

# Planning for Impulse

by Norman Schreiber

Last century I began to edit *Magazine Retailer*. It was a marvelous experience. It kept me off the streets and tossed me into the raging waters (and raging bull) of the single copy world. The first and most frequent rule whispered to me — always in reverent tones — was that magazines are impulse purchases. I've yet to learn the absolutely verified, exact, quantified percentile of magazines bought impulsively. Enough anecdotal evidence convinces me that the number is somewhere between the high 90s and a whole lot.

"If we only sold people the magazines they came in for," says Mike Oelrich, Buyer, Etc. of Chicago's City Newsstand, "we'd be out of business. It's the magazines that people *weren't* looking for that we make all our money on."

It's 2002 and we are coping with the three horsemen of the Apocalypse: logistics, payments and technology. But we still should keep our eyes on impulse. Doing what we do well and doing it better means we sell more magazines. As Martha Stewart would say, that's a good thing. We'll look at impulse fundamentals and dynamics here, as well as alternate ideas that belong to the wondrous world of theory. The goal is to get us all thinking about it.

## What Lies Beneath the Impulse

An impulse purchase is "an unplanned action that results from a specific stimulus," according to Professor of Marketing Strategy John Mowen, of Oklahoma State University.

In contrast, a planned purchase, consumer psychologists report, is the final action in a series of steps used to solve a problem (anything from "baby needs a brand new sports car" to "hey, we're out of milk"). Consider the quintessential *Consumer Reports* reader coolly studying charts, graphs and performance studies, pondering prices, determining needs and, only then, acting.

Impulse buying also solves problems — but without all that messy middle stuff. The consumer sees an item and responds immediately. Often the underlying problem is "How can I be happy?" "How can I be the true me?" or "How can I be cool?". Emotional forces create the impulse buy. Mood state or self-image dominates. Something about the item pushed a button in the customer's head. There are several kinds of buttons.

- **Reminder impulse:** The customer spots a product that, according to Professor John Stanton of St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, he or she "may have used; needed; and/or ran out of. The customer sees it and remembers to buy it." *TV Guide* at the checkout is a good example.

- **Suggestion impulse:** Something in the display suggests this item would assist the customer. "A woman in a department store," says Professor Steven Hoch of Wharton, "might see a mannequin wearing a blazer and a scarf and think, *I have a blazer. If I had that scarf, I could do that outfit.*" Magazines offer suggestions that match customers' interests, such as plans to purchase a new car. (Yes, even the *Consumer's Report* reader can be an impulse buyer.)

- **Planned impulse:** A customer walks into the store, just

itching to buy something. People browse their way through a magazine display waiting for, as Hoch puts it, "a magazine to speak to them."

- **Pure impulse:** An object tempts the consumer — and wins. Says Hoch, "The customers recognize they shouldn't buy it because it is bad for them or too fattening or too expensive or too prurient." Men's sophisticates can be pure impulse. At least that's been my experience — but so can an exotic, molto expensive (\$24.99) imported fashion or shelter magazine; or a magazine about a

passion (such as motorcycling, boating or golf) that a customer should avoid upon pain of poverty or divorce.

Resistance to impulse comes from such factors as concern about peer disapproval or cost.

"Magazines don't cost too much," says Oelrich, "If one can plant the idea in a person's head that his or her life will be somehow improved by the possession of this magazine it's usually a 'done deal'."

We know much about people and what they want for themselves. So why aren't there more done deals?

The short answer? People perceive things differently. We each have our own set of associations, memories, cherished notions, ideas about who we are, what we feel, what we believe, what we do, what we plan, and so on. These all may lead to sex, health, money, barbecue and thinner thighs. But the road maps differ. Although there is no universal button, marketers know plenty about what tends to attract and repel. We use that knowledge to prepare our customers' minds to help them respond positively to our magazines.

## Uncovering the Cover — A Love Story

Impulse rubber meets the road in the store when the customer's eye meets the cover — the single copy world's favorite love/hate relationship.

A 1999 Envirosell study for Time, Inc. found that the cover art attracted 40% of the shoppers at the checkout, and a particular cover line captured 13%. Just about everybody in our industry is a cover maven. Still, a bonanza of failed covers on the newsstand is God's way of telling our colleagues and us to revisit the rules.

When Time, Inc.'s Richard Stolley (a member of ASME's 'Magazine Editors' Hall Of Fame) was Managing Editor of *People*, he devised a concise guide to covers: ("Young is better than old; pretty is better than ugly; rich is better than poor. Music is better than movies; movies better than TV.")

"For me," Janet Chan, editorial director of Time Inc.'s Parenting Group, told Folio's Geoff van Dyke, "thinking of designing a cover is looking for the image that says, 'You want to take this puppy home.'"

