

5 Secrets to Great Magazine Covers

By Darren Buford,

Magazine covers matter now more than ever. In an age where our attention spans are constantly challenged through technological bombardment, the arrival of magazines into our readers' mailboxes (both snail mail and email inboxes) is the announcement of an experience, one in which our readers have asked for and paid for. Magazines are appointment viewing and the cover announces that.

Underestimate the importance of your cover at your own peril. Because you may have fleeting seconds to entice your readers into opening your publication, spending valuable time here is critical. Too often, choosing covers can become an internal 11th-hour circus. Here are some ways to flip that script.

1. Start Early

This cannot be overstated. Queuing up your design team for success begins with early, short meetings regarding cover strategies the second your editorial team has determined the direction of an issue. Work with your designers by giving them the issue theme or feature cover story as early as possible. The same applies for cover words—even if they aren't final cover blurbs, anything that can help designers conceptualize a theme or a strategy helps.

Tip: if your cover feature pertains to your cover art, have your design team read the feature, front to back. And pay particularly close attention to its headline, deck, and callouts. Good callouts give designers (and readers) clues to the content of a piece without reading the entire piece. Keywords and a mock-up drawing never hurt anyone either.

2. Be the Master of Photography

The photography budgets for our publications are limited, so we only sparingly call in the professional photography reserves. Yes, with professional photography, you can (hopefully) get what you want, but for us, the cost rarely justifies what we can get by simply sleuthing online. Over the years, we've become masters at using stock photography by purchasing stock photography subscriptions.

Tip: some of our favorite stock photography subscription companies include Thinkstock, iStock, and Shutterstock. Recently, we've started using smartphone apps that regular "Janes and Joes" submit their photos to. Our favorite is Snapwire.

3. Know Your Reader

My company houses four very different associations, so choosing the right image for each brand requires particular attention to detail. Yes, the cover should reflect the feature story or issue theme or person of interest, but our in-office motto is "aspirational, within reach." Translation: choosing a person (we almost always use people rather than still-life shots) who the reader themselves identify with and want to be.

Tip: Know and embrace your reader demographic. Not doing so risks appearing out of touch with your audience—an immediate turnoff.

4. Create the Unexpected

If you're not challenging yourself to get better each issue, your readers will notice. If your readers love and identify with your brand, they are asking that you inspire them each issue. And the cover is the gateway to that inspiration.

Tip: Line up your covers on your wall in your office. If you see patterns within the past year or more, change up your approach. Too many [insert color here] covers? Don't do that next time. Too many headshot, do an illustration. Also be cognizant of varying ages and ethnicities.

5. Words Are So Critical

My team and I spend as much time on the words of a cover as we do with the image itself, and headline/cover meetings are held near the end of each issue's cycle. Invited to this meeting: editors *and* designers.

Tip: Invite all of your publication's staff to contribute, and sometimes look outside. Sometimes the person in your office who has the witty one-liners isn't always an editor. Many of our covers' words have been crafted by designers.

A Few More Tips

- *Sleep on it. Once you've decided on a cover, give yourself at least an extra night before sending it to press. Things often look very different the next day.*
- *Get the laser proof from your printer. Don't trust what you see on screen. Give yourself enough lead time and order the laser proof of the cover from your printer for true color and photo evaluation. Our printer charges us a nominal fee, and it has changed our opinions on an image numerous times.*
- *If you have multiple covers in play, post them on your door or in a high-traffic area. Trust me: people love to give their opinions.*
- *A/B test your covers to your readers. Create a small group of your most dedicated readers and each month send them a short survey with images you're considering. This type of surveying doesn't give away what you're doing to your full readership, and this dedicated reader group feels special—like they're on the inside.*
- *Create a wall of "no-nos," meaning things that aren't allowed on the cover. For us, we have two categories here: things that shouldn't be represented because of improper technique or suggestive material, but also things that have become cliché.*

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