

Alumni Magazines in a Time of Transition Part 1: The Maelstrom

By Emily Harrison Weir

A Status Report

With private- and higher-education budgets being slashed and mass-market magazines disappearing (bye-bye *Gourmet*, *Modern Bride*, and *Cookie*), it's no surprise that alumni magazines are feeling the pinch too.

Will they survive in print or move exclusively online? Is the printed magazine a medium that's seen its best days and should gracefully bow out in favor of the instant gratification offered by Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn? Can one magazine be all things to all audiences in these days of personalization?

It's a classic crisis/opportunity pivot point, when alumni magazines will either evolve into some future-friendly form or go extinct. Editors, individually and collectively, are worrying, planning, and exploring new avenues to success.

Here's a look into the maelstrom of challenges and possibilities for alumni magazines.

The Problems

There are two major problems facing all print alumni magazines: cost and production time. As budgets shrink, formerly monthly publications now appear bi-monthly or quarterly, and many quarterlies have become "thirdlies" or semi-annual publications. Like daily newspapers, page counts in alumni magazines have dwindled. No magazine that I know of has reverted to black and white from full-color production, but circulation lists have been trimmed, and once robust budgets have become recession-ravaged. And even at institutions where money still flows

relatively freely, print magazines face significant competition from real-time social networking and other Internet sites that make print publications' news seem hopelessly out of date.

Defend the Printed Word

Are print alumni magazines irrelevant today? In a word, no. That's because, despite the buzz around social media and new ways to read magazines online, readers of all ages continue to favor reading their alumni magazine in print.

The largest (24,000 U.S. respondents) and latest (2009) survey of alumni readers confirms this. The survey was conducted by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), the trade organization for alumni magazine editors and other institutional advancement employees at colleges, universities, and private schools. The survey asked alumni at more than seventy-five institutions whether they'd prefer reading their alma mater's magazine online or in print.

The results were clear: 65 percent preferred print; 14 percent preferred online; 21 percent said "both." The older the respondent, the more likely he or she was to want to read a paper magazine. However, the age difference among those preferring "online" was not statistically significant. Jeff Lott, editor of *Swarthmore College Bulletin*, who is giving a series of talks about these survey results, wrote the College and University Editors listserv (CUE-L) that the results "are very affirming regarding the power of [print] magazines to connect and motivate alumni."

Twitter's success shows that less can be *more*, but print magazine editors have also argued

convincingly that more is more. Here's part of a posting to CUE-L from February 2009 by Matt Jennings, editor of *Middlebury* magazine:

"...it's my contention that upon a close and prudent cost-benefit analysis, simply 'putting it all on the Web' won't save you money; in fact, you'll probably end up worse off. As so many of these reader surveys point out, a good college/university magazine is the best vehicle for constituent engagement with said college [or] university. Do we really want to cut off the very people we need for support right now? We know that our magazines are not only entering the homes of our readers, but they are gobbled up.... Do we really want to say, we need you now more than ever, but instead of us coming to you, you need to come find us (on the Web)? And even if we do reach you, we know it will probably be when you are at work, when you have e-mails and phone calls and IMs and Twitters pinging away, dragging you off from that content we worked so hard to produce. And that content will still cost money, by the way; so do we really want to lessen the impact, the bang for the buck?"

Even the most print-loving editors know that communications are moving online. There's no doubt about the direction of the tide, but it's still a shifting sea, not a tsunami. At one level, it's all about demographics. Alumni who choose not to use the Internet are still around, and they wield enough power of the purse that institutions, afraid of declining donations and bequests from frustrated alumni, will likely resist efforts to go *completely* online.

How to Stay in Print Despite Budget Cuts

- Reduce page counts. Brian Doyle, editor of the University of Portland's respected magazine, wrote to CUE-L in late 2008: "...our feeling is that while we may trim pages and selected audiences, we cannot cut issues, for the magazine is the continuing case statement for investment in a way that no other communication is; the Web, useful for information and for touches from many constituents, does not arrive as a gift, is not

read as carefully and thoroughly, does not have an immediate emotional and sensory impact like the magazine. Our sense is that the magazine, curiously, is more important in straitened circumstances than it was before, because we need more than ever to convince new audiences of the substance and quality of potential investment here of child, cash, or both."

- Publish less often.
- Use less expensive (cheaper quality and/or lighter weight) paper.
- Negotiate a better deal with your printer: Because so many print projects are getting smaller and publishing less often, printers are understandably frantic for business. Even large organizations that print huge runs for commercial clients have recently stepped up efforts to court potential clients—such as shorter-run alumni magazines—they'd once dismissed as small fish. Hence, there's never been a better time to renegotiate your print contract.
- Editors often hate the idea of ads mucking up their carefully constructed pages, but some of the best magazines around use either a voluntary subscription program (Brown, for example) or a full-fledged advertising program (Dartmouth and many others) to bring in revenue.
- Give alumni the choice to opt out of receiving a printed magazine (reading it online instead) to reduce printing and postage costs.

Jump on the Hybrid Print-Online Magazine Bandwagon

Although there are a few holdouts whose magazines appear only in print (Penn State University's superb magazine *The Penn Stater* also has a blog written by its staff, but there's no way to read the print magazine online), most alumni magazines have some kind of online presence.

