

Cover story

If the idea is to sell magazines, who better to craft cover lines than a direct mail copywriter whose very success is measured to the third decimal place by his ability to create subscription promos that get opened? With that in mind, *Folio*: sent **RICHARD RICCELLI** to the newsstand to pick out—or more tellingly pick on—several current issues for a special cover story on covers. Could he improve them with a few well-placed come-on lines? Or would he blow his own cover? Riccelli's full report follows.



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1. Learn from the masters

Long recognized as the past master of cutlines, each issue of *Cosmo* is practically a post graduate course in—if not a parody of—covers that jump off newsstands. Add Dennis' *Maxim* and Rodale's *Men's Health* and you have the holy trinity of cover teasers to study. I recall visiting Rodale years ago and seeing a long conference room wall blanketed with covers—each one scored word-for-word, image-by-image for to-the-penny newsstand sales appeal. In awed amusement I imagined editors building sell-through-by-numbers in *Spy* blurb-o-matic style. Simply choose a winning verb from column one, a winning adjective from column two, a winning body part from column three, a winning numeral from column four, and voila! “*Ripped Sexy Abs 7 Days Away!*”



- Beautiful women attract men. *Really* beautiful women attract women. The more approachable the beauty, the more the women. The more unattainable, the more the men.
- Hot words excite the senses and capture the imagination.
- Alliteration catches the eye and ear.
- Forget long tortured edit missions. Connect with readers in one word.
- Numbers sell. Especially odd stick-in-your-mind numbers. 101 or 99 work better than 100. 65 is better than 75. 7 has always been lucky. To say nothing of what 69 probably does for Maxim readers.
- Every women's book I've worked for finds weight loss a top draw. Don't fail to fatten up on that fact.
- Sweepstakes and contests may be dead in direct mail, but they win on covers. Especially if they connect to editorial inside. And what a great way to add value for advertisers—especially if they provide the prize at no cost.
- Light, bright covers usually beat dark, sinister ones. Pictures usually pull more than illustrations.
- Given a choice of thousand words or a single picture, choose words—but choose carefully. Action verbs. Self-interested promises. Fantasies on parade. Fulfillment a page away.
- Don't just think like your readers, become one. Go to the newsstand and watch for an hour. See your future subscribers in action. It's an eye-opening experience.
- How close must the cutlines hew to the coverage? Well by rights what's on the cover ought to be in the issue, but there's no law that says you need to make the connections obvious. In fact, some say you should make readers dive deep for the benefits they see up front.

2. Is it art or commerce?

Magazines with a higher calling—the intellectual books on culture, art, literature and politics—often struggle with a classic head/heart conundrum. They love you for your mind, but what they desire most is your money. Some have it both ways. Like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly* they use half wraps that keep their covers artfully pristine while fairly screaming “look at me.” But even in this slightly pregnant world of newsstand promotion some half wraps are smarter than others. If you decide to add the expense, remember to drop the pretense and sell as well as, well, *Maxim*.



- When David Bradley of National Journal Group bought *The Atlantic* and installed Michael Kelly as editor, the magazine immediately started winning readers on the outside just as smartly as it captured national magazine awards for its coverage on the inside. (Self interest alert: I wrote *The Atlantic's* 6x9 direct mail control.)
- *The Atlantic's* cutlines read like fast food for thought. Brain snacks of sex, crime, money, celebs and Proust. A moveable feast written with the flair of Helen Gurley—if not Tina—Brown.
- *The New Yorker's* eat-your-peas menu is much less appetizing. A cure for diabetes? A portrait of Germany? And a remembrance of civil rights marches past? Things haven't gotten *that* dreary post Tina. Don't judge this magazine by its cover. Unfortunately newsstand shoppers will.
- Notice how *The Atlantic* uses the back of the wrap to put a couple of tempting subscription cards into the hands of new readers. That's extra smart. Especially if back cover advertisers, Honda in this case, do not complain. (And why would they? The wrap appears only on newsstand copies and it brings more readers to the message.)
- When is a monthly not a monthly? When it comes out 10 times a year not 12. While Bradley, Kelly, et al. have measurably increased the quality of *The Atlantic*, they have increased profits (or more aptly, cut costs?) by reducing its frequency with “double” issues. Expect an edit of the title's title soon.

3. Fight for the fanatical fringe

It seems that magazines with the laziest, least-effective covers are the titles most focused on aficionados of everything from antiques to yoga. Perhaps thinking they will get their share of the fanatics, these special-interest titles often forget the battle on newsstands is for the fringe. Readers on the edge of your target who can take you or leave you — and will if you give them any reason to. Fight for new eyeballs. Write your cutlines not for those who worship you already, but for those who need to be enticed inside. After all, you can't save souls in an empty church.



