Chapter 5

Analysis Component

Redesign to reconnect. How magazines are using redesigns as a tool to build a stronger relationship with their readerships

Darhil Crooks was hired to reinvent Ebony Magazine by redesigning it. My whole goal was to take Ebony as a brand, which had lost relevance and wasn’t exciting or coherent or unique visually and give it its unique look and give it something that was relevant to 2012 and something that would attract a younger, savvy audience.

Crooks, and the five other designers interviewed, agreed that the goal of their recent redesigns was to connect better with their readership.

Interviewed between 2012 and 2013 along with Crooks were designers Elizabeth Hummer, design director for Harp’s Bazaar; David Priest, former design director for O, The Oprah Magazine; Alex Grossman, creative director for Bon Appétit; and Deirdre Koribanick, design director for Food Network Magazine. One editor, Adam Rapoport, editor in chief of Bon Appétit, was also interviewed about the role of design in marketing a magazine.

Most of these magazines have garnered national attention after their redesigns. Food Network Magazine has enjoyed record-breaking success because of the creative interpretation of a TV brand into a magazine. But everyone interviewed conveyed a desire to be more meaningful to their readers. The designers had to rethink every component of their magazine including how the
design affected their brand image. That meant changing or adapting the photography, typography and color.

**How to reinvent.** All six subjects said the goal of a redesign is to better connect with the reader. Readership loyalty drives newsstand sales and circulation rates, which translates to advertisers buying into the magazine. O, The Oprah Magazine, Harper’s Bazaar, Ebony and Bon Appétit were all redesigned because their circulations or newsstand sales had plateaued. The impetus for change was survival. Those four and Food Network Magazine approached their visual identity from one of two philosophies:

Reuse design from the brand either from a different time or platform.
Trust in your instinct and build the design off personal taste.

The designers from Food Network Magazine and Harper’s Bazaar based their new visual identities on a design aesthetic from within their own brand.
Food Network Magazine used colors from the Food Network color palette — lime green, bold red, vibrant orange, white, violet — all bright, energetic colors. They also used the logo of the network instead of trying to create a new logo; they were basing the magazine’s design on the network’s identity.

Harper’s Bazaar based the redesign largely on the work of Alexy Brodovich, who was the art director for Harper’s Bazaar from 1938-1958. During that time Brodovich became known for his innovation in print design. While others at fashion magazines felt it was important to show photographs that
depicted the entire garment, Brodovich wanted dynamic photography as artwork. “Dovima with the Elephants,” shot by Richard Avedon, is a prime example of this. He would often let the forms in the photography dictate the type design treatment. Curving forms in a photograph would mean text boxes would mirror that shape, the text would play off the art and the text would become art.

With the redesign of Harper’s Bazaar, there was a return to the roots of the magazine in its heyday. In the September 2010 issue, Hummer said they “went back to Brodovich — really simple type treatments. A beautiful drop cap and letting that speak for itself. We played with white space more and type [design] in the front of the book.”

Instead of creating a totally new visual identity, she used the brand’s history, which is laden with groundbreaking print design, and made that the inspiration for the redesign: dominant type treatments, unusual photography, monochromatic artwork and ample white space.

Not every designer has the opportunity or a desire to use a brand’s history as a guide through a redesign. At Ebony Magazine, O, The Oprah Magazine, and Bon Appétit, designers went on instinct to create a new design to reinvigorate their brands, despite the fear of upsetting their existing audiences. Rapoport at Bon Appétit explained:

If you rock the boat, you’re going to get complaints and criticism. It’s inevitable. But we try hard to listen to those critiques and use them to improve the magazine, month by month. [We wanted to] make a magazine full of content that we as a staff personally feel passionate about, and make it beautiful. Period.
Crooks echoed this sentiment. He believes if he does something new, people will like it and recognize it for the sheer fact that it’s new. Neither Bon Appétit nor Ebony Magazine conducted focus groups because they both trusted the instinct of the staff to create something fresh.

