

## HOW TO START A MAGAZINE: The Basics

Magazines Canada Staff

Please note that this is a compilation of resources that Magazines Canada has created to answer the many inquiries we receive. This can be used as a jumping off point, but it should be noted that these are suggestions for starting a magazine, and it will require more work than we have listed.

Other resources include the Small Magazine Handbooks series and the [Hotsheets](#) series. For more information, please contact Information and Administration Coordinator, Nina Ya-Haqqi, at [nyahaqqi@magazinescanada.ca](mailto:nyahaqqi@magazinescanada.ca).

### Frequently Asked Questions by New and Would-Be Publishers

#### *Management*

#### **1. I have a great idea for a magazine. How can I find a publisher?**

Once you have a concept, you have two options: sell your idea or you can publish the magazine yourself. Nearly all small magazines in Canada are published by the same people who dream them up...at least until the reins can be handed over once the business is up and running. You will only be able to sell your idea to a publishing company if you can guarantee that it will make money, that it fits with the rest of the company's titles, and that it will thrive by garnering steady and appropriate advertising over the long term. In short, it has to nearly publish itself, and it needs to be unique and saleable. Very few magazine concepts begin this way.

Publishing your own magazine allows you to keep control of the vision of your publication. You will also be its main spokesperson and financier. Devoting oneself to the start-up of a new magazine can be a daunting prospect. As with any new business, it will involve a great deal of effort and risk. Work, learn and persevere, and you will join the ranks of a collegial, ingenious and diverse cultural industry.

#### **2. What's a business plan? Why do I need one?**

A business plan is like a compass. It identifies the boundaries of your magazine and helps you find your way as you move forward. Creating your business plan is one of the very first steps you will take, long before your magazine is launched, as a way of identifying your mission and priorities, your potential for longevity, and your prospects as a business. It is also a concise document that can be shown to potential lenders or investors.

Although your business plan will be based on projections and assumptions, it will be your ultimate rationale. As an overview of your entire business, it should contain information that describes your venture, your management structure, your market and audience, your targets and plans for editorial, circulation and advertising, your distribution strategy, production costs and cash flow projections. You may also include your financing plans, your design aesthetic, detailed information on your company and personnel, your partnerships and anything else you deem important. There are many [sample business plans](#) available for free online.

#### **3. As a magazine publisher, do I need to register my business in any special way?**

No. Magazine publishers are required to register in the same way as any other business: by contacting [Industry Canada](#) or the [business service centre](#) run by the government in the province

where your business is located (e.g. [Service Ontario](#)), paying a small fee, and waiting for your licence in the mail. This is roughly the same procedure used to apply for things like vendor permits, Employer Health Tax, et cetera.

#### **4. Where can I find someone to invest in my magazine?**

You know better than anyone to whom your business will appeal. Think broadly and creatively in your pursuit of potential investors, and develop a concerted strategy for your fundraising. If your magazine is issue-based, brush up on your venture philanthropy knowledge. If you have charitable status, there are online resources available that list philanthropic organizations across Canada. Are you associated with a specific group of people that holds membership in other organizations? Does your magazine speak to any particular industry? Seeing your magazine in the broader marketplace is a helpful place to start. Networking is your best tool for finding potential investors to approach with an attractive proposal.

#### **5. How can I find out if anyone else is publishing the same type of magazine?**

Head to a few well-stocked newsstands, perform a search at the [National Library and Archives, search the names of registered businesses in Canada](#), use Google, contact Magazines Canada.

#### **6. How many staff should I have? How much should I be paying personnel?**

Many magazines in Canada have functioned for years with a staff of fewer than five people. Most small magazines (those with an average per-issue circulation under 10,000) do not exceed 10 staffers. You need the basic minimum number of staff persons to perform the tasks laid out by your business plan.

There are no clear standards here, except for the legislated standards of minimum wage. The [Professional Writers Association of Canada](#) (PWAC) offers [suggested standards](#) for paying writers. Small magazine publishing is a prestigious, adventurous, hands-on, cultural and independent enterprise but very few people make a lot of money doing it.