Communication is becoming personal, and your graduates will expect the same level of personal choice from their alma mater's communications that they have elsewhere in

their lives. Thus some kind of online presence is a must for alumni magazines. The form this takes varies and has been changing over the past two years or so.

- The easiest, fastest, and cheapest way is to post static PDFs of the print magazine on the institution's Web site. This makes the content readable, but lacks the enhancements of the methods listed below.
- Many magazines appear online as html versions of the printed version. This requires programming/posting/design staff time, but allows content to be reorganized for easy Web reading, and makes it easy to include Web extras. The most common are Web-only content and live links to internal and external sites. With proper staff talent and time, these can be beautiful and robust online magazines in their own right.
- A few magazines—my own included—experimented with a hybrid magazine/blog format, which I dubbed a “blogazine.” This form encourages discussion among readers through comment features, and alumni can choose to receive new posts instantly via RSS feed. Free software such as WordPress offers templates that can be somewhat customized even by those without tech support staff.
- The most recent trend is toward what's cheekily called a “flippin' magazine”—one in which readers view online pages that look exactly like the printed magazine's pages but virtually turn the pages with their cursor. Depending on the service that's chosen, these can also include features that take advantage of the Web, such as hyperlinks, and video or audio clips.
- An article in *FPO* magazine (www.fpomagazine.com/digitaledition) succinctly describes the differences between a print and online magazine, provides *Consumer Reports*-style pros and cons of ten digital edition vendors, and guides you in choosing a self-service or enhanced-service provider to host your magazine. The services reviewed are: Advanced Publishing, BlueToad, Issuu, Nxtbook, Pagesuite, PageTurnPro, Texterity, Typewares, Yudu, and Zmags.

Move your Magazine Online Only

Way back in 2007, Tom Griffin (then editor of *Columns* magazine at the University of Washington) correctly noted, “There is no case of a university or college dropping the print version of a university alumni magazine and going strictly via the Internet.” That's not 100 percent true today.

Turning a print publication into an online one may seem an obvious choice. Savings in printing and postage are significant, and technology now offers many display options for online magazines. But if you build an online magazine, will readers come?

It's early days, and data is sketchy, but the experience of *Columbia College Today* suggests the answer is no. For budget reasons, editor Alex Sachare took the publication online-only with their July–August 2009 issue. They announced the plan in two previous print editions and sent an e-mail blast to alums when the online magazine was posted. Yet, Sachare admitted to CUE-L, “I still get the feeling that many (if not most) of our readers never knew the issue existed.” His e-survey revealed that, although 91 percent said they read the print magazine “always or frequently,” nearly 75 percent had *not* read the online-only issue. Sachare says they have since found other cost savings and plan no more online-only issues.

Syracuse University Magazine suspended print publication and made its spring and summer 2009 issues online only, with plans to return to print (and online) publication that fall. Editor Jay Cox says reader reaction was mixed: “Some folks enjoyed the online issues (particularly those who are tech savvy and/or value sustainability efforts), while others shared their disappointment about not receiving hard copy. Most of the phone calls I received came from alumni who wanted the print edition.”

Commercial magazines haven't shown much leadership on how to move online successfully—consider *Time's MINE* magazine, described by MSN Money as a “hasty, Frankenstein monster

of compilation.” With a dearth of commercial examples to emulate, alumni editors are on their own.

Separate the News from the Magazine?

Matching the medium to the message can be good news for alumni magazines, freeing them from competing with other media in areas in which they will never win—such as delivering news quickly to alumni.

Print takes time, and time is the enemy of news. Print magazines just aren’t able to keep up with the latest. But although most colleges have online newsfeeds, every print magazine I know about also keeps a “campus news” section. Devoting significant space to news in print takes valuable real estate for a function that the Internet handles far faster and better. Editors might consider shifting news items almost exclusively online, with perhaps a short summary in print of the most crucial news for alumni without Internet access. This approach would also free magazines from the eternal problem of having more news than there is space in which to print it. With news or without it, print magazines should do what print does especially well: display stunning still visuals (think *National Geographic*), present complex arguments (think faculty research), and prompt intellectual musings. Dale Keiger, associate editor of *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, eloquently summarized

for CUE-L how he thinks alumni magazines should evolve: “I believe the way forward for our publications is to take ourselves seriously as magazines with a journalistic and educational mission. The best intellectual, science, and cultural journalism *ought* to be coming from our publications: we’ve got the source material at our fingertips, we’ve got a receptive audience, and we’ve got a mission congruent with our institutions’ missions,” he wrote in a proposal for a CASE conference session.

What Next?

The only thing that magazine editors appear to agree on is that things will change.

The magazine industry in 2010 seems analogous to the state of the motion picture industry in the 1920s. Sound films were just appearing. Some studios scoffed, some embraced the new technology; some actors flourished while others’ fame plummeted. With alumni magazines, as with movies, where we end up in a few decades may not be what any of the pundits predict today, but the smart money is on those who go with the flow of progress—carefully and thoughtfully.

Emily Harrison Weir is editor of the Mount Holyoke College Alumnae Quarterly magazine. She also writes and edits for Bidwell ID and our clients.