How design can bridge across media platforms. Before O, The Oprah Magazine’s redesign in 2010, its newsstand sales had been on a decline for five consecutive years, and its circulation was not growing. The company wanted a stronger point of view from an editorial standpoint in order to build readership and decided the best way to do that was a redesign. Priest and his partner Grace Lee, of Priest + Grace, were brought on to do a redesign that would inject more liveliness, more color and more sophistication. It was to be launched in September 2010, the 10th anniversary issue. He explained:

They [Oprah Winfrey, Susan Casey and Gayle King] were feeling that they had reached a peak with the previous design, and it didn’t represent Oprah. It was too bland. We wanted to achieve warmth with the design, and we wanted to make it more lively, prettier and more accessible. We were responding to 10 years of a certain look; we wanted to depart from that.

Priest said the target audience was women in their 30s through 50s. Similarly, Koribanick, design director of Food Network Magazine, wanted to make sure that her magazine mirrored the network’s point of view visually.
While she didn’t have to redesign a magazine, she did have to construct the design for a magazine based off an existing brand, Food Network.

Essentially, they had a built-in readership because of the network, but the magazine’s success laid in understanding the Food Network viewer and the best way to serve that kind of reader. Koribanick explained:

Food Network as a brand appeals to all types and all ages, but what we know is, our readers love to cook and the magazine is designed to serve that need. We have to make sure the pages are user-friendly from cover to cover. We never jump a recipe to the next page, we never run images separate from the recipes, we always make sure type is legible.

Utility is evident in the magazine. For example, in the front of the book there is a recipe index. It’s a spread that includes a thumbnail of each dish in the magazine, the name of that dish and the page where you can find the recipe.

Koribanick said it made sense to start with an index because the magazine is so visually driven.

“People can sort of ‘shop’ for recipe ideas at the beginning of the issue and decide what they want to make. It’s in keeping with the user-friendly feel of the magazine,” she said. Touches like the index as well as the Bonus Recipe Booklet, a small book inserted inside the magazine every month that contains shorthand recipes, demonstrate effort through design to speak to a reader who likes to cook dishes quickly and with ease.

*Go young or go home; how some redesigns aim to serve a younger readership.* Not every magazine wants to keep aiming at the same
demographic after a redesign. Sometimes, the goal for a redesign is to expand the audience. In the cases of Ebony Magazine and Bon Appétit, they were both aiming for a younger readership.

Crooks, former creative director of Ebony Magazine, revealed that reconnecting to the readership was the overall goal of the redesign, but they also wanted to appeal to a younger readership to make it a better sell to advertisers.

You can see changes to the design that feel fresher — younger. The colors are bolder, and the use of illustrations contributes to a more modern feel. Crooks’ experience as former art director at Esquire Magazine, is evident in the pages; graphic shapes caption photographs, department section headers are bold and eye catching and bright pops of color dot the redesigned pages. These elements were made part of the design to evoke the feeling of magazines that target a younger demographic (like US Weekly, for example), but Crooks carefully placed them to help guide the reader and not merely for aesthetic purposes. He also wanted to appeal to a more balanced gender demographic, not too feminine and not too masculine.

“[Ebony Magazine] wasn’t for men or women in the beginning,” Crooks said, “It was for a culture.” Ebony Magazine’s media kit states that its subscription base is roughly 60 percent women and 40 percent men.

Reaching a younger audience was one of the goals that Rapoport of Bon Appétit had for the redesign of the magazine too. The idea of reaching a younger audience was integral to the redesign; he explained that he wanted to make a magazine full of content that would inspire his staff, many of whom are young.

Grossman, creative director of Bon Appétit, echoed Rapoport’s sentiment.
“We’re also younger as a staff, so there’s another shift in our perspective. The overall goal was to be more young, gender neutral, have more food sensibility.”

Rapoport’s strategy for speaking to a younger reader was to broaden the context with which food was discussed, which is to say that they might ask an actor what their weekend breakfast routine is or they might ask famed authors what restaurants they would like to work in, instead of just focusing on chefs and food.

