

“ASK THE EXPERTS”: THE ROLE OF THE ADVISORY BOARD AT *WOMEN’S HEALTH* AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MAGAZINE’S HEALTH COVERAGE

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ANALYSIS

Hed: Ask the Experts

Dek: Editors and advisors of *Women’s Health* magazine talk about the role of its advisory board in elevating the magazine’s health coverage.

By Hannah Pederson

Women’s Health magazine is the world’s fastest-growing women’s lifestyle brand. In addition to the 1.5 million people who buy or subscribe to the U.S. print edition each month, *Women’s Health* has 24 international editions that reach 50 countries, and a total of 20 million readers, through multiple mediaⁱ. One thing that *Women’s Health* feels makes it stand out from other magazines is its consistent use of an advisory board.

Throughout my research, several *Women’s Health* editors and advisory board members reported that it is common for other women’s health and fitness magazines to consult with experts on stories, but they don’t always have a specific panel they rely on. This is not the case for every magazine in the genre, however. *Shape*, *Fit Pregnancy* and *Prevention* all have advisory boards, but *Women’s Health* feels its board is superior to the others, partly because it was one of the first magazines to adopt the advisory board concept.

But advisory boards go beyond the women's health and fitness genre. Publications and organizations of all kinds — including the EPA and the University of Missouri's own Trulaske College of Business — use advisory boards to give credibility and provide expertise, as well as to help prepare for events. In general, advisory boards “can be an essential source of advice, guidance, technical know-how and industry connections from day one,” Christopher Mirabile of Inc.com wrote in a column.ⁱⁱ However, they can also be abused. *Women's Health's* board members and editors noted that some brands simply use experts as a list of names on their mastheads as a tool to add credibility to their publications.

Over the course of three months, I interviewed *Women's Health* Editor-in-Chief Amy Keller-Laird, as well as three *Women's Health* editors and five of the 26 members of the *Women's Health* advisory board to study the impact the advisory board has on the magazine's health coverage.

The *Women's Health* advisory board was introduced to readers in the July/August 2006 issue, just over a year after the magazine had its debut in April 2005. Above the experts' names and credentials, the brand-new advisory board page read: “We've recruited 15 of the smartest people we know, from cancer doctors to exercise scientists, to join our new board of advisors. You'll see their names — and influence — throughout our pages in the coming months.”ⁱⁱⁱ (See Appendix C(e) to view the original advisory board). At that time, the magazine was under the direction of founding editor-in-chief Kristina Johnson. Johnson brought *Women's Health* to 750,000 readers within the first year of publication, establishing the magazine's place among trusted health and fitness publications early on.

Throughout my nine interviews, a common theme kept appearing: *Women's Health* feels it is an authority on health and believes the advisory board helps the magazine stay a trusted, household name in women's health media. The magazine aims to have everything it reports backed by science, and this process involves checking with experts before publication — even when competitor magazines might fall victim to the 24-hour news cycle, wanting to be the first to report on a new study.

“A lot of people get a press release or an abstract and just run with it without really getting into the nitty-gritty of the study, and that can sometimes contradict or cause misinterpretations of the data,” says Jill Waldbieser, food and nutrition editor at *Women's Health*. In 2015, journalist John Bohannon^{iv} created a fake study claiming chocolate promotes weight loss^v to see how many mainstream media outlets would report on the study without actually researching it. Many outlets, including fitness magazines *Shape* and *Prevention*^{vi}, ran stories assuming the study was true; however, *Women's Health* did not. Waldbieser says the advisory board is largely relied on in situations such as that. “Our fact-checking department is very thorough, but they're also working under a high volume and lots of deadlines,” she says. “So if we need to, we can go to our advisors because sometimes you really have to do a deeper dive.” In these instances, advisors are usually contacted by *Women's Health* editors via email, but sometimes they are consulted on the phone.

