

CHAPTER FIVE

A magazine's design must be constant, but also able to withstand many different scenarios that arise through the nature of ever-changing content. A design can be great in one issue, but if it isn't flexible enough to work in a variety of different settings, the design concept is lost (Black, 2014).

Three art directors were interviewed in an attempt to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do art directors and editors keep the design of their magazine relevant and follow current design trends while preserving the magazine's visual identity?

RQ2: How do art directors and editors create a magazine design that speaks to their audience and communicates their message?

The art directors were chosen based on their experience maintaining the design direction of magazines and past involvement in magazine redesigns. Their responses guided the researcher in doing a light redesign of *Vox Magazine*.

Doreen Chisnell has been working at *Rhode Island Monthly* for twenty-seven years. She began her career as an associate art director of the main magazine, and then became the creative director of special publications,



Figure 1: Cover of Engaged's 2016 Issue

where she designs everything but the main magazine. Her main projects include *Engaged*, a bridal magazine, a state travel guide and a home design magazine. *Rhode Island Monthly* has over 170,000 readers, and *Engaged* has a circulation of 17,000. It is sold on newsstands in Rhode Island and southern Massachusetts and distributed through advertisers and bridal shows..

Dean Welshman is the Assistant Director of Creative Services at Providence College Magazine, where he has worked since 2014. Previously, he was an art director at *Rhode Island Monthly* for five years. He was involved with the redesign of *Rhode Island Monthly* and redesigned *Providence College Magazine* when he first started working there. He implemented his design in stages and referred to it as “more of a modification,” than a redesign. *Providence College Magazine* is distributed twice a year to alumni of the university.



Figure 2: Cover of Providence College Magazine's October 2015 Issue

Meera Nagarajan is an MU grad and has been an art director at *Sauce* since 2008. *Sauce* is an independent St. Louis-based food magazine with a controlled circulation of 300,000 a month.



Figure 3: Cover of April 2016 Issue of Sauce

It is distributed for free at bars, restaurants and businesses in the St. Louis area. Nagarajan was previously an intern at *St. Louis Magazine* and *Harper's Bazaar*, where she observed their redesign in 2007. Nagarajan redesigned *Sauce* for her master's project in 2013. See Appendix B for more design samples of *Sauce*, *Engaged* and *Providence College Magazine*.

Vox Magazine is a city weekly magazine with a circulation of 10,000. The magazine began in 1998 is staffed by students at the Missouri School of Journalism. It was redesigned in 2009, and more recently, in May 2014.

Content for *Vox* is written, edited, photographed and designed by students at the University of Missouri. This poses a unique challenge, as there is no full-time staff. Department pages of the magazine are designed by students in the publication design class—who have varying levels of experience—and are overseen by the art directors. Features are designed by students in the advanced design class and are overseen by the creative director. The design of the magazine needs to be simple enough that even the most beginning students can master it, and complex enough that advanced students can experiment. The magazine needs to have a consistent look and feel despite having so many people designing it, and having a changing staff every semester.

The researcher chose these individuals and publications as they all have regional audiences and a somewhat controlled circulation like that of *Vox Magazine*. The art directors all took the approach of redesigning in stages, similar to what the researcher did with *Vox*. The interview responses were used in the design update of *Vox Magazine*.

Theory

Images, design and text all work together to frame the content, goals and mission of the magazine brand and communicate that information to the reader.

The theory of framing informed this research. “Frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tactic theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (Gitlin, 6). As artists choose frames when showing their artwork, and are aware that these can effect how their work is seen, journalists use the frames of words, images and design to impact how the audience sees the publication (Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2009, 18).

Design is an integral part of framing the news. Magazine design can carry information that can be communicated to a large amount of people incredibly quickly (Rosas-Moreno, Harp & Bachmann, 2013).

The design of the magazine acts as a frame for the magazine’s content, mission and values. From just the art direction of a magazine, readers should be able to tell whom the magazine is for and what it is about. Every design decision an art director makes holds meaning and communicates information to the audience.