The question is not 'what should the cover be;' but rather 'what does every cover element say about and to the reader?' The following questions may help.

Are the models looking at the reader?

What emotions or attitudes are conveyed by the models' facial expressions?

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**"It's the magazines that people weren't looking for that we make all our money on."**

What are they wearing and why?  
What equipment or products are on the cover and how are they lighted?  
What are the colors and how do they work together?

Hearst editor John Mack Carter (also a Hall of Famer) codified coverline savvy. Here are a few of his points:

The sum of your coverlines ought to represent a value greater than the price of the magazine. You can almost take a little calculator out and say what that value is worth. Money can be saved and the magazine is going to tell you how to do that.

The magazine should do something for you or you're not going to buy it. Make you handsomer. Make you richer. Make you appear to be more intelligent and make you come back for the next issue and buy another one of these magazines.

Make a boastful promise. If you don't have something good to say about yourself, nobody else is going to. Use superlatives.

Richard Rhodes says never assume the magazine will get full cover display everywhere so be sure all valuable information "is on the cover's top third and left side." While at Weider, he made editors aware of the channels of trade in which their titles were sold so that they could design the covers appropriately for display.

## Seeing Is Perceiving

The center ring for the magazine marketing circus is right in the store. Flaunting a striking cover is just the beginning. The cover has to be seen. Here are a few steps in the journey to vision.

- **Place category leading magazines in the best position**, says Professor Hoch. He says "optimum placement for an item is 47"-60" from the floor (assuming the average woman is about 5'5" and the average man a little under six feet tall.) People are most likely to look 15° below where their eyeballs are."

- **For that extra impulse impact**, says Hoch, "put more expensive, higher margin magazines right near the leader."

- **"Bombard the customer with the cover,"** says consultant Amy Burns, president of ACB Services. "The display can be all covers in a window, pockets on a wall or freestanding floor fixtures or dump bins."

- **Get a little synergy in your life.** Burns reports that she added a display of news and business titles over the newspapers in the Orlando airport newsstand. Her goal is to get the business traveler, just dashing into the shop for a newspaper, to also pick up a magazine.

- **Floorstands work.** Wholesaler drivers used floorstands to make *Chile Pepper* magazine more visible. (The better to sell more copies of the magazine and win sales incentive awards.)

- **Keep displays neat, spiffing and current.** The EnviroSell study found a higher percentage of people (35 %) shop for magazines when the display is unobstructed than when it is obstructed (29 %). John Stanton says, "supermarkets have discovered that if they give 'ownership' of a department to an employee [a champion for the category] sales go up."

- **Use shelf talkers.** Failing to do so could be a form of shelf-sabotage. Alert the customer to timely, provocative or local interest editorial matter. Put shelf talkers for magazines in other departments. ("See 21 wild things you can do with broccoli stalks in *Vegetable Monthly* at our newsstand now.")

Think about opportunities. Barnes & Noble puts its category leaders at its cash wraps. You'll find not only *Time* there but *The Economist* as well. Special themed displays draw attention to groups of magazines. Themes include "weddings," "new titles," "Hispanic interest," "Black History Month," and "our staff recommends."

- **And speaking of checkouts.** I can summarize everything most everybody ought to know in one word: fuhgeddaboutit! Yes, it's the very best positioning. As such, it tends to go to the very best performers with the deepest pockets. Moreover, or lessover, there's room for only 15 or 20 at most. Sure try for it; but don't obsess.

## Other Triggers We Have Known

Positioning is not all. Other tools can incite as well.

- **Store atmospherics stir impulses.** Wafting aromas from Weider and Rodale in-store recipe demos seduce and succeed as they trigger suggestion impulses. Spray the automotive magazines with "new car" scent. Use hippy-dippy aerosol floral essence around the new age publications. Run a popcorn popper for a movie or entertainment magazine display.

- **Lifestyle displays work.** We've all seen the inviting tabletop complete with cherries, Cuisinarts, pie plates, gleaming china and colorful dishcloths in an upscale housewares store. It gives positive suggestions and vibes. Let there be displays or posters that show how a particular magazine category or titles from a particular publisher enhance the customer's life. Emphasize lifestyle and the suggestion impulse scores.

- **Sound deserves a hearing.** Music washes listeners with reminders of time, place, mood and activity. There needn't be a soundtrack for each magazine category. Immerse customers in a streaming, evocative medley that reminds them of seasons, events, health, New Age, motoring, food, among others. You can even include the "Love Theme From CNN." Announcements on the in-store radio slip the magazine's name into the customer's mind. While strolling through Winn-Dixie, I heard news about medicine, presented by *Good Housekeeping*.