- I can't decide. Is *Automobile* reaching out to the evil twin inside every mom with its "satanic SUV" cover? Or have the magazine's editors not yet heard SUVs are the anti-ecology mini-vans of the new century? Either way seems like *Automobile* missed not only the fringe, but the green and the fairway too. This looks like St Andrews-deep rough.
- In the battle to win readers who may well settle for a never-off-road, car-seat-in-the-back SUVs, *Motor Trend* does a "sleek and sexy" job appealing to every man's inner drive.
- Same cars. Different decisions. Which do you think will drive more newsstand sales?
- The tried and true rule for women's books: If you put a girl on the cover, make her blonde. The corollary for automotive magazines? If you put a sports car on the cover, make it red.

4. You are what they do

Those who can, write. Those who can't, read. Which explains the covers of two ostensible competitors on the newsstand, but vastly different magazines to their readers. *Writer's Digest* is essentially a *how-to* title. *Book* is essentially a *fan-zine*. Knowing who you are will help you know what to do when it comes to motivating newsstand buyers. Ask yourself: What moves my subscribers? A desire for fame and fortune? Or the fortunes of the famous? Do you attract voyeurs or voyagers? Readers or writers? Express your answer in the arithmetic of single-copy sales.



- In any how-to magazine, character development is all important. The promise of a better you. Let readers know how you will help. Give them specifics. Examples. Support. Most of all, give them hope. That's the emotional trigger behind the practical decision to buy your title.

- A picture worth a thousand words? Not in a world where the power of description is king and the subtext is for love and money.
- The difference between *Book* and *Writer's Digest* is the difference between author as sex object and author as object lesson.

- Alice Sebold — *Julia Roberts!* — Andrew Weil *Brad Pitt!* — Annie Proulx — *Cameron Diaz!* — Jeff Shaara — *Matthew McConaughey!* — Toni Morrison — *Nicole Kidman!* — Hunter S. Thompson — *Bruce Willis!* — in the world of personality journalism, stars sell. The hotter your cover celebs, the better your newsstand draw. Even if they're names only devoted fans and relatives recognize on sight.

- By the same token, celebrity scandal has star quality too. *Book* could do better with their kickers. "The Guru on his X9 Ranch"? How about "The whole secret of his holistic success"? Or instead of Toni Morrison "Revisiting Her Debut" how about Toni's "Shocking, never-revealed story of her controversial climb to the top"? *Book* should know better than most: well told stories sell.

5. More food for thought

Yuck. How much wine would it take to make *Food & Wine's* roasted bird look appetizing? The answer is real simple. If you're serving up food, and the dish looks like your brain on drugs, you're cooked. Think light, airy and blonde. It's the same for food as it is for fashion. Beauty, and how to attain it, sells.



- *Food and Wine* must suffer the effects of tryptophan. A contest so sleepy they decline to name the prize. Double talk about "dishes" they're too tired to describe. Cutlines so generic they read more like ingredients on a shopping list than fun food for thought.

- *Real Simple* reads like a modern *McCall's* for the upwardly mobile with taste.

RS: A month of easy dinners
McC: 31 ways to make chicken
RS: High school sweethearts reunited
McC: Drop 15 lbs. before your class reunion
RS: Natural beauty
McC: Change you hair, change your life

- There's also a bit of closet *Cosmo* in *Real Simple's* winning lines.

RS: 6 basic recipes, 28 delicious options
Cosmo: 65 ways to love his body
RS: 24 solutions for everyday emergencies
Cosmo: Relationship mistakes even you make
RS: 10 winter remedies
Cosmo: 7 reasons French women stay slim

- *Real Simple's* cover is a triumph of good design that uses classic, hard-selling cutlines in a way that reinforces its brand image. Copy that in another context or even point size might seem strident is perfectly presented and no doubt brilliantly effective here.

6. Healthy competition

Women's health: It's among the most competitive categories in publishing. And it features many of the best covers on the newsstand. If you want to increase the fitness of your covers watch how these health magazines win readers.



• Attack every angle of your topic. Here health is defined as medicine, exercise, diet, and well-being—both physical and mental.

• Make every feature special, an attention getting exclusive, bonus, guide, annual or pull-out that has extra value and justifies the buy.

• Promote your features through the readers. Personalize the coverage. Make emotional connections. Start at their point of view if you want them to subscribe to yours.

• Solve problems, offer advice, deliver benefits, become a friend. Make it fun. And do it fast.

7. Category killers

When there are few, if any, competitors in your category, the temptation is to be all things to all people in pursuit of a wider audience. But the lesson of single copy sell through is to stay focused. While you may feel like “we’re publishing the same magazine every month” remember each issue is a new experience for new buyers on the newsstand. If “*Rock Hard Abs In 30 Days!*” worked last month, it’s smart to use “*Flat Abs In 4 Weeks!*” this month, and “*A 6 Pack In 60 Days!*” next month.



MARGINAL THINKING DEPT.

Even Mad has the formula for success covered



- Remember Bill Jayme's classic envelope tease for *Psychology Today*: “Do you close the bathroom door even when you are the only one home?” In one line it actually *demonstrated* the idea of the magazine. A lesson lost on the cover of this issue of *Psychology Today*.