Art directors should understand the mission and goals of the publication and design the magazine in a way that aligns with those goals. Every design decision communicates information about the magazine. For example, art directors use fonts that create a look and feel that align with the goals of the magazine. Fashion magazines have long used the font Didot, because its dramatic thick-to-thin transitions communicate luxury.

Art directors are the primary decision makers for what the brand communicates visually. Visuals are “less intrusive than words and as such require less cognitive load,” (Rodriguez, 2011, 50). Visuals are important because they communicate information so quickly to the reader. Design is the first point of contact with a reader, and good magazine design guides the reader to the story.

Maintaining design direction

All three art directors talked about how the design of the magazine was constantly changing and improving. They emphasized that the design of the magazine overall should be flexible enough to experiment and make changes and that the overall publication should have a strong voice and visual identity.

“You want to have one confident voice for the whole publication as opposed to different avenues for the publication that look and speak differently,” Welshman said. He pointed out that there is an established vision and formula for *Providence College Magazine*.

To keep the magazine up to date with design trends, both Welshman and Chisnell look to feature designs. While department pages are somewhat templated and predictable, feature design offers a chance to step outside of the formula of the magazine. Welshman said it is, “logistics, because your sections are going to follow form and function...features are a good time to step out.” He said he looked to magazines that were able to step outside of their design for features but still preserve the look and feel of the magazine. He said that *Esquire* and *Outside* do this well. “They’ll have elements that are consistent with the rest of the publication but then the design expression is totally different and fresh,” Welshman said.

“The departments are consistent with the grid, fonts and approach of the photography, but then with the features, that’s where you can have more fun and use other fonts and step away,” Chisnell said. She said the feature should still feel like the same magazine but offer something new and interesting visually. It should be fresh but still rooted in the brand’s visual identity.

“You want to remain fresh and create buzz about the magazine,” Chisnell said. “I think that if you understand the brand, then your approach is always going to be successful,” Chisnell said.

For department pages, Nagarajan talked about keeping certain elements consistent like colors and style of photography and then tweaking a different element like typography. The result is something updated but that retains enough of the same elements to feel consistent.

“Most of the time, I’m not changing things month to month. But I think typefaces and color, for me, that maintains consistency and keeps it feeling like the same magazine even if there are certain things that are changing,” she said.

Redesigning in stages

Welshman talked about doing the design in stages. He knew his audience well enough to know that they wouldn’t mind this, and with the time constraints of other responsibilities of his job, he didn’t have time to sit down and do a complete redesign of the magazine all at once.

“When I came onboard, one of the first things I did was to redesign it, but it was really more of a modification. The first step was to bring in the brand look and feel into the existing design,” Welshman said.

He discussed that when he originally started working at the magazine, he redid the cover design in a rush and wanted to go back and update it.

Welshman discussed taking over the design of a magazine from a previous art director, saying that some personal preferences varied between the two of them but that he wanted to preserve a strong sense of readability.

He stressed the importance of having reasoning behind a design change. “Design can be subjective, but when you’re in a discussion with editors or other art staff, it is important to have a rationale behind your design choices to back up your argument,” Welshman said.

Nagarajan also rolled out her redesign in stages. She pointed out that with a large national title, there are press interviews, a certain amount of publicity that comes with a redesign, along with pushback from editors and publishers. With smaller magazines, there are fewer people in management positions to sign off on design changes. With a controlled circulation publication, designers have more freedom. Most readers don’t notice tweaks or small design changes from one issue to the next.

“I don’t think most readers are going to remember what this looked like,” Nagarajan said. “I’ll tweak a typeface or redesign the way the intro looks or work on a different column width or arrangement.” She talked about doing a lot of experimenting with page design and then using a few elements she thought of to improve the page rather than totally overhaul the design of it.

“I hate rules,” Nagarajan said, “If it’s better, let’s make it better.”

