

American Magazine Winners and Losers: 2001 to 2010

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Abstract

This article examines the 20 largest special-interest magazine sectors in the U.S. and explores which were most and least affected by the challenges of technology and economic recessions between 2001 and 2010. Ten sectors were “winners,” and ten were “losers.” This study of 168 magazines showed that food, gardening, health, and fitness magazines reported the biggest gains. Newsweeklies, entertainment magazines, and general-interest magazines were the biggest losers. These results reflect a trend occurring for more than a century: a decline in general-interest magazines and an increase in magazines aimed at a narrowly defined group of readers. Americans have turned increasingly toward escapist interests. They want magazines that personally benefit them—magazines that tell them how to cook, exercise, garden, dress, groom themselves, take care of their children, and pursue their hobbies. They less frequently read magazines that interpret the latest news, political and social topics, and developments in science or technology.

Keywords: food magazines, magazine industry, magazine trends, newsweeklies, special-interest magazines

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine which of the 20 largest special-interest magazine sectors in the United States were most and least affected by the challenges of technology and economic recessions that marked the beginning and end of the decade between 2001 and 2010. Magazines took hits from many sides, beginning with the economic effects of September 11, 2001, followed by a two-year recession and continuing competition for readers and ad revenue from the Internet. Another recession in 2008 and the introduction of the iPad and other digital media devices in 2009 added to the disruption.

Method

This study examined the 168 largest magazines with audited subscription and single copy sales of more than 300,000. The study was limited to magazines belonging to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), which publishes circulation figures. Magazines belonging to ABC pay membership fees to have their circulation figures audited so they can attract advertisers and

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maintain their rate base. The total number of ABC magazines declined from 740 in 2001 to 581 in 2010, which limited the number of magazines for which data were available. If magazines ceased publishing during the decade, the study used their 2001 circulation figures if they were greater than 300,000. For new magazines launched during the decade, the analysis included the 2010 circulation figures if they were greater than 300,000.

Circulation data for this study were obtained from ABC figures in its printed annual *Magazine Trend Reports*, which include five-year circulation reports for member magazines. Some ABC data were obtained through the *Advertising Age* Data Center (adage.com/datacenter) and Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS), which sells various types of magazine data to advertising agencies and advertisers. Many academic libraries subscribe to SRDS electronic databases, which were used in this study.

The 168 magazines were categorized according to the 20 largest SRDS categories or sectors. While there are more than 50 SRDS sectors, the magazines with the highest total circulation figures fell in the 20 categories (in alphabetical order) listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Magazine Sectors Ranked by Circulation Change (%) from 2001 to 2010
(including single copy and subscription sales)

Rank	Sector	N	2001 Circulation	2010 Circulation	Change
1	Gardening	3	1,425,326	2,440,387	71.2%
2	Epicurean/cooking	13	11,073,593	14,422,768	30.2%
3	Health and fitness	8	9,109,823	10,587,322	16.2%
4	Hispanic/Latino	3	1,355,484	1,532,119	13.0%
5	Fashion	8	6,530,726	7,285,599	11.6%
6	Parenting	3	4,704,472	5,123,630	8.9%
7	Music	2	1,808,740	1,953,450	8.0%
8	Travel	8	8,849,264	9,199,292	4.0%
9	Sports	12	11,523,208	11,939,676	3.6%
10	Women's	17	40,107,417	40,726,805	1.5%
11	Business	12	9,690,256	9,370,636	-3.3%
12	Home service	21	25,292,683	23,953,086	-5.3%
13	Automotive	5	4,747,679	4,370,558	-7.9%
14	Men's	10	12,251,259	11,253,292	-8.1%

15	Associations	6	7,170,902	6,360,549	-11.3%
16	Fishing/hunting	11	10,118,073	8,705,168	-14.0%
17	Science	3	3,279,575	2,488,145	-24.1%
18	Newsweeklies	6	10,392,157	6,811,130	-34.5%
19	General editorial	7	28,781,552	17,386,864	-39.6%
20	Entertainment	10	22,262,201	13,336,468	-40.1%
	Total	168	230,474,390	209,246,944	-9.2%

