

BY JACQUELINE KOVACS, Content Specialist

WHAT'S THE WINNING FORMULA FOR MAGAZINE CONTESTS?

COTTAGE LIFE MEDIA SHOWS THAT IT'S AS EASY AS 1, 2, 3...4

WHO DOESN'T LOVE a contest? For a fairly minimal effort, you get a chance to win a prize. Small wonder, then, that running contests is something of a magazine mainstay. In fact, done properly, a contest can help a magazine engage readers, boost its database, increase brand awareness across multiple platforms and attract advertisers.

But that doesn't happen automatically. Read on for tips on how your magazine can win at the contest game.

1. STAY ON BRAND

"Over the years, we've done lots of **contests**," says Randy Craig, vice-president of marketing at Toronto's *Cottage Life* Media. "The one big thing it brings is fan engagement. So if it's a contest that originates with editorial, it's something we're really looking to get readers involved in." And key to that is staying on brand so that the contest makes sense with readers' experience with the brand's print and online platforms.

"If *Cottage Life* ran a contest with 'Win a five-star weekend downtown' as the prize, that wouldn't resonate with our audience," says Craig. "It's got to make sense. So you have to think of the reader first and the advertiser second." You also have to think of the contest's level of positioning relative to the brand — you don't want to go all glitz and glam if your audience looks to you for a down-to-earth take on topics. "Aspirational is okay," says Craig, "but it can't be outrageous."

2. DETERMINE YOUR GOAL

Is this an advertiser-lead contest to create buzz around a product? Is your online team trying to build your brand's social media presence? Are you looking to get more detailed information about your audience? Do you want to deepen your brand's connection to your readers? Your end goal will determine the type of contest you run.

For instance, an advertiser-lead contest might lend itself well to a simple sweepstakes style of contest. "It's just a random draw with little effort," points out Craig. "There's nothing to do but enter to win. You'll get lots of entries for little effort." Buzz created.

But if you're looking for what Craig describes as "more qualified fan engagement," your approach would be different. *Cottage Life's* **photo contest**, for instance, creates "great interaction with readers," says Craig. "They look and share each other's photos with their friends." That brings fresh readers/users to *CL's* platforms and reinforces the brand's relationship with its existing audience. "And we can use the readers' photos in other ways," Craig adds. "Every year, we create a calendar from the pictures they send in."

3. LAUNCH AND PROMOTE

"We promote our contests in the magazine as a straight-up promo," says Craig. "It's usually a brand ad, one-third of a page — a dedicated ad to drive contest eyeballs and lead to our digital platform." There, readers will find a contest-specific landing page with all the details, rules and regulations.

But it doesn't stop there. Over a six-week period, staff promotes a given contest on social media — on *Cottage Life's* **Facebook** page and through its **Twitter** account. It is also promoted via the brand's e-newsletter. "So if readers don't see the

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contest on the pages of our magazine,” says Craig, “there are three or four other platforms where they can find it.” Not all at once, of course. The brand might craft a Facebook post a week after the magazine’s arrival on newsstand. The following week, a few Tweets with links to the contest’s landing page might go out. “Then,” explains Craig, “we can track how many landing page hits we get after each promotion.”

4. EVERYTHING IN MODERATION

After the contest runs its course, it’s a matter of either randomly drawing a winner in the case of a sweepstakes, or judging entries based on pre-determined criteria. Whichever route, you create buzz, excitement and awareness about your brand. Just beware to not overdo it. “A well-executed contest helps readers feel engaged,” agrees Craig, “but people can get fatigued if you give them too many contests — especially if they don’t win anything.”

But if you strike a good balance, says Craig, you end up with good partnerships, good future contests and a lift in both brand awareness and perception. All in all, it’s a winning combination.

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