

HOW TO TELL YOU'RE A *DETAILS* READER

by Carrie McLaren

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I work at a record company and one of my jobs here is advertising. When one of our bands has a new release coming out, it is my job to select the magazines in which we'll advertise.

To "help" me with this task, the salespeople who work for magazines do any number of things. Bigger mags try to bribe me with free lunches and dinners, which isn't too terrible (though I'd rather just have them give me the money). Or they offer to drop by for an office visit and give the sales pitch here (I invariably decline.)

The other option is to do away with the face-to-face altogether and let the media kit make the pitch. Magazines of all sizes use some variation of a media kit, which is the promotional material they

use to attract advertisers like me. Small publications usually keep it to a page of ad rates while bigger magazines tend to have bigger and more complicated kits—kits so complicated that, in fact, I've no idea what most of the stuff means.

All kits, however, share a single purpose: to sell ad space, i.e. to provide a solid argument for getting my money. The surprising part is that this generally has nothing to do with the content of the magazine. I'm not supposed to advertise in *Details* because it's well-written, informative, or interesting, but because it reaches and influences the right audience. Magazine content is sorta beside the point, a means to an end; the audience is what matters, the audience is what's for sale.



Just being a reader of magazines, you probably don't know it but most magazines are hip, influential, cutting-edge, and really important to our generation. Well, that's what the media kits say. *Ray Gun*, for example, calls itself "the choice of a generation." Oddly enough, its competitors say the same thing:

Spin — "the voice of a generation"

Swing — "the first lifestyle magazine written for, by, and about people in their twenties, today's most exciting generation."

Film Threat — "the ONLY movie magazine read by generation X"

Vibe — "speaks to a whole generation of young men and women whose lives defy categorizing"

According to media kits, *Vibe*'s readers aren't the only ones who defy categorization. Just about every mag has their own way of saying "stereotypes are bad," our readers are all different, unique, etc. Supposedly the only thing that unites readers—other than them all being "influential" consumers (see below)—is their devotion to the magazine in question.

But then maybe the magazines are joking. This would explain why the parts about defying categorization are followed by pages and pages of charts, percentages, and decimal points categorizing their readers. (No two psychographics alike!)

65% of *Wig* readers call themselves artists

63% of *Interview* readers say "I have more self-confidence and style than most people my age"; 92% love new and different things (the other 8% must be unconscious)

98% of *Film Threat* readers wear hip clothes

Too bad publishers don't make their magazines as interesting as their math. (If I start reading *Film Threat*, are my clothes more likely to be hip?) Granted, I'm no numbers whiz, but publishers' stats seem impossibly off. The median age of *Film Threat* readers is given as twenty-five and the median income as \$39,000 (and these are, according to the media kit, "the people they invented the word slacker for"?). Meanwhile, *Spin* readers are supposedly buying 7.5 CDs a month. Yeah, right.

ALL THINGS INFLUENTIAL

Apparently, if you just read the magazine, you're not following the rules. Magazines are for consumers, not readers. Magazines don't make money selling magazines; subscriptions and vendor sales don't even come close to covering costs. Magazines usually make over 50 percent of their income from advertising—that is, from selling their audiences, their targeted markets.

Marketers constantly survey, poll, and interview readers to see how much they're consuming. Some of this audience research has a secondary purpose—such as helping the editors "give readers what they want." Others offer incentives: answer a few questions, win some prize. Lifestyle magazines such as *Details*, *Paper*, and *Wired* recruit readers to serve as marketing consultants, answering questions for the magazine's advertisers in exchange for free goods and other perks.

Once they've collected the data, magazines compile and transform it into something that proves how influential they are. There are two pertinent definitions of influential here:

- a) **influential** — as in, the mag influences its readers to buy things, much in the same way that a catalog or a promotional newsletter does
- b) **influentials** — as in the magazine's readers are "influentials," i.e., tastemakers, fashion-forward people. They set trends and cut edges. They're the first to try new products and encourage their friends to do the same. As an early MTV trade ad says, "buy this 28-year old and get all his friends for free." Or, as the media kits put it:

Interview - "Whether it's the latest unheard-of sound, the next big fashion statement, or the newest anything, our readers are quick to enter uncharted territory. Perhaps more importantly, *Interview* readers help draw the map for those that follow."

Paper- "the ideal 'tastemaker' readership based in America's largest and most cutting edge single city market, New York, as well as strategic trendsetting markets across the country."

Pulp - "targets hip, fashion conscious, consumption-oriented demographic. Our readers are diverse, yet share a common bond in exploring our offered areas of interest."

What I want to know is this: If magazine readers are so influential, what are they doing filling out marketing surveys? Don't they have anything better to do? Shouldn't they be out influencing?

"GENERAL, YET SPECIFIC"

You'd think the most likely people to be able to cut through the b.s. would be my fellow ad buyers. And you'd be wrong. Or maybe whoever's putting these things together believes we can't read. Media kits contradict themselves all over the place.

Pronouncements like these are eerily common:

Ray Gun - "high profile and extremely visible, but decidedly rebellious and underground."

Maxim - We're "general, yet specific . . . (Our reader) is not interested in fashion, he's interested in clothes. He's a man who has arrived, but is still going places."