#### **7. How do I get an ISSN? How do I get a barcode?**

Obtaining an ISSN (an International Standard Serial Number) is simple, and free of charge. Visit the [National Library and Archives Canada](#). Once you receive an ISSN, the Library will also send you information about how to go about getting a barcode. Magazines Canada also hosts a [hotsheet](#) about UPC codes and can issue barcodes to member magazines in our distribution program. Contact the [Membership Office](#) for more information on how to become a member of Magazines Canada.

#### **8. How can I get grants?**

Several granting agencies in Canada fund magazine publishing. Magazines Canada's online resource library features a list of [grants and subsidies](#). [The Department of Canadian Heritage](#) runs the [Canada Periodical Fund](#), which currently has three different types of grants available to publishers (Aid to Publishers, Business Innovation and Collective Initiatives.) [The Canada Council for the Arts](#) funds small arts and literary magazines, as do many of the provincial arts councils. [The Ontario Media Development Corporation](#) awards project funding to Ontario-based publications. In Quebec, contact [SODEP](#) (Société de développement des périodiques culturels québécois) for a list of cultural organizations and [AQEM](#) (Association Québécoise des éditeurs de magazines) to promote your french magazine, and for a list of guides and grants. If your organization has charitable status, you may research cultural philanthropic and private

foundations to find a partner that fits well with your magazine. We also have a list of grant programs available in Canada on our [website](#).

### **9. How can I get start-up money for my magazine? How long does it take for a magazine to make money?**

The break-even point for a new magazine can easily be three to five years from launch. If you are asking for start-up money, you need to develop a business plan. The funder, bank, or investor may ask that you make a business plan for a certain number of years in the future as magazine publishing is known as a tenuous business. Many banks will not finance magazine ventures because of this.

If you do approach a bank for a loan, you will need to provide a guarantee of the stability of your future business. A solid circulation plan is an effective way of showing this. Canadian magazines rely heavily on subscriptions to build stable revenue. Make fair estimations of expenses and realistic projections of revenue.

It is recommended by our Small Magazine Business Handbook that you write a business plan that looks two years out from your current year. Different types of magazines require different amounts of funding. Remember that producing a sleek, glossy look or a uniquely shaped magazine is costly and will not always garner the instant praise and sales because of its visual appeal.

### **10. Are there courses I can take in magazine publishing?**

Yes. Search for "magazine" or "publishing" on the websites of [Simon Fraser University](#), [Langara College](#), [Centennial College](#), [Humber College](#) and [Ryerson University](#) (including Ryerson Continuing Education). There are also many other resources for magazine and writing education across Canada listed online if you simply use a basic search engine. Magazines Canada runs a number of [professional development](#) programs every year that are open to non-members: the [AudioMag podcast](#), [Arts & Literary Magazines Summit](#) and the annual [MagNet](#) magazine conference in June.

### **11. How long does it take before most magazines make money?**

It depends on your business model but the rule of thumb is three to five years.

### **12. Do I have to join a magazine association?**

No, but there are benefits available if you do, including shared knowledge and resources and up to date communications about the industry. Magazines Canada is the national association for consumer, business and cultural titles (English and French) while the [regional magazine associations](#) provide services to a geographic member base. The unofficial motto of Magazines Canada is *In Unitate Veris*. Read the [Membership](#) section of our website to discover what this is about.

*Editorial*

#### **1. How do I find writers?**

Attend industry events (e.g. [Word on the Street](#)), place a listing in the annual [Writer's Market](#), place advertisements (for instance in other magazines), consult writers' associations (such as [PWAC](#)), and network. Read widely for writing that you enjoy and don't discount the power of

[CARD](#) (Canadian Advertising Rates and Data) as a resource that writers consult. The [Editors Association of Canada](#) and the [Writers Union of Canada](#) also have searchable databases of editors and writers available to the public.

## **2. What do various editorial positions mean?**

For job descriptions on each editorial position found at most magazines, consult our Editorial Positions guide.