Keller-Laird has been in her current role at the magazine since fall 2014, and in her tenure as editor-in-chief she has made changes in both the structure and members of the advisory board. Currently, the advisory board contains 18 categories, including fitness, internal medicine and nutrition, as well as niche groups such as gastroenterology

and yoga. (See Appendix C(d) for a full list of current advisory board categories and members). In 2015, the magazine added entrepreneurial and finance categories to the advisory board and removed the categories of “Green Living” and “Life Strategies.” The staff revamps the list regularly to make sure the experts are being responsive and “aren’t just looking for something to add to their resume,” says Tracy Middleton, health and features editor. Middleton is involved in the process of adding new members to the advisory board and removing experts the staff no longer feels it needs. She says the magazine looks for experts who sincerely want to be involved and are willing to go the extra mile, such as sending editors studies they feel would make interesting articles for *Women’s Health* readers.

Twelve of the 26 current advisors are medical doctors. These include a fertility expert, a dermatologist and a gynecological oncologist. Among the 10 remaining advisors are three registered dietitians, a personal trainer and a CEO. By compiling a team of what *Women’s Health* considers top-of-the-line experts in a vast array of fields, the magazine feels it is ensuring a broad scope of accurate coverage. “They’re able to find out what we’re all doing out there in each of our areas in a way where they’re on the pulse of what’s going on,” says yoga advisor Mandy Ingber. Ingber has been on the advisory board for three years and is typically contacted every other month to provide yoga expertise for stories. “I think it gives credibility to the brand. If people know that I teach the top people (celebrities), they know that they can trust me.”

Women’s Health is benefited by its experts, but there is also a reciprocal advantage for being on the advisory board. The members are not compensated for serving on the board, but they are paid if they write articles for the magazine. The five advisors I

interviewed are contacted primarily by editors, but occasionally freelancers, especially in the fitness department, reach out to the board members, as well. The advisors consult for print and online content with varying frequency, ranging from a few times a year to monthly, but they all appear on the masthead every month. Fitness advisor Rachel Cosgrove has been on the advisory board for seven years, and she appreciates that her expertise is being put to use at *Women's Health* in both writing and advisory roles. "I've been on some (advisory boards) where they don't use you at all; they just have your name as part of their advisory board just to say that you're on their advisory board," Cosgrove says. "I would say that *Women's Health*, they do use me pretty frequently, at least once a month."

The *Women's Health* advisors act as a sounding board for the publication in his or her realm of expertise. In addition to the role of go-to specialist for writers and editors, the medical professionals, fitness gurus and nutrition experts on the advisory board have other roles to fill.

Consultants

The main responsibility of the advisory board is to provide expert opinions and help resolve conflicting information writers or editors might come across. Advisors aren't consulted on every story, but sometimes they're contacted when a story is still in the initial idea stage, Keller-Laird says. In this instance, editors will contact the experts if they've heard about a new study or product anecdotally but want to make sure the research backing it is legitimate. "These are people we know we can rely on," she says.

“We know their background, we know how they look at studies, we know they’re impartial.”

Keri Glassman, a New York-based registered dietitian and a *Women’s Health* weight-loss advisor, has been on the board for eight years and is frequently called to confirm quotes and information from other dietitians. Middleton explains the process this way: “Sometimes, even our fact-checkers will go to them with a question if they want them to verify something that seems a little bit questionable or if we’ve had kind of a random source say. For example, if we’re in a story, and one source says one thing and during the fact-checking process another source says they disagree with that, we might reach out to someone on the advisory board just to kind of get their opinion and to weigh in.”

Sharon Chirban, a psychologist and instructor at Harvard Medical School, has been a mental health advisor for *Women’s Health* for nine years. In addition to verifying information, she is occasionally approached as a source to provide expert commentary in the magazine. She says the magazine has been reaching out to her more in recent years than when she was first on the advisory board. This could be due to changes in editorial staff, as well as increased reliance on the advisory board to make clarifications and answer questions.

As a fitness advisor, Cassandra Forsythe says she is most frequently contacted by writers asking for input for their stories. This doesn’t happen in all departments of *Women’s Health*, though. From my interviews with Middleton and Waldbieser, I learned that in their sections of the magazine — health & features and food & nutrition, respectively — the editors are the ones who typically contact the board members, not the

writers. This is because the editors have developed relationships with the board members. When the editors are looking for new trends and story ideas, they will often contact the advisors to ask if they've seen anything new in their fields. Keller-Laird says sometimes the advisory board members are included as sources on stories, but most of the traditional behind-the-scenes consulting by them occurs with the editors.

