

ONLINE EDITORIAL FEATURES

By Matthew Blackett,
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Media strategists will argue about what makes “the best website,” but there are some over-arching features to a website that will, if executed with some care and patience, complement your print product.

BACK IN 1995, MY FIRST journalism internship was at the Toronto alternative weekly newspaper *Eye*, where I worked on their website. I took text from those lovely adult ads in the classified section of the print issue and converted them into online ads. For obvious reasons it was not a glamorous position, but one of the benefits was that we were constantly trying to envision the future of magazines online, and I got to be part of that.

Over 10 years later, I’m still excited about what magazines can offer in the online world, but I am also continuously disappointed by Canadian editors and publishers who are unwilling to take a risk with their websites. If there is a space for a publication to test out its craziest idea, the website is it.

The magazines using smart and creative web-features are the ones best prepared to make the shift from print to online. Or in the case of the magazine I help to run, *Spacing*, we are seeing the lines blurred between what we are as a publication: are we a magazine with a strong web presence, or a dynamic website with a print component?

Media strategists will argue about what makes “the best website,” but there are some over-arching features to a website that will, if executed with some care and patience, complement your print product. The most obvious is to offer your readers a chance to order back issues or subscribe online using their credit card. You can build a profile of each of your subscribers that they can update at their own convenience (change of address or credit card, for example). Online registration will also allow you to ask a variety of questions to your readers—instead of spending thousands of dollars to produce and execute mail-out questionnaires, you will get answers from those that are willing, with no other cost to your magazine than personnel hours.

A good magazine will also offer their auxiliary products online. *Spacing* created a series of one-inch buttons that replicate the walls of Toronto’s subway stations. For nearly one year we sold them exclusively online, and for 8 months our button sales outpaced our subscription sales. We also saw our subscriber base triple during that same time period, and nearly one in 7 people who bought buttons also bought a back issue or a subscription.

There are a number of things you can accomplish online that are impossible in your print issue. The most popular feature currently sweeping our industry is the blog. Blogs allow your writers to offer commentary or links for your readers with the immediacy of a news wire. The blog is also a great way to elevate the profile of your columnists. In a monthly magazine, your readers may only see 12 pieces by your star talent, but a blog can help cultivate a wider fan base than print. *Maclean’s* is doing just this with their columnist Paul Wells—his blog The Inkless Wells (<http://weblogs.macleans.ca/paulwells>) allows him to comment immediately on any current event.

In this example, the blog allows *Maclean’s* to compete with newspapers when it comes to breaking a story or adding their voice to a topic’s discussion. If you enable a comments section on each

post, you can create discussions that breaks down the metaphoric wall between reader and writer. It also enables you to take the pulse of your readership.

Photo galleries or photoblogs are also great—print magazines can feature a limited number of photos because of page constraints, but a website can offer hundreds if not thousands of images for consumption.

Another effective editorial vehicle is an online newsletter. Readers like it when the news comes to them, instead of having to seek it out themselves. Quarterly magazines should definitely use a newsletter, as it allows more regular communication with readers. If you have the staff, you can even try a daily or weekly newsletter. The eclectic *Maisonneuve* produces Media Scout—every day by 10 a.m., subscribers receive a brief email that features the headlines from news sources from across the country, with an article or two highlighted with some commentary.

A quick and easy feature is the poll. It can be daily or weekly, but by asking your readers questions it gives them a chance to contribute to your publication and allows their voices to be heard.

Websites are still in their infancy and are constantly evolving. If you take a chance and experiment with your online product you will see the benefits in no time.

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