Sources: Audit Bureau of Circulations, Standard Rate and Data Service; *Advertising Age* Data Center

The primary limitation of this study is that it excludes the great majority of magazines that do not appeal to large readerships. Smaller-circulation magazines, which represent the majority of American magazines, generally do not join ABC because of its high membership costs. Therefore, this study represents only a snapshot of about 6,000 American consumer magazines. The results, therefore, cannot be generalized to the mass market of U.S. magazines with statistical certainty. However, according to Baird Davis (personal communication, February 25, 2012), a circulation consultant and former circulation manager for Ziff-Davis Publishing, “Audited [ABC] magazines attract 80 to 85% of all advertising that goes into magazines,” and “the thousands of other magazines out there carry relatively little advertising.”

Results

Ten sectors were “winners,” and ten were “losers.” The biggest gains came from the 13 food and cooking magazines assigned by the SDRS to the epicurean category. They registered a net circulation gain of 3.3 million—an increase of 30%. These included *Bon Appétit*, *Cooking Light*, *Dwell*, *Every Day with Rachael Ray*, *Everyday Food*, *Food & Wine*, *Food Network Magazine*, *Gourmet*, *Midwest Living*, *Saveur*, *Taste of Home*, *Taste of Home Healthy Cooking*, and *Wine Spectator*. The highest percentage circulation change, however, came from three gardening magazines—*Birds & Blooms*, *Gardening How-To*, and *Organic Gardening*. They gained 1,025,055 readers—a 71% increase.

These magazines were followed by eight health or fitness magazines that registered an increase of 1,477,499 readers—a 16% increase. These magazines included *Arthritis Today*, *Diabetes Forecast*, *Fitness*, *Health*, *Muscle & Fitness*, *Prevention*, *Shape*, and *Women’s Health*.

Two of the most successful launches of the decade were epicurean magazines: *Everyday with Rachel Ray* in 2006 (Reader’s Digest Association) and *Food Network Magazine* in 2008 (a joint venture of the Food Network and Hearst Magazine). By 2010 *Everyday with Rachel Ray*’s circulation had increased to 1,767,409 and *Food Network Magazine*’s to 1,365,653. One major food magazine, *Gourmet*, ceased publishing in 2009, closed by Condé Nast when it had a circulation of 950,000. “Before we even put a test issue out, we did a lot of research and talked to

consumers and viewers about the kind of magazine they wanted,” Vicki Willington, publisher of *Food Network Magazine*, told *Folio* magazine (Quoted in Parde, 2010). “What we learned was that people are passionate about entertaining, cooking and Food Network’s personalities, and they wanted the magazine to be an extension of what they loved about the network. And, as it turns out, the timing was just right for the launch as consumers are eating and entertaining more at home and looking for an approachable epicurean magazine.”

Taken as a whole, the total circulation of these 168 magazines declined 9.2%—from 231 million to 210 million copies. The biggest losing sectors were the newsweeklies, entertainment, and general editorial magazines. Although the total loss of 21.2 million readers (9.2%) appears substantial, most of this loss—about 17.3 million—occurred at three magazines: *Reader’s Digest*, *National Geographic*, and *TV Guide*. If the figures for those three magazines are subtracted, then the overall loss for the remaining 165 magazines was 2%.

The general editorial sector magazines include *Ebony*, *Guideposts*, *The New Yorker*, *Reader’s Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and *Vanity Fair*. Three of these magazines—*The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Smithsonian*—had a circulation increase averaging 8% each. The others incurred substantial losses. The most dramatic losses were incurred by *Reader’s Digest* (7 million) and *National Geographic* (3.1 million), which share an audience defined as “general interest” in an era when niche titles increasingly dominate the market.

When the Reader’s Digest Association, Inc. filed for bankruptcy in 2009, the company’s financial woes extended beyond its flagship title. Its purchase of 12 magazines from Reiman Publications for \$760 million in 2002 created a third of its debt, which had reached \$2.2 billion when the company filed for bankruptcy. As of 2008, the *Reader’s Digest* magazine and its 50 international versions comprised only 16% of the company’s total revenue (Streib, 2009).