Spin - "We are cutting-edge, but avoid the hypnotic trap of being trendy."

Surface - "a spotlight for today's 'avant-gardians' " and yet "surface's cover stories are the superheroes of our media age, icons like Grace Jones, Nina Hagen and Debbie Harry . . . official slogan: the subculture is surfacing."

Using imagery to reach these sorts of oppositional contradictions is a cliché in advertising. When you consider that media kits function as advertisements for magazines, I guess this isn't so surprising; it's even less so considering how the line between editorial and advertising is getting pretty impossible to find.

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ADVERTORIALS

Advertising is content. - *Plazma* media kit

The down side of passing up lunches and office visits is I don't get to have the salesrep rep offer editorial coverage. These sorts of deals aren't in media kits—they're, you know, unethical—but magazine editorial is for sale along with ad space. In exchange for financial favors, the mag will put an agreed-upon artist on the cover, for example. I can't even begin to count to phone chats with reps that rely on the assumption that I should advertise band X because the mag covered them. Even semi-legit mags do it. You'd be surprised.

Or then maybe you wouldn't, especially once you consider that more and more magazines are run by Madison Avenue types. This is something the media kits are up front about: *Plazma* was founded by former creatives at Wieden and Kennedy, supposedly one of the hippest ad agencies (they work with Nike); the new men's mag *P.O.V.* was started by a couple guys from *Forbes* "looking for a younger, cooler mag"; and the soft-porn men's "zine" *Hollywood Highball* is the brainchild of Steven Grasse, CEO of a marketing agency that helps companies like R.J. Reynolds, Coca-Cola, and

MTV target generation X. *Hollywood Highball's* media kit may be the savviest of all: it's nothing more than one sheet with the ad rates. Perhaps because the mag itself is a sort of media kit.

In a few years we'll all think back to the golden days of the early 1990s when the issue of advertiser influence was a matter of censorship: *Rolling Stone* cancelling something that pisses off Subaru or

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whatever. Advertiser money doesn't merely censor content, it dictates and defines acceptable content in the first place. This is one of the reasons that music magazines—like other specialty publications—are transforming into so-called lifestyle mags. It's hard to name a mass music mag now that doesn't regularly feature fashion spreads, trend reports, tech columns, and consumer tips (*Rolling Stone's* guide to cameras, *Spin's* guide to makeup for men). *Alternative Press* (their media kit says to think of AP as a "guide to better living"), *Ray Gun*, and *Spin* do all the above. It's not as if some *Spin* editor is actually thinking: "Hey guys, let's get some scantily clad models, an expensive car and take pictures of them frolicking with PowerBooks in the desert . . . readers love that!" Features often aren't designed to inform or even entertain, but to sell gear.

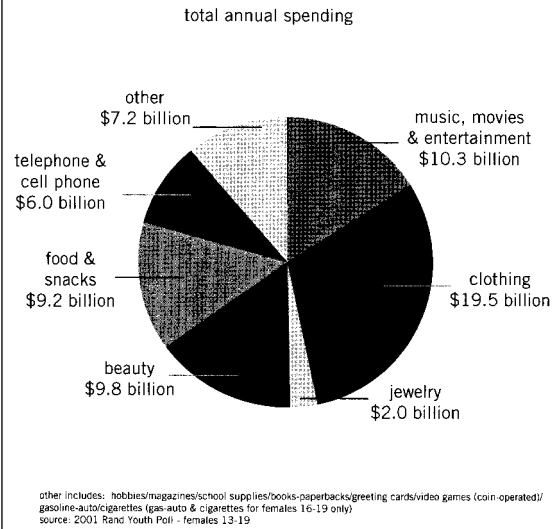
Fortunately, magazines have other ways of making money besides selling editorial content: "ancillary revenues." These include things like brand extensions: *Spin* Radio, *The Source* clothing line, *Plazma* fonts, *Rolling Stone* Rock and Roll Bowl and New Music Tour, *Paper* Promotions (a marketing consultant service), *Playboy* cigars, etc. Media kits promote what they call "value-added" deals where, if you buy an advertisement in their mag, you get a bonus of some sort.

CONCLUSION

Magazines, particularly lifestyle magazines, are primarily marketing vehicles. That's not to say they can't be appreciated for what they do offer—an occasional great article (Paul Keegan's "Cyber

female teens are big spenders!

female teens spent **\$64 billion** of their own money in 2001, including \$31 billion on beauty and fashion!



The above page appears in *Seventeen* magazine's media kit. By illustrating the spending habits of its female teen audience, *Seventeen* hopes to convince clients to advertise to this group.

"Agent Man" in *Details* and Glasgow Phillips' article on T-shirt logos in *Might* are recent faves), photos of scantily clad people, and free fragrance strips. In fact, understanding and questioning the way magazines work makes it possible to appreciate the content even more.

As an advertiser, however, it is unfortunate that I need to spend a bunch of money advertising in magazines, whether people actually read those magazines or not. If I had my way, we'd bypass expensive magazines altogether. You know, cut out the middleman: Take the several thousands of dollars it costs for a Pavement ad in *Details* or whatever and just pay people to buy the record. I bet we'd receive more return on our investment that way. But then, what do I know. I'm in the music industry