In February, the magazine published a feature on sodium^{vii}, and because sodium and nutrition can be controversial, Waldbieser turned to the advisory board for help in understand differing studies and to come to a decision on the way the magazine was going to approach the story. "We rely on our advisory board to be like, 'OK, help us make sense of this; what is your take and why,'" she says. "Then we'll get a consensus from a couple of different people who deal with nutrition on the board and say, 'OK, here is how we're going to approach sodium going forward.'"

At the other end of the spectrum, there are some advisors whom the editors don't rely on whatsoever. That appears to be the case with Helen Fisher, anthropology advisor. When I reached out to her asking for an interview, Fisher didn't seem to know she was on the advisory board. "I really don't have anything to say about being on the Advisory Board at *Women's Health*, because they never once contacted me for any advice," Fisher wrote in an email. "I have no idea who they are or even what they do." However, when I looked back at the *Women's Health* archives, I found she has been on the advisory board since its inauguration. (See Appendix C(e)).

Additionally, Middleton also says there are certain experts on the advisory board, especially in the health realm, she has never reached out to simply because the topic or that person's expertise has never come up. She says she has never reached out to the

oncology advisor partly due to her own background in cancer science and working at a cancer research magazine; she has sources she knows from her time there who she can reach out to if need be.

Industry Relevance

Another role of the advisory board is simply using the members' expertise to provide insight from the real world. "There's a big difference between research and then practicing it," Waldbieser says. "When we're giving out advice for people to act on, we want to make sure it's legit and it's practical. Academic studies are sometimes not able to be reproduced in the real world." Cosgrove agrees with this and feels that journalists don't always know how to translate the experience that comes from working with clients, and that's where the advisory board can be helpful.

Because the experts on the board have a wide network of colleagues, the *Women's Health* staff sometimes relies on advisors to help provide sources for stories. "If we're looking for someone who's kind of in a very obscure field or is researching something very specific and we're not able to find someone, I might tap (an advisor) and ask them even if they know of anyone and could make an introduction for us."

Additionally, because advisors are in the field every day, they often learn about new research or hear similar client concerns, so they can relay that information to *Women's Health* to help the magazine stay on top of trends.

Writers

The advisory board has a small contributing writer role at *Women's Health*. The advisors rotate writing "Ask Anything," the monthly column where experts — some on the board and some not — take turns answering readers' questions.

In her editor-in-chief role, Keller-Laird started "Ask Anything" in 2014 as a place to bring all *Women's Health's* experts together to show readers the authoritativeness and trustworthiness of the publication, she says.

Marissa Gainsburg, *Women's Health's* associate fitness editor, speaks to Keller-Laird's point: "I think that everyone kind of thinks they're an expert nowadays, especially with social media. There are a lot of people out there who aren't necessarily certified but are putting information that isn't always totally correct or can be a little misleading based on clickbait and stuff, so we really value having certified experts."

Beyond "Ask Anything," only Glassman writes a monthly column. It is called "Buy 5 Drop 5" where she creates recipes promising weight loss using five featured foods. A few other advisors such as Cosgrove are contacted occasionally for quotes or one-off articles, but Keller-Laird says they are mostly used in their advisory role. She says board members are welcome to pitch stories, but she reminded me that they don't necessarily have great writing skills because they are not writers; they are (mostly) doctors.

Face of the brand

Some of the advisory board members support and represent the *Women's Health* brand through platforms other than the magazine. Glassman is a spokesperson for the brand on TV, Cosgrove and Forsythe have written books with *Women's Health* and

sometimes, Waldbieser says, advisors give advice on backing brand-related projects. For example, when the *Women's Health* brand was partnering with a fish oil supplement, Waldbieser worked closely with an advisor to make sure *Women's Health* stayed true to its mission statement. (See Appendix C(a) for *Women's Health's* mission statement). The advisor gave a second opinion about backing the fish oil project. "We want(ed) to make sure this (was) something we (could) get behind and should stand behind," she says.