With two exceptions, newsweeklies were big losers (Pew Center for Excellence, 2010). *Newsweek’s* circulation had declined so substantially that it was sold to a new owner for \$1 in 2008. *U.S. News & World Report*, founded in 1948, published its last print issue in December 2010. *Time* lost 800,000 readers during the decade. *New York* magazine lost 35,000 readers. The two newsweekly winners were *The Economist*, which doubled its American readership to 833,667, and *The Week*, launched in 2004 by UK publisher Felix Dennis. Its circulation had climbed to 519,307 by the end of the decade.

Entertainment magazines lost 40% of their subscribers. These included *Entertainment Weekly*, *Globe*, *In Touch Weekly*, *National Enquirer*, *OK Weekly*, *People*, *Soap Opera Digest*, *Star Magazine*, *TV Guide*, and *Us Weekly*. The tabloid weeklies—*National Enquirer*, *Star*, and *Globe*—suffered the most dramatic declines, losing 4 million readers, down to a total circulation of 1.9 million. Since 2001, *TV Guide’s* circulation declined from 9.1 million to 2 million as the publication faced considerable competition from free newspaper and online program guides. In 2005 the magazine cut its rate base and tried to reinvent itself as a celebrity and entertainment magazine focused on television. After losing \$20 million in a year, the ailing magazine and its debts were sold in October 2008 to a private equity firm, OpenGate Capital, for \$1.

All magazines in this sector were hard hit by competition from a proliferating number of movie, television, and entertainment celebrity websites, as well as applications for iPads and other mobile devices. These various forms of digital media offered daily and hourly updates of celebrity gossip that weekly and monthly print magazines could not.

Home service (shelter) magazines, one of the five largest sectors in terms of total circulation, have been hardest hit by the recession that began in 2007 (Fitzgerald, 2009). While advertising revenue for most magazines declined by about 25% between 2007 and 2009, advertising in the home service magazines declined by about 40%. Three of the six magazines in this study that stopped publishing between 2001 and 2010 were home service magazines. (See Table 2.) The dwindling home service market mirrors the decline in home sales and consumer spending on home improvements and redecorating.

<i>Table 2</i> <i>Magazines in This Study That Stopped Publishing</i> <i>Between 2001 and 2010</i>			
Magazine	Circulation at closing	Date of closing	Sector
<i>Business 2.0</i>	338,200	2007	Business
<i>Cosmo Girl</i>	694,200	2008	Women's
<i>Gourmet</i>	950,800	2009	Epicurean
<i>Southern Accents</i>	404,000	2009	Home service
<i>Country Home</i>	997,300	2009	Home service
<i>House & Garden</i>	756,800	2007	Home service
Source: Ives, N. (2009, December 15). A guide to magazines that have ceased publication. <i>Advertising Age</i> .			

Discussion

Taken as a whole, these results indicate that Americans have turned increasingly toward escapist interests in their print magazine reading habits. The results also reflect a trend that has been occurring in the U.S. for more than a century—a decline in general-interest magazines and an increase in magazines aimed at a narrowly defined group of readers with a special interest in a particular subject (Sumner, 2010). Americans want magazines that benefit them personally—magazines that tell them how to cook, exercise, garden, dress, groom themselves, take care of their children, and pursue their hobbies. They want magazines that offer tips on where to dine, travel, and find entertainment. They are not as interested in magazines that interpret the latest news, debate political and social topics, or report developments in science or technology.

The decline among the newsweeklies does not necessarily mean that Americans are less interested in the news. The loss of readers is likely explained by the fact that news has become a free commodity offered by plentiful sources on the Internet. With hundreds, if not thousands, of free news sites, no one has to pay for the news.

The decline in the entertainment sector also reflects a similar rise of digital media use, with entertainment news, photos, videos, movies, and TV programs freely seen on computers, portable digital devices, and mobile phones. Media consumers have less need to see photos of Lady Gaga in a magazine, for example, when they can watch her perform on YouTube.

The industry trend toward increased reliance on subscription sales and declining single copy sales began 50 years ago and has continued (Association of Magazine Media, 2012). In 1960, 67% of all magazine sales came from subscriptions, while 33% came from single copies. By contrast, in 2010 subscription sales reached 90%, a 50-year high, while single copy sales declined to 10%, a 50-year low, according to the Association of Magazine Media. (See Table 3.)