“We needed to get people in the magazine that younger folks, who put a lot of stock into what’s going on pop-culturewise, care about.” Rapoport explained. Shortly after the redesign of Bon Appétit launched, Gwyneth Paltrow did appear on its cover. It also has regular Q&As with celebrities regarding their interest in food, which are always accompanied by a portrait that injects humor. “I also want to make a magazine that’s culturally relevant, that feels ‘right now,’ that reflects what’s going on in society and popular culture. That’s what magazines do. There’s no reason food magazines shouldn’t also,” he said.

**Approachability.** Being approachable leads to being more mainstream, which leads to mass appeal.

Why be approachable? The answer is to attract a wider range of readers instead of a specific reader. It has everything to do with having a broader advertising base.

Koribanick explained that wide appeal was a key point of the magazine’s design plan to make people feel comfortable and guided throughout recipes and
stories. “Food Network as a brand is really approachable, and we try to be as well. Things are simple to read and process,” she said.

For example, in the May 2011 issue of Food Network Magazine, the Fun Cooking department had a story called “Piece of Cake.” The story was about how to transform a sheet cake that you make from a boxed cake mix into what looks like a box of popcorn that you buy at the movies. The first page of the story had a photo of the finished product. The second page had six photos that illustrated each step of the process.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are luxury-brand magazines, like Harper’s Bazaar, that are challenged in being approachable because of their content. “There’s not a whole lot that’s approachable about a gown that costs $20,000,” Hummer said. However, even luxury magazines need to connect with readers who can’t afford the products they feature.

They try to connect to a broader readership by featuring products at a wider range of prices. Some are less than $100.

Shifting editorial focus was a strategy Ebony Magazine used to reach a wider audience. Before the redesign, many of its human-interest stories relied heavily on reporting about black celebrities and athletes. After the redesign, instead of just relying on people who were famous, they decided to talk about people who were making a difference. The shift in editorial focus targets a broader black audience. By covering everyday people with great stories along with celebrities, it widens the reach and makes the magazine more relatable to the readership. From a design perspective, photographing real people and showing them in their
element enables the reader to connect to the magazine both visually and through the text; the content becomes more approachable, more accessible, more real.

Crooks harkened back to the idea of Ebony Magazine being a magazine for black culture as a whole and his passion for serving that readership as best he could through design.

Ebony is a black magazine for black people, and I honestly didn’t feel like we as black people have a magazine that is on the level of Esquire, GQ or Vanity Fair. We just don’t have that. There isn’t really a well-crafted magazine with smart illustration and great photography. At Ebony I wanted [to] do it well-crafted, from top to bottom.

Having a broader target readership was also a goal for the Bon Appétit redesign.

“[We needed] more attitude, more point of view, more humor,” Rapoport said. “It needed to be about more than just recipes.” One way Bon Appétit accomplishes this is through Arsenal, a section in which the staff tells the reader what food-related obsessions they’re currently having. The voice is informal and funny. Most importantly the staff’s bylines are on those recommendations. It’s common in magazines for some short stories not to have a byline, but in this case, Rapoport wanted to include it to help make the text more personal. However, Bon Appétit’s most notable change was in its philosophy of photography.

Fine-tuning photography, how photographs can change the mood of an entire magazine. Tom Wallace, the editorial director of parent company Condé Nast, told Grossman that the photography had to change.
Wallace explained that the food had to look delicious — that it had to make readers hungry — and to his dismay the style of food photography Bon Appétit was using at the time was not achieving that goal.

Before the redesign in 2011 the photography featured was conceptual. “The photography was too modern, almost avant-garde, like something you’d see in a zine.” Grossman explained.

Some would argue that it was genius because it depicted familiar food in ways that audiences had never seen them. For instance, the April 2008 cover featured cupcakes, which everyone knows, but they were stacked in a way that defied gravity. Or the story that focused on frozen desserts and featured a photo of an ice cream cake that looked like it was from the future rising from a cryogenic haze of dry-ice smoke. Brilliant? Perhaps. Did it possess mass selling appeal? Not according to Wallace. Grossman explained that they still wanted the photos to be beautiful, but they had to step away from modern and step toward mainstream photography.