## **3. I have content. How do I start?**

Editorial is very important, but is only one of the three "pillars of publishing." The others are circulation and advertising. Publishing a magazine requires all three in order to make content widely available to an audience.

Successful magazines build an editorial plan. Think about what kind of editorial fits together thematically, what suits different seasons and times in the year, and create a framework for your editorial that will be pertinent and comprehensive to your readers.

## **4. How do I reprint things from other sources?**

Knowledge of rights and permissions is important in publishing. Contact [Access Copyright](#) to learn the fundamentals. Don't reprint anything without permission, including photographs. For more on rights, listen to our [Copyright 101](#) webinar for a primer on copyright.

## **5. What is a typical editorial-to-advertising ratio?**

Most mainstream consumer magazines contain about 50 to 60% advertising compared to editorial. Arts and literary titles often have much fewer ads, and some contain no advertising at all. How much advertising your magazine carries depends on your publishing strategy.

Magazines Canada's membership guidelines state: "There must be a clear distinction between advertising and editorial content, and advertising must not be tied to editorial. An average of no more than 70% of the magazine, calculated over a yearly publishing cycle, may be devoted to advertising. Advertising supplements must be clearly marked as advertisement or advertising supplement in compliance with the Canadian Magazine Industry Code of Reader & Advertiser Engagement." For more information on the code, read about it in our [Membership Kit](#). The code can provide a good departure point for understanding why maintaining a good ad/edit ratio is highly important to your magazine's credibility and readership base.

## **6. Do I need insurance against libel?**

Some magazines have it, some don't. Libel insurance is expensive and is almost always sold in tandem with other kinds of special insurance, for instance errors and omissions. Learn about the legal aspects of publishing, and if you're really concerned about the potentially libellous nature of your material, retain a lawyer who can give you advice. For further reading on libel, take a look at our resource [Know Your Libel Basics](#).

## **7. Do I need to make a prototype of my magazine?**

Many business plans include mock-ups and creating them will help to flesh out the idea behind a new magazine.

## **8. My content is excellent. How do I find readers?**

You need to learn about circulation, the science of finding readers. Keep reading....

### *Circulation*

#### **1. What is circulation?**

Circulation refers to the process of reaching readers, and is sometimes overlooked by new and would-be publishers. While little known to laypeople, circulation is extremely significant to magazine publishing.

There are many different models of circulation. Readers can be reached through subscriptions, the newsstand, and in other venues, and a magazine can either have *paid* circulation or *free* circulation. The difference lies in whether people pay to read your magazine or whether they pick it up or have it delivered to them for free.

There are some basic truths about circulation: Canadian magazines are driven by subscription revenues; renewals are cheaper to attain than new readers from the newsstand; and circulation is immensely useful in researching and understanding your readers, which means it's important to your advertisers.

To learn more about circulation, check out the [Professional Development](#) section of our website. You can also consult these resources: Small Magazine Circulation Handbook, [Subscription Sources That Really Work](#), [Make Your Renewal Series Sing](#) and [Business Tips For Literary Magazines](#).

#### **2. How do I get a business reply envelope or card?**

Set up a Business Reply account through [Canada Post](#).

#### **3. How can I estimate the circulation size of my new magazine?**

You can rent one or several lists from other magazines, organizations or brokers, do a targeted direct mail campaign, and estimate your potential circulation size from your response rates. You can launch your magazine in tandem with another publication, and use that controlled number as your circulation base as a start. Compare your title to others already in existence that share certain characteristics. Do market research—if yours is a consumer title, find out about consumer habits (including media habits) using [Vividata](#)'s data. These are all good ways of estimating circulation.

#### **4. How much should my subscriptions cost?**

Look at what your closest competitors are charging. Note: It's customary for the subscription price to be significantly lower than the cover price (what it costs to buy on a newsstand). Some magazines set a range of different subscription prices that correlate to different campaign offers. You can also take a survey of subscription cards that fall out of magazines on the rack, then calculate the subscription discounts that magazines are offering. Set your subscription rates accordingly, higher or lower, based on your circulation strategy.