- Is it about dating? Or understanding love lost? Is it about kids? Or handling parental stress? Is it about weight? Or mind-body effects? Is it about Lisa? Or Lisa?

Connections that are hard to fathom quickly undermine the meaning of the magazine...even if you “own” the category.

- Mad* on the other hand has never lost focus. Every issue, the same idea: skewer and satirize popular culture with the sense and sensibility of a 12-year-old. One mission, brilliantly accomplished again and again—hundreds of times over—for a magazine who's very survival depends on profitable newsstand sales.

- He's appeared on more covers than Martha, Oprah and Rosie combined. Alfred E. Neuman, *Mad*'s ubiquitous coverboy. As Volkswagen memorably asked in a 1960s ad featuring nothing more than a brush stroke in the shape of a Beetle: “How long can we continue to hand you this line?” As long as it sells.

8. A brand is a terrible thing to waste

A tale of two brand names. One making the most of its image. The other too muddled for words. While *National Geographic* sends a line down to younger, more active readers with a compelling cover that invites exploration, *Sierra* forgets it stands for rugged environmentalism and loses a chance to guide new readers who subscribe to the club's mission.



- Magazines that are the public face of do-good organizations have an extra opportunity to attract readers – by proselytizing the benefits of membership on the cover.
- Clearly *National Geographic* wants to enroll active “dream it, plan it, do it” readers who will perfectly replenish the Society’s ranks of aging members.
- *Sierra*, once a one-word synonym for effective environmentalism, extends no such invitation. “Hike, paddle, and wander” is hardly a call to arms – leaving behind legions who might otherwise pick up a magazine that helps protect the world.
- Simple cutlines like “Free Trial Membership When You Buy This Magazine” or “Save the Environment with a Trial Subscription” – sort of a reverse of *National Lampoon’s* famous cover shot “If You Don’t Buy This Magazine, We’ll Kill This Dog” – could give these non-profit titles a leg up on their for-profit newsstand competitors.

9. You say you want a revolution...

Is there any thing more obvious than a magazine being left behind? You can practically see the stretch marks as *Rolling Stone* ages on newsstands while *Revolver*, *Spin* and *Blender* foment the next revolution in music.



- Which cover says sex, drugs and rock and roll? Newsstand buyers judge magazines by their covers. And in this world image in everything.
- Nothing labels you as "pathetic aging rocker" quite like buying a magazine with the Beatles on the cover. It's as embarrassing as asking the checkout girl for the latest issue of *Penthouse* hidden behind the counter.
- When did *Rolling Stone* become the *Teen Beat* for 50-somethings? The Beatles weren't a good cover when they were the Beatles.

Even in the battle of Townsend vs. Townsend *Revolver* is faster and funnier with the rise of madman Devin. While *Rolling Stone* is left to follow the fall of defendant Pete on a child porn rap.
- It's easy to blame the edit, and the edit alone, but *Rolling Stone* and *Revolver* both featured Audioslave and—well, that's about it. While rock and roll may be here to stay, I'd worry about *Rolling Stone* coming down for breakfast. Hello sweetheart? Get me rewrite. It's time for a revolution. Starting with the cover.

10. Advice for all it's worth

Now is no time to be in the stock picking business. Which makes a study of these investor books a valuable exercise. Here are magazines with some splainin' to do. How they approach skeptical readers now that double digit losses have replaced dot come gains reducing personal 401(k)s to about— oh, 220 or 240—is a real test of the art of the (duck and) cover.



- Approach #1: Face the Music and Dance...

Smart Money has clearly decided unhappy days are here again and they're ready to dive in and rescue drowning readers.

- Approach #2: Welcome to the roaring 90s!

No worries at *Worth* ... not when there are big profits ahead in consumer tech ... not when Microsoft may issue dividends ... not when a bull market looms and they have the 25 greatest stock picks of all time. And by the way, lay off Martha—OK?

- Is it smart money to be realistic? Or is that so pessimistic now it will drive readers away?

Is it worth it to be optimistic? Or do you risk losing readers who think you just don't get it?

- Sometimes your cover does more than attract a reader at a newsstand, it forms the basis of the subscription relationship you ultimately seek.

Whichever way you go, remember—like the best investments—it pays to stay fully vested for the long haul.

11. At least it got her off the cover

We all know the story of *Rosie*. The bizarre reincarnation of *McCall's* that lives on only in lawsuits. Having failed miserably myself writing direct mail designed to save that seventh sister from a fate worse than O'Donnell, I couldn't help but marvel at the amazingly cheery, shine-on-a-sneaker cover lines the editors blithely ground out even as their private boardroom battles burst into a rather public mud fight. Right to the end G+J made chicken salad out of—well—to the extent they even flagged the last *Rosie* a “farewell issue.” A collector's item indeed. Sadly now worth nothing.



