

AN UPDATED VIEW OF MAGAZINE CIRCULATION TRENDS

Recently we came across old magazine data for the first half of 1982 and thought it would be interesting to compare these figures with more current (2007) statistics for books that are still published today. The results were, in many cases, so startling that we thought we would share some of the basic findings.

Bearing in mind that the resident population of the United States increased by approximately 32% between 1982 and 2007, one could say that the magazine industry (as represented by these 46 bellwether publications) would have done well if these magazines averaged at least the same levels of circulation growth. However, as the accompanying table reveals, in aggregate the 46 magazines were down by 27% in paid copy circulation per issue. On an individual genre basis, some categories fared better than others; 26 out of the 46 magazines posted circulation gains, most notably the health books, which were up 53%; personal sports and epicurean (both +46%); men's interest (+38%); and cars (+36%). Nevertheless, the overall 46-book tally, which was weighted by circulation size, was affected primarily by significant attrition among mass circulation titles, notably within the women's service and general editorial genres.

Fortunately, since 1982 the magazine industry has switched from the issue-specific "through-the-book" visual recognition method to the non-issue-specific "recent reading" design used by MRI, which generates more readers-per-copy. An average magazine copy, which was assumed to generate 3.0-3.2 readers in 1982 now delivers 5.5 or more readers. Obviously the effects of this change on audience projections has mitigated much (though not all) of the circulation losses incurred by certain publications.

A number of factors contribute to the overall decline in circulation. Obviously many of the older titles, and often entire genres, are falling out of fashion and being supplanted by newer, more consumer-relevant publications. Compounding this is the problem of fragmentation. For example, with women's service magazines, not only are fewer women buying copies put out by the six remaining "sisters," but newer magazines such as **O, The Oprah Magazine** and **Real Simple** have expanded the field, in part at the expense of the incumbent players.

Competition from other media is also a major factor. There is little doubt that the newsweeklies, **Time** in particular, are finding it difficult (and less profitable) to maintain their traditional paid circulation levels, since so much of the same information is available in a more timely manner on cable and the Internet.

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It should be noted, however, that the influence of other media can also sometimes create positive results; while there is a lot of information about health, food, cars, travel, business and sports on cable and online, it does not seem to function at the expense of magazines covering the same areas. **Travel & Leisure**, for example, whose circulation has held up well over the years, serves as a source for in-depth travel information, while the Internet is where one can book the trips discussed in the publication. In like manner, **Sports Illustrated**, whose circulation has increased over the past 20-25 years, provides expert sports commentary at a level not practical for the sound-bite-oriented sports reporting on cable or the Internet.

In a nutshell, however, the long term circulation trends make it clear that magazine genres are evolving much like TV programming, reflecting changing public tastes, finer demographic and psychographic segmentation, the impact of new media options and, internally, the eroding effects of oversaturation within formats or genres when too many “me too” titles or editorial approaches fragment the audience base. Obviously the “survival of the fittest” concept is at play, and over the next decade, certain titles will fade from the scene while newcomers surge to the top. Although those who can’t adapt and wind up on the losing side may disagree, all in all, it’s a healthy and invigorating process for the industry as a whole. ■

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PUBLICATIONS INCLUDED IN EDITORIAL GENRES FOR CIRCULATION TREND ANALYSIS

BRIDAL

Brides
Modern Bride

BUSINESS

Business Week
Forbes
Fortune

CARS

Car And Driver
Car Craft
Motor Trend
Road & Track

EPICUREAN

Bon Appétit
Food & Wine
Gourmet

FASHION

Glamour
Harper's Bazaar
Vogue

HEALTH

Health
Self

HOME SERVICE

Architectural Digest
Home
House Beautiful

MEN'S INTEREST

Esquire
GQ

OUTDOOR

Field & Stream
Outdoor Life

PERSONAL SPORTS

Golf
Golf Digest
Ski
Skiing
Tennis

WOMEN'S SERVICE

Better Homes & Gardens
Family Circle
Good Housekeeping
Ladies' Home Journal
Redbook
Woman's Day

OTHER

Cosmopolitan
Parents
People
Playboy
Popular Mechanics
Popular Science
National Geographic
Reader's Digest
Rolling Stone
Smithsonian
TV Guide

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HOW AVERAGE ISSUE PAID CIRCULATIONS OF SELECTED MAGAZINE GENRES CHANGED BETWEEN 1982 & 2007

CATEGORY	NO. OF MAGAZINES	% CHANGE IN AVG. CIRC.
Bridal	2	NC
Business	3	+21
Cars	4	+36
Epicurean	3	+46
Fashion	3	+8
Health	2	+53
Home Service	3	+13
Men's Interest	2	+38
Outdoors	2	-30
Personal Sports	5	+46
Women's Service	6	-28
Other	11	-44
TOTAL	50	-27

NC = no change.

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.