

DEVELOPING YOUR NICHE

By Scott W. Gray,
Marketing Manager of *ascent* magazine, 2006

ascent doubled its circulation from 5,500 to 10,000 in less than three years by following these techniques.

ASCENT IS A QUARTERLY YOGA and engaged-spirituality magazine out of Montreal publishing since 1999. Our definition of yoga is expansive and has a decidedly non-physical perspective. *ascent's* editorial mandate is to inspire our readers' lives by focusing on how people take yoga out of the studio and into the world, explore creativity and recognize the integrity of individual paths toward self-reflection and personal growth. *ascent* presents yoga as a way of life.

By exploring the practical side of spiritual life, *ascent* has gained recognition as a diverse and challenging magazine. This recognition, however, does not necessarily translate into subscriptions. Below are some of the challenges *ascent* faced in growing its circulation.

Define Your Market

ascent believed its market was very contained until Magazines Canada travelling consultant Greg Keilty from CM Group met with us. He prepared a report showing *ascent's* potential circulation universe, and techniques to reach this audience. Greg suggested *ascent* begin marketing itself as a yoga magazine by putting yoga poses on the cover, and reworking sell-lines on the cover to better reflect its unique yoga content. Our sell lines, now focusing on reader benefits, resulted in better positioning on the newsstand. Retailers now understood that we were a yoga magazine. This increased newsstand sales from 28.3% in Fall 2002 to 56.7% in Fall 2004 in Canada and the US.

After looking at yoga magazine competitors we calculated the total circulation universe (estimating 10% of the US universe). Major competitors refused us their lists, but looking at their circulation profiles and audited breakdowns was valuable in understanding the market, and ascertaining what portion might represent *ascent's* niche. This new-found knowledge allowed us to change how we presented ourselves, without changing editorial content. You don't have to sell out to sell your magazine.

Go to School

Two staff members attended Magazines Canada's School for Circulation, the expenses of which were offset by a Canada Magazine Fund grant. This program was very important in *ascent's* growth: it gave us industry tools and techniques to develop acquisition programs and to staunch subscriber attrition. And, the big fat binder from the School has helped other *ascent*

staff with their circulation skills. Simple techniques like tracking the cost of acquiring new subscribers and mailing out renewal notices until the cost outweighs the response completely changed *ascent* circulation strategies. By decreasing attrition and increasing retention, we developed a foundation for circulation growth. We use the metaphor of a leaky boat on a river: it's easier to stay afloat when you stop up the holes; this is easier than constantly finding new boats to use.

Conduct Reader Surveys

Every magazine editor thinks they know their magazine best, but that has no bearing on how your audience sees it. In seven years, *ascent* conducted three reader surveys and each one teaches us more about our subscribers and our magazine. There is no onus to change a magazine based on readers' feedback, but a methodical survey can act as a great barometer. Your audience will tell you where they shop, what websites they visit, how they define themselves, what their concerns are, etc. You can then build demographic and psychographic models of your readers and this in turn makes finding new readers that much easier. You'll see places that your subscribers frequent; go there to find potential new subscribers. A reader survey is a simple tool that can provide targeted information, saving your magazine time and money. Not conducting a regular reader survey keeps you in a cycle of guessing who your readers are, which makes it hard to grow and may have an impact on the satisfaction of your advertisers.

What We Learned—An Overview

1. Take advantage of consultant expertise.
2. Use CMF grants to run your programs, but also for training.
3. Do everything in your power to retain the subscribers you have, because retention is cheaper and easier than acquisition.
4. Conduct a reader survey to learn how to grow.
5. By following the techniques above, *ascent* was able to double its circulation from 5,500 to 10,000 in less than three years. This growth has caused some challenges, but fewer than trying to operate without knowing how to grow inside our niche market.

The Hotsheet Series provides tips and advice to small magazines from people working in the field. The series is produced by Magazines Canada and is funded by the Canada Council and the Canada Magazine Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

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