CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC: PLEASURE FOR CANADIANS

ABSTRACT

As the editor of a very successful magazine, Rick Boychuk offers his recipe for success. First and foremost, he advises, is the necessity to give a magazine a specific identity so as to create between its readers a sense of community, of commonality, of belonging. In addition, a magazine should not only give readers a sense of who they are and where they belong, but it should also make them feel good about themselves, their lifestyles, and their beliefs.

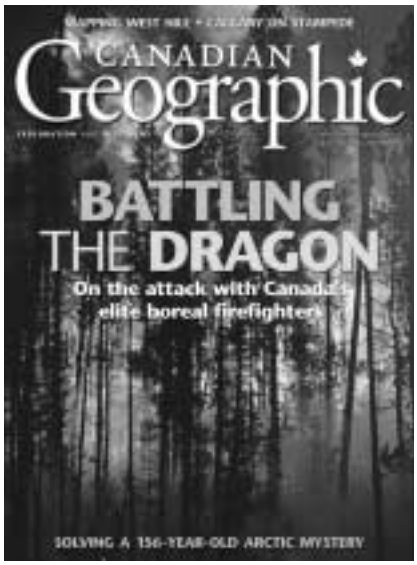
Not everybody buys magazines. All of us in the magazine business would like to know why. But that's a secondary interest. Our greatest preoccupation isn't with those who don't buy magazines but with those who do.

Consider, if you will, the exchange we negotiate with readers every month or, in my case at *Canadian Geographic,* every second month. There are people who actually take the time to stop by a newsstand just to check whether the new issue has arrived. And others, who might simply be browsing, see a copy and think, yes, $6.95 plus tax is a reasonable price to pay. Of course these days, that's the price of a cup of coffee. And still others who take the time to open our mail-out subscription appeals and decide this is a good deal, only $35 for a year.

What do we promise and what are those readers looking for? A newspaper delivers the news; TV delivers entertainment and some information; books, a peek into a different world. Radio is for multitaskers. Where do magazines fit in this mosaic of information products?

Well, we all have our techniques and I'll get back to those in a minute. But what we are promising, in essence, is membership in a community of like-minded individuals. My dad belonged to the Royal Order of Elks. And he read *National Geographic.* As my son would say, the Elks were my dad's crew. In the pages of *National Geographic* he found another crew. Thinking back on it now, I'd have to say he hung in there with the Elks because his buddies did. And he hung in there with *National Geographic,* despite a feeling that he wasn't really of that community, that he didn't share its world view, because he never stumbled across a more congenial group. Until he found *Canadian Geographic.*

I confess; I introduced him to *Canadian Geographic.* But the fact is, my recommendation aside, he immediately felt at home within the ranks of its readers. He's no overt nationalist but he is powerfully attached to his place in this country. And he's still delighted by the fact that *Canadian Geographic* is produced in Canada, is all about Canada and is damned interesting to boot. He lives in a small town in the west where every drug store has a selection of every American magazine you could possibly imagine or want. And when he and his neighbours browse the displays, the only thing they don't see in those magazines about hunting or Hollywood gossip or home décor or how-to repair your deck is themselves. Still, they can be coaxed into buying them by slick ad campaigns or the purchase of a display rack at the checkout or by there mere fact that if you are about to repair your deck and you come across a magazine that will show you how to do it, you might be willing to overlook the fact that it is written by, and for, an audience based in the southern United States.



I'd argue that people like my dad ease themselves from identification with ethnic groups or religions not because they desire to be free of the constraints and responsibilities of membership in those communities

RICK BOYCHUK

Rick Boychuk is the editor of Canadian Geographic, which has twice in the past four years been named Best Magazine of the Year, and has been nominated for 45 National Magazine Awards. He is a former reporter with the Edmonton Journal and the Montreal Gazette and the author of Honour Thy Mother, a work of non-fiction published by Penguin.

but because ethnicity and faith feel less and less relevant to their lives. I'm not about to argue that magazines fill the gap but becoming part of a magazine's readership is one element in a process of self definition. All I have to do is tell you that my friend Sheila subscribes to *Reader's Digest* to create in your mind an image of what sort of person she is.

Our job as editors is to cultivate that sense of community, to give readers the feeling that they are in good company. One of the frequent mistakes new editors make is that they assume the letters page should contain only missives that are uncritical, celebratory or filled with congratulatory commentary. What experience teaches is that to most people, good company is synonymous with stimulating conversation. A dinner where praise is the main course of conversation would be awfully boring. The letters page, which is among the most widely read department in many magazines, should reflect a range of views, should include critiques and corrections, as well as commentary. Readers share values, not necessarily opinions.

Our jobs as editors would be much easier if there were a simple formula for cultivating a sense of community. You can survey and focus group and test and all of these things help. And the other thing that helps – and this is where technique comes in – is craft. Do you have a process in place that ensures consistent text editing and the accuracy of the facts? Does the architecture of your magazine intrude or impede on the reading? Good design and competent editing are skills that need to be both taught and learned by experience. If your magazine is tough to read because the design makes it difficult to know where the story starts or if the reading experience is frequently interrupted by mistakes, then your magazine is going to have a short life span.

Get the basics right and you're halfway there. But as important is the tone or personality that editors set for their magazines. And good magazines have very distinctive personalities. Gossipy. Hip. Ironic. Funny. Dead serious. Sentimental. Jingoistic. Hard right. Soft left. Knowing. Smart.

And finally, one last thing that is truly underappreciated, that is difficult to assign a value to, that isn't done well very often, but that, in my view, is critical to the success of a magazine. How do you put a price on the rare little burst of pleasure that you experience when you come across a bit of clever wordplay, a character description, a terrifically smart conclusion to a story, a deft headline or a photo whose colours and composition strike you memorably beautiful? In our magazine, I've even seen an artfully designed map deliver such pleasurable sensations to some readers. We're the only magazine in Canada with mapmakers on our staff and our chief cartographer is also an artist. There are days when his work makes me jump for joy.

Every dollar that we spend on content for our magazines is an investment both in enhancing the sense of companionship we hope readers feel when they pick up an issue and in delivering to them some degree of pleasure. It's non toxic, it won't give you heart disease or make you put on weight, but we do hope that it becomes addictive.

✔ **Yes** *I would like to subscribe to Canadian Issues*
Oui *J'aimerais m'abonner à Thèmes canadiens*

RECEIVE 6 THEMATIC EDITIONS PER YEAR
RECEVEZ 6 NUMÉROS THÉMATIQUES PAR ANNÉE

AND AUTOMATICALLY BECOME A MEMBER OF
ET DEVENEZ AUTOMATIQUEMENT MEMBRE DE ACS • AEC
www.acs-aec.ca

$40

Name / Nom _____

Address / Adresse _____

_____

City / Ville _____

Province _____

Postal code / Code postal _____

CANADIAN ISSUES
THÈMES CANADIENS
An examination of Canada for the thinking person
Une analyse du Canada pour la personne informée