- **Pricing makes a point.** Use "anchor pricing" to stimulate impulse sales. When shoppers buy products, they tend to buy one or two at a time. That fixed number is the anchor. They buy more when the product is on sale. Professor Brian Wansink, Director of University of Illinois Food and Brand Lab reports that more sales come when suggestions are made to change the anchor number. Suggestions can be:

- *Multiple unit pricing* (Four for \$2 rather than 50 cents a can)

- *Purchase limits* (Only 12 per customer)

- *Suggestive selling* (Buy 12 for your freezer)

People don't necessarily obey the signage slavishly; but they do break script and buy more than they otherwise would. Suggestive selling probably works best for us. (Buy five sports titles and get full coverage of the race to the World Series.)

The new ABC rules give impetus to pricing for impulse, says Richard Rhodes. For example, you can bundle magazines in two for one packages.

In-store marketing has its limits. Prevailing business conditions do have an effect, as does the erosion that comes from missed opportunities.

Professor Stanton says publishers don't market magazines aggressively with the same tools (point of purchase display, shelf signs, automatic coupons, and circular ads) other categories use. He

calls these aggressive because they both stimulate impulse sales and demonstrate to retailers the vendor's commitment to the product. Too often, says Stanton, publishers use mass marketing, which he defines as "put the magazines out and go to mass and pray that it works."

## Thinking Outside the Store

"When you get right down to it," wrote Simon Dimenco, New York magazine media editor and Folio columnist, "it's a lazy, despicable little political game - and a failure of imagination - to resort to blaming the poor little old magazine cover for the ills of the entire magazine industry."

Although retail magazines are consumer products, there's not enough marketing by publishers directly to consumers. We need more thinking outside the store. The mission is amazingly, bluntly simple. Use garden variety marketing tools to plant awareness of title (and/or store) in the customer's mind. This constructs bridges to the hot buttons that trigger the impulse when the customer is in the store.

- **Cash in on coupons.** Here are some magazine opportunities:

Place a coupon in a current issue for discount on next issue. Or even offer savings on two or more titles with one coupon. (Shades of anchor pricing!) Also possible are automatic cashier coupons for titles that reflect contents of the grocery cart.

Barnes & Noble wants a tie-in with subscription renewal campaigns. Along with that final letter to the stubborn ex-subscriber, include a "thanks for your business; let's stay in touch" discount coupon for one issue, redeemable at Barnes & Noble.

- **Circulars make sense** — especially if the spotlighted titles support the circular's promotional theme. Your publication's name is delivered to the home of just about everybody in the region. Yes, there's a price. If big chain fees bust your budget, Professor Stanton recommends targeting customers of a smaller chain that has the right demographics.

- **Go global with Internet marketing.** Send e-mails regularly to readers. Tell them about all the great stuff that they need to know that they only can get in the new issue of your publication. Include a tip or taste of the info. If you don't have a readership address book, now's the time to start one.

Check your Web site to make sure it does enough for retail sales. There's more to the Web than "click here to subscribe." That's the news from *Weekly World News*. To promote a special double issue the tabloid shut off access to the site's content and posted this: "We would like you to buy the paper at least one stinking week out of the year . . . We want to see who our true fans are. We want to know who loves us. We want to keep our jobs." This led into a similarly jocular, hectoring message from columnist Ed Anger. Apparently it worked. That issue's sale increased by 15%, despite a higher cover price.

- **Zap them with buzz.** Magazines spread hype efficiently and effectively — except when it's for themselves. The goal is to get newspapers, radio and television programs, and Web sites to alert their audiences to the special stuff in your magazine. Add newsworthy press releases and stir. Titles need two types of campaigns. (1) There is the continual "we are the authority" juggernaut. Position key figures (editors, publishers, contributors) as the best people to be quoted on issues relating to your publication's niche. (2) Each issue needs its own publicity campaign that details the magazine's

most vital contents.

"High-profile stories create powerful impulses outside the store," said Oelrich. He warned that timing is all. The button fades away, if, says Oelrich "a publisher does all the publicity a week to 10 days before the title is on the newsstand." He recalls "issues of magazines that we would get dozens of calls on before they came out, only to see weak sales when they finally did come out. I know if I'd had them in the store that every one of those calls would represent a sale."

- **An impulse can be made possible by a grant from . . . you.**

The vehicle is sponsorship. You donate money, time, goods and/or services in return for an association with a sports, arts, entertainment event or a cause. Richard Rhodes advises sponsorship of cause-related community events. "Not only are you doing good," says Rhodes, "but you are creating a high degree of visibility. People feel good about what they're doing and associate that feeling with your brand." Fees range from the thousands to the millions of dollars. For a list of sponsor-seeking properties, go to [www.sponsorship.com](http://www.sponsorship.com).

If we've learned anything, it's how crowded the public's mind can be. But that mind, that cauldron, that seething furnace of hopes, desires and swirling egos always has room for one more ingredient. Don't even think about it. Just do it!

## Sources & Resources

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