#### **5. Lots of people tell me they love my magazine, so where are all the subscribers?**

Editorial does not usually sell itself. Circulation campaigns, including marketing and promotions, produce subscribers. Think about ways to get the word out about your magazine, and capture the people who enjoy it.

## **6. Why do some magazines come with my newspaper?**

This is a type of controlled circulation. The magazine publisher gets to claim a high and established circulation rate base for their advertiser in the magazine, which in turn brings in revenue to the magazine. The magazine is then distributed to the readers of the newspaper for a price. The newspaper claims added value for their readers and the magazine garners a much larger audience.

### *Marketing and Advertising*

#### **1. I want to hire an advertising representative—where should I look?**

Finding an ad sales rep can be a challenge for smaller magazines. Advertising agencies often don't want to work with magazines that have relatively low circulation, because their commissions won't be significant enough to make the effort worth their while. You need to find someone who is friendly, quick-witted and who doesn't quit. It doesn't necessarily matter if this person is already a salesperson—if they are equipped with the right personality.

#### **2. Why do so many literary magazines run ads for each other?**

Many magazines swap advertising space with one another. It's a great way to gain exposure.

#### **3. What is a standard price for an advertisement?**

There is no standard price, but publishers do set their prices competitively. The cost of a page of advertising is based on CPM, which means "cost per thousand." Each magazine has a different CPM, based on how many readers the magazine can legitimately claim. Find a copy of [CARD](#) (Canadian Advertising Rates and Data) at your local library to find listings of magazines' circulation and advertising rates.

#### **4. I don't want ads in my magazine, but how will I make money?**

Most magazines have advertising to different degrees. Magazines that have no advertising generate revenue from circulation (subscribers and newsstand sales), fundraising and selling ancillary products.

### *Distribution*

#### **1. How do I get my magazine into stores?**

Most magazines get into stores through their distributor, who contacts stores on behalf of the publisher to determine the draw (how many copies the stores will stock), to analyze the sell-through and to physically ship the magazines. In some cases, retailers might work directly with a publisher to stock their magazine, but this is rare.

#### **2. Can I use more than one distributor?**

Some distributors insist on being the sole distributor while others will work with a publisher who has another distributor. Having more than one distributor can lead to confusion, including double

shipments to the same retailer and figuring out which portion of the payment goes to which distributor.

### **3. How do I get my magazine into libraries?**

Promotion to libraries is difficult unless your magazine is carried by [EBSCO](#) or [CANEBCO](#), the subscription services used almost exclusively by librarians. Magazines Canada regularly markets its member magazine to libraries and sends librarians its Retailer Catalogue, as do some of the regional associations in Canada.

#### *Production*

### **1. What computer layout programs do designers use?**

Most designers use Adobe InDesign to do their layout. Other applications that are used include Quark Xpress, Adobe PageMaker, Corel Ventura and Adobe FrameMaker. Desktop publishing programs are not used for professional magazine publishing.

### **2. Can I use another magazine's design?**

Many designers use elements they admire in other magazines' design. Checking out other publications is a great way to get ideas for fonts, colour, placement of graphics, etc. for your own magazine. But completely copying somebody else's design would defeat the purpose of publishing a new magazine with its own personality. And designs change—they evolve with the magazine.

### **3. How do I print my magazine?**

To print your magazine, you must contract a printer. It's important to find the right printer for you and to develop a good business relationship with them.

You don't necessarily need to work with a printer in your area; you can send your print-ready files to printers anywhere via email or an FTP site. Quality and price are the priorities.

### **4. How do I find a printer?**

If you're having trouble knowing where to start looking, call a few publishers whose books you admire and ask them what printer they use. In addition, you can use a print broker—somebody who shops around to get you the best deal.

### **5. Can I use photos I find online in my magazine?**

You must obtain permission from the primary rights owner before printing anything in your magazine.