She also talked about how in her redesign of *Sauce*, she had a lot of freedom but one thing that didn't change was the logo. "Since the founder has an emotional connection to the logo, I pitched it as an idea knowing that it probably wouldn't change," she said. "People recognize that logo and like it or not, it does have that advantage...you want to make sure [the logo] still evokes the feeling of the brand."

Audience

Chisnell stressed the importance of designing the magazine with the audience in mind. She talked about how *Engaged* markets itself to middle-class women more than other wedding magazines, so she keeps takes a design approach that feels more casual and relatable than other high-end magazines.

"Everything from the content to the visuals must communicate that message. The whole magazine is for the girls that aren't the wealthiest girls. They don't necessarily want a Newport wedding. They want to do a lot themselves, so the approach we take is very earthy and very casual and that's not the approach that a lot of the other magazines take," Chisnell said.

She talked about how other magazines are very visual and photo heavy, but she wanted *Engaged* to be useful. Chisnell decided to change the size of the magazine so it was smaller and more portable, and included icons that indicated planning tools, Q+A's and other information were available online. With this approach, she was able to create a design that served the reader as much as possible.

Providence College Magazine is mailed to all current students and alumni of the university. Welshman said they do not do a formal survey of audience response,

but have discussed creating an online survey where readers can provide feedback. Readers do occasionally email the editor in chief feedback on the magazine, and Welshman said that the design feedback was generally positive. In one instance however, Welshman did receive feedback from his audience that some of the design was “too polished.”

“Since *Providence College Magazine* is a campus publication, some readers associate the design and expense paid for photography as not the best allotment for institutional finds,” Welshman said. “We tend to lean towards modern design and are attracted to it, but I think that can be pretty jarring to our audience.”

Since *Sauce* is distributed for free and is a controlled circulation publication, there is no subscriber information and very little feedback. Nagarajan enjoys the freedom to design based on her personal preferences rather than worrying about newsstand sales.

“We have a distributor who can let us know if we ask how many issues were picked up... We don’t collect any information on how anything is received, which is a good thing and a bad thing,” Nagarajan said. “I think it’s a good thing because it gives you the freedom to decide what you like and to make choices based on your experiences as a reader and what you respond to rather than having focus groups and people telling you what they like. The only downside to it is you feel sort of like you’re in a vacuum sometimes because you don’t have any idea how things are received.”

Nagarajan did seek feedback with a small focus group of contributors during her redesign. She says she is most interested in hearing about what people don't like so that she can improve the experience for them.

"We're a small community and people say really kind things and I appreciate that," Nagarajan said. She said she would much rather know what didn't work for someone rather than be complimented on her design. She found that knowing what certain readers didn't like was more useful in understanding their reading experience. She emphasized talking to photographers, editors and writers about how they approach stories visually.

"The whole point of this is to get the reader to read the story...if you're not providing entry points for different types of readers, the whole point is lost. It's important to talk to people who are not like you and ask what encourages them to read the story."

Chisnell agreed. "I think in order to be a good designer you can never just settle," she said. "With *Engaged* or any of the magazines I do, I sort of critique it and say 'What could I have done better?' and I ask other people, 'What do you think of this? Does this work for you?' If it doesn't function then you didn't do your job."

Inspiration

The art directors stressed the importance of looking at notable magazine designers throughout history and at current magazines for trends and inspiration. Welshman pointed to Fred Woodward, award-winning art director of *Rolling Stone*, as a source of inspiration.

Chisnell recommended sitting down with many different types of magazine and pulling sources of inspiration. Welshman talked about looking at magazines you wouldn't typically read for new ideas. "I think a big thing for me is to really see as much as you can about what's out there," Welshman said. "Really look at the different languages for different publications and you'll start to see a few different approaches." He says this will give provide designers with greater flexibility. The *Society of Publication Designers* also fosters a good sense of competition among designers and honors excellence in magazine design.

Nagarajan follows notable designers on social media to see into their day-to-day lives and what inspires them. She also recommends looking at a variety of publications, and looking at publications with varied styles.