Since Gainsburg came to *Women's Health* two years ago, she has noticed that the advisory board members have started to come out into the public eye. "I feel like they're a little bit more of public figures (now) in the sense that we really want our readers to trust them, so we promote their faces a little bit more so you can easily identify them month to month," she says.

By bringing the advisory board members to the forefront of the *Women's Health* brand, they are giving faces to the names on the masthead each month.

Translating Research

My interviews uncovered conflicting opinions about whether the advisory board has a role in translating jargon-filled research into digestible articles for *Women's Health* readers. Waldbieser and Middleton see converting academic language into layperson's terms as their job as editors, not that of a board member. However, yoga advisor Ingber says: "As a teacher of something, you're really a translator. So I think when they call and ask me for my advice on specific questions, I'm basically giving that type of an answer that translates to the general public." Advisory board members Glassman and Cosgrove also say that occasionally editors will ask them to help get to the bottom line of what a

study is really saying. However, Forsythe and Chirban don't feel that is something they do as advisors; they are just contacted as experts who provide information.

Marissa Gainsburg, associate fitness editor, doesn't work with advisors as much as the other editors because most fitness stories are handled in-house, but she feels the *Women's Health* advisory board members are better at not using jargon than a lot of other experts the magazine works with. This is likely because many of the advisory board members work with patients and clients, so they are used to putting scientific phenomena into layperson's terms.

The magazine relies on the advisory board for general background information such as verifying the legitimacy of a new study, but it goes to specialized experts with specific questions. For example, "The gastroenterology (advisor) would probably know something about IBS or Celiac disease, but there are other people who that's all that they research," Middleton says. "So I would not tap someone on our advisory board for that if I could find someone else who that was their sole area of expertise."

Self Reflection

When looking back on the interviews and analysis I conducted, it is interesting to see how things did not go as planned. My overall research question changed as I was conducting my interviews, largely because I discovered the advisory board members do not speak to writers on a daily basis, nor do many of the members and editors feel the board has a role in translating jargon-filled research into digestible articles for readers. My research unintentionally became more about the different roles of the advisory board, which changed my RQ in the process.

Also unexpectedly, I was not able to interview any *Women's Health* writers as I originally intended. None of the editors could recommend writers for me to interview because the writers they work with do not have a significant relationship with the advisory board. This also had a role in changing my research question.

Finally, remaining objective in my analysis proved to be difficult as the *Women's Health* editors and board members I spoke to were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the advisory board. I have also been a fan of the magazine for many years, so my opinion of the magazine is generally positive, as well. It was important for me to remember my role as an objective journalist and researcher during this process and not get carried away with being overly promotional.

The magazine feels that the thorough selection process of experts and advisors at *Women's Health* ensures the magazine maintains its standard of accuracy in the health realm. To add a new expert to the advisory board, Keller-Laird says there must first be a need to do so. For example, if the editors decided they needed a new doctor, the health editor would make a list of potential candidates and their credentials. The editors would then go through and narrow the list down and reach out to the doctors they would want on the board. "It's a quite thorough process, and you have to live up to a pretty high standard to end up on the advisory board," she says.

The accountability to which the advisory board is held is part of the reason Glassman wanted to work with *Women's Health* even before the opportunity arose. "I always felt that their content was incredibly smart and always, to me, incredibly backed up by real, hardcore science and fact-checked," she says. "I think (using an advisory

board) makes their content smarter and more accurate and more trustworthy.” Keller-Laird argues that, as a health and fitness magazine, it would be hard to be seen as a trusted source without one.

Women’s Health’s advisory board is no longer “15 of the smartest people we know.” It is now 26 of what *Women’s Health* identifies as the top experts in 18 different categories, and just like current health and fitness trends, it will continue to change over time. One thing has remained consistent since 2006, however: The goal of the advisory board is to provide real-world knowledge and expertise to have a positive impact on *Women’s Health’s* coverage. The evidence from my research suggests that the current advisory board is successfully filling this role by acting as consultants, writers, brand representatives, real-world experts and sometimes research translators for *Women’s Health* magazine.

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