Today, the photos are more realistic. For example, food is shot with natural looking light, whereas in the past, food was often shot with a spotlight or harsh lighting to garner a modernist effect. Also, the food is photographed in such a way that it makes the reader feel as though a home cook made and plated that dish. There are crumbs, there are mistakes. It isn’t perfect, and that’s the idea.

Conceptual, hypermodern photography does not have mass appeal. Although all the designers interviewed are creative people and appreciate photographers’ work as fine art, many of them understand that the vast majority
of their readers don’t identify with it. There is a fine line between being fresh and interesting and being unrealistic.

Hummer of Harper’s Bazaar explained that the photography in the magazine features products that are high-ticket items. In an effort not to alienate readers, they brainstorm creative ways to shoot stories that appear in the feature well so that if they’re not that relatable, they’ll at least be notable. She said Glenda Bailey, the editor in chief, is always pushing the staff to remain relevant and newsworthy.

Harper’s Bazaar stays newsworthy by doing creative takes on events in pop culture. For example, when “The Rachel Zoe Project,” a reality television show featuring star stylist Rachel Zoe, became popular, the magazine jumped on it. Zoe’s signature phrase was “I die,” which she would say when she loved an outfit or a piece of clothing. So, they did a photo story on her. Each photograph featured Zoe donning one of her favorite designers’ creations while that designer was depicted plotting her murder. The title of the feature was “I Die.”

In 2004 Harper’s Bazaar started printing two covers every month, one for its subscription base and one for newsstand sales. Though this is not a new development, it showed that artful photography doesn’t sell on the newsstand. Harper’s Bazaar puts out a separate, more commercial cover for newsstand sales. That cover follows a formula that has proven successful — often a smiling celebrity, eye contact and certain language for cover lines. For the subscriber cover, they understand that they’re speaking to a reader who doesn’t need to be persuaded to pick up the magazine. Because they’re talking to a reader that’s bought into the brand, the cover can be more experimental.
Gourmet Magazine, like Harper's Bazaar, used to use artsy photos. Hummer described it as being painterly and rich but said that its visual identity was too elevated for the average reader. After the magazine folded in late 2009, it could be argued that it signaled a changing of the guard. It was around this time that Food Network Magazine debuted. One magazine was artful, targeted an older demographic and was out of business; the other magazine was approachable, user-friendly, with easy-access design and was an instant success.

At Food Network Magazine, the photography starkly contrasts with Gourmet Magazine’s vintage style. The former has food photography that is consistently bright, with white backgrounds, simple white dishware and clean, mostly white linens. The latter had photographs of food depicted as if Rembrandt had painted it from still life, with deep blue undertones, moody lighting and beautiful props. Those photos were scene-setting and their purpose was not only to show readers the food but also to inspire. There is a reason that Koribanick didn’t go the “Gourmet” direction, even though she admitted she would have liked to. Koribanick said:

As a designer, I’d love to run big beautiful images of food for pages and pages, but I know that [our] readers want to see the food right next to the recipe, so we design our stories that way. We've kept the photography user-friendly as well. We don't shoot food as artwork. We want people to see exactly what the finished dishes look like, so we shoot the food in focus and often on a white background.

The tag line for Food Network Magazine is “Cook like a star,” which is very much the Food Network brand. Its covers use the same formula every month: one
dish shot on white, a few cover lines, the Food Network logo and headshots of Food Network stars. Some might argue that never changing the cover format could get boring, but Food Network Magazine’s newsstand success says otherwise. Koribanick explained:

The look of the cover from the first issue reflected our whole approach: We're all about the food, so the food was and still is big, in focus and not surrounded by props. We did that with the first cover and we stuck to it.

**Typography: versatility is everything.** The most important piece of typography in a magazine is the logo. It has to represent the brand, it has to be attractive and it has to relate to the audience. That’s what Crooks had to consider when he redesigned the logo for Ebony Magazine, a logo that had never been fully redesigned in the history of the magazine.