"I like any time someone is taking a complicated issue and simplifying it for the reader," she said. "Magazines are constantly changing and you have to constantly look at them," Nagarajan said. "Those are your peers and that's how you learn.

The designer as editor

Chisnell talked about how the editorial staff had changed frequently during the time she worked at *Rhode Island Monthly*, so she was always working with editorial and helping coach new editors. "You sort of have to wear many hats when you're working at a small company ... I think the more knowledge you have of the editorial side, it only helps visuals," Chisnell said.

She emphasized the importance of editors and designers working together to make both the content and design stronger.

Welshman talked about editors and designers starting their processes at the same time, so the design and edit could work together from the beginning.

Nagarajan discussed the experience of being on the staff of a small magazine. “We don’t have an editor-in-chief at this point in time, so our structure at the magazine is pretty free...we’ll all give feedback,” she said.

Conclusion

Consistent elements like typography, grid, style of photography and colors can be used to create a magazine’s design and visual brand. As the content changes from issue to issue, the design may change as well but as long as the design remains rooted in the brand it will remain consistent. Features offer a unique opportunity to create a design outside of the templated nature of department pages and to experiment. Feature design should feel different from department pages but should still be recognizable as part of the magazine’s visual identity. Department pages, while structured, may change and adapt. Good ideas and small tweaks shouldn’t be ignored to preserve the exact design of the magazine.

Many of the designers worked for small or independent publications. Because of this, they can redesign the magazine in stages, updating certain sections with each issue. This approach is ideal for smaller art staffs that don’t have the time to redesign the magazine in one go. Readers won’t mind subtle changes in design and the new design should fit within the brand’s existing identity.

The design of the magazine should speak to the needs of the audience. With smaller regional publications, audience feedback isn’t as accessible, which allows the designer to have more freedom. The design should still serve the reader and

fulfill the goals of the publication. The overall purpose of the magazine is to create an engaging visual experience for readers, and design is the main way to do that. Designers should consult others who see stories differently to make sure the story engages them visually.

Inspiration can be found by studying designers throughout history and through studying current magazine design. All three art directors stressed the importance of keeping up with current magazine design trends and exploring magazines with a wide range of topics. Understanding the visual system behind different types of publications gives designers more flexibility.

Designers don't just exist to flow text and direct images. They should have a deep understanding of the content and fulfill a second role as an editor. Designers and editors should work together to make sure the design and content inform each other.

Reflection

Much of what the art directors said applies to the redesign of *Vox*. Welshman talked about his personal preferences being different than the magazine's previous designer. With *Vox*, the art directors and creative directors can change as often as every 16 weeks. The visual identity of the publication must be strong enough to endure constant changes in staff. While art directors should feel free to speak to their own personal preferences, there needs to be an underlying visual identity for the publication that continues from each semester. Since the art directors at *Vox* are students, they should strive to constantly be learning and improving the design from week to week.

Nagarajan said that fonts, colors and style of photography could preserve the look and feel of the magazine. The researcher chose to use fonts that were already part of the visual identity of *Vox*, but to use them in different settings and weights. This provides a new look that is still connected to the past design. The color palette, while updated and expanded, still references the bright and fun nature of the CMYK palette.

The art directors also pointed out the freedom that the controlled circulation of publications allows. *Vox* is also free from the pressure of newsstand sales, and its audience won't notice or be upset about incremental changes. Art directors should take advantage of that freedom and update the design of the magazine as needed.

Future Research

More research should be done to explore how art directors maintain design direction of magazines. The relationship between preserving the magazine's brand and trying to constantly improve the product is complex and designers would benefit from expanded research in this area.

To expand this research, studies could investigate how the approach of redesigning in stages affects different types of audiences. What type of audiences respond better to redesigns that are put in place in stages versus all at once? How do readers of controlled circulation magazines respond to redesigns as compared to paid subscribers? Further research could examine how the two different types of audiences respond to the two types of redesigns.