

AN EDITORS' BEST FRIEND: THE EDITORIAL PLAN

By Kim Pittaway,
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Making time for editorial planning can seem impossible, but the benefits are worth it.

I KNOW: YOUR DAY IS jammed with just getting the current issue out the door. And it's tough enough juggling that along with editing the next issue and assigning for the one after that. Even contemplating trying to plan a year's worth of issues seems, well, impossible. But trust me: it's not as daunting as it sounds—and the pay-off is worth it.

How do I know what we'll want to cover next year?

Let's start with what your annual plan isn't: it isn't exhaustive and it isn't carved in stone. No annual plan should lock you into committing all of your editorial pages to a particular subject a year in advance. With magazine lead times what they are, it can be tough to be current and the last thing you want to do is to tie yourself to content that may seem stale by the time publication dates roll around.

But the truth is you probably have an underlying annual plan, even if you don't explicitly articulate it. Depending on your subject area, in December, you might run a year in review issue. In summer, you might run a reading series or destinations guide. How you tackle those subjects may vary from year to year, but odds are you have—or should have—at least a handful of topics that you come back to at the same time every year.

When should I start?

Now. Ideally, your plan for the next calendar year should be finalized by summer of the current year to allow your sales representative (in some cases, namely, you) to use it in next year's media kit and start trumpeting it to advertisers. But even if it's February, there's no reason not to plan out the balance of your year's issues now and plan to plan next year come June.

Where do I start?

It's simple. Grab the last two years' worth of your magazine—and the last two years' worth of your main competitors. Scan the issues, looking for seasonal content that readers want and timeless content that generates strong reader response.

What's seasonal? It might be RRSPs in February, summer camps in March (because that's when parents start booking), hockey play-offs in May, breast cancer

in October, or Christmas baking in December. What are the deadlines your readers worry about? What are the sporting or cultural events they mark on their calendars? What issues engage them—and show up in the news at the same time every year thanks to annual PR campaigns? What holidays are important to them? Which of these topics are must-haves for your readers? Mark them on your calendar.

What can you own? Annual plans aren't just driven by external deadlines and calendars. There's room in your plan to layer in stories or packages that have timeless reader appeal—and the opportunity for you

to create branded packages that readers will look for every year. Maybe it's your "How to do anything better" guide, your "Top 100 entrepreneurs" list, your "25 things to do before your die" list, your "Kitchen reno

guide" or your "Where to get good stuff cheap" guide. Look at the stories that generated the most enthusiasm or controversy among your readers in the past. Is there an opportunity to create an annual package, list or guide related to that subject?

What goes in what issue?

Slot content based on reader interest—but take the time to check with your ad sales team to see if there are ad opportunities that might come into play as well. For instance, if appliance advertisers heavy up on their ad spends in spring, your kitchen reno guide might be better in April than in November. (Hint: Those advertisers have probably invested heavily in research on when their customers do what and targeted their ad spends accordingly, so you're also tapping into their consumer research by aligning with their spending.)

And then?

Finalize your plan, communicate it to your team—and measure your results next year. Look at what did well and what tanked—for you and for your competitors. Slot in new content and drop tired themes. And remember to leave room for content that can't be pre-planned a year in advance.

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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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