Crooks worked with a type designer and used the original logo as a starting point to preserve the history of the brand and keep from alienating readers. His goal was to produce something more elegant and fresh. However, when it came to selecting display type in the magazine, Crooks and Grossman valued versatility over everything else. They used similar serif fonts for display type: Brunel for Ebony Magazine and Izembard for Bon Appétit. Both are thick serif fonts with a retro feel. (Similar typefaces were also found in the redesigns of The New York Times Magazine and Every Day With Rachael Ray.)

Grossman said Izembard reminded him of the famed fashion typeface Bodoni and that the contrasting thick and thin lines worked well with the condensed sans serif typeface also used in the magazine as a display type. Crooks
said he selected Brunel because the multitude of weights in the family enabled him to use that typeface for a wider range of stories. Harper’s Bazaar continues to use Didot, which it commissioned in 1991.

Wyatt, created for O, The Oprah Magazine, is the sole display type. Priest said it was important to have Wyatt consistently used throughout the magazine after the redesign launched. However, he believes once readers adjust to the new design, it would be safe to introduce other display typefaces.

**Color inspiration can come from anywhere.** Color, lots of bright happy color, is synonymous with the Oprah brand. The logo for her television network, OWN, is composed of a rainbow of colors, so it made sense to extend that aesthetic to the magazine. For the redesign, Oprah Winfrey, editor-at-large Gayle King and editor Susan Casey all wanted the magazine to be colorful and to use Oprah’s love of bright color as the inspiration behind the palette. Priest did exactly that. When they open the magazine, readers find vibrant flashes of violet, red, lime green, cyan, magenta and orange. “It’s the most difficult thing to control in the design.” Priest said.

Grossman worked with art director Elizabeth Spiridakis on the development of the color palette for Bon Appétit. His choice for display type drew from fashion so it was no surprise that the color palette was developed, in part, through a fashion lens as well. For inspiration, Spiridakis and Grossman researched high-end fashion brands — Marni, Prada, and Givenchy — as well as early 20th-century food packaging. Grossman recalled driving all over Manhattan to buy packaged foods from specialty food stores and Asian markets. When he laid the
packages on the table, he found the inspiration both for his display type and his palette.

Crooks based his inspirations for Ebony Magazine’s color palette on Romare Bearden paintings and African textiles. He explained that the paintings and textiles he drew from were a mix of browns and earth tones with pops of magenta and beautiful yellow-oranges and green-blues. He built a palette based off that idea: bright flashes of colors grounded in warm muted tones.

Koribanick, who redesigned a magazine based off a successful TV network, had to use Food Network’s palette. She said:

There are some colors that just don’t work well with food, so you won’t see a lot of pink, purple or blue in the issue,” she said. When she does use those color, they are muted. “We keep going back to oranges, reds, browns, greens — they’re colors that just naturally look great with food. And of course white is our favorite.”

Was it all worth it? A redesign has the potential to increase newsstand sales, garner publicity, increase advertising revenue and raise staff morale.

Bon Appétit released its redesign in April 2011. Since then newsstand sales have gone up 21 percent, according to Melissa Goolnick, account director at Condé Nast. Similarly Stephen Gregory Barr, publisher for the Johnson Group, which owns Ebony Magazine, confirmed that the magazine has seen a strong increase in newsstand sales since the redesign launched in March 2011 thanks to targeting a broader audience. Circulation rates have held steady for both O, The Oprah Magazine and Harper’s Bazaar since the launch of their redesigns.
According to the Food Network Magazine media kit, Koribanick has achieved her goal of targeting the Food Network viewer because hers is the No. 1 selling epicurean magazine on the newsstand today, selling more than Cooking Light, Food & Wine, Bon Appétit and Saveur combined. Rapoport of Bon Appétit commented on the newsstand success of Food Network Magazine by saying: “It’s got a brilliant business plan — a hugely successful TV network with a dedicated following. Voila, a built-in readership. Give the people what they want, then give them more of it.”