	Subscriptions	Percent	Single Copy	Percent	Combined
2001	305,259,583	84%	56,096,430	16%	361,356,013
2002	305,438,345	85%	52,932,601	15%	358,370,946
2003	301,800,237	86%	50,800,854	14%	352,601,091
2004	311,818,667	86%	51,317,183	14%	363,135,850
2005	313,992,423	87%	48,289,137	13%	362,281,559
2006	321,644,445	87%	47,975,657	13%	369,620,102
2007	322,359,612	87%	47,433,976	13%	369,793,587
2008	324,818,012	88%	43,664,772	12%	368,363,773
2009	310,433,396	90%	36,138,517	10%	346,571,912
2010	292,237,864	90%	32,999,207	10%	325,237,070
Decline		4%		41%	10%
Source: Association of Magazine Media (2012). Historical subscription/single copy sales. Retrieved from http://www.magazine.org/consumer_marketing/circ_trends/1318.aspx					

The drop in the number of ABC magazines from 2001 to 2010 is troubling to the industry for several reasons. First, smaller circulation magazines are dropping out of the Audit Bureau because of its high cost. Second, single copy sales are more of a barometer to advertisers than subscription figures. During this 10-year period, single copy sales declined by 41%, while subscription sales declined by 4%—a combined 10% decline. Newsstand sales help bring in new readers and give advertisers a more immediate indication of consumer demand than subscriptions, which reflect a commitment of a year or two at a time. Davis (personal communication, February 25, 2012) put it this way in a telephone interview:

Subscription circulation can be manipulated by publishers. Publishers can keep subscription levels pretty much where they want, depending on how much [promotion] money they want to spend to do that. On a newsstand, it's much purer. When you put your title out, it sells or it doesn't. Advertisers believe it's a much purer barometer of a magazine's health. And the newsstand is in the midst of a tremendous fall. The number of units sold has dropped 40%.

In spite of all the bad news, American magazines survived the decade more successfully than newspapers, which made their own headlines with steady circulation declines, closings, and staff layoffs. In 2008 total magazine circulation and advertising revenue surpassed that of newspapers for the first time. *The Statistical Abstract of the U.S.* (2012), published annually by the U.S. government, reported that magazine industry revenue reached \$44.9 billion in 2008, while newspaper revenue declined to \$43.9 billion. The figures offer little comfort to magazine publishers, however. From 2005 to 2009, newspaper revenue declined 26%, magazine revenue declined 9%, and Internet revenue increased by 108%. (See Table 4.)

<i>Table 4</i>						
<i>Total Industry Revenue for Internet, Newspaper, and Magazine Publishing 2005-2009</i>						
<i>(figures in millions of dollars)</i>						
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Change
Internet	9,378	11,510	15,035	17,760	19,504	108%
Newspapers	49,401	48,949	47,563	43,919	36,338	-26%
Magazines	42,778	44,757	46,003	44,985	39,060	-9%

Source: *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.* Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/information_communications.html

According to the Association of Magazine Media (2012), the Internet now generates 25% of all new print magazine subscriptions, a figure that has doubled in the last five years. While exact figures are not yet available, many top consumer magazines have reported substantial gains in digital-only subscribers.

Cosmopolitan, for example, which has the highest newsstand circulation of any American magazine, was the first to reach a milestone: 100,000 paid digital subscriptions in March 2012. Condé Nast hit the 500,000 digital subscription mark (split among eight publications) in October 2011. Digital subscriptions are so popular that *Cosmopolitan* is charging online subscribers more than its print subscribers. *Cosmo*'s website offers print-only subscriptions for \$15 per year. Its digital-only subscriptions for the iPad and Zinio, by comparison, command \$19.99 per year (Parekh, 2012).

"A couple of years ago, the big question was what's going to happen to magazines like *Cosmo* in the future," Kate White, the magazine's editor-in-chief, told *Ad Age*. "There was a little bit of anxiety. What this has done is say that our content will rule and will thrive. Women want our content, and they'll get it on a variety of platforms" (Quoted in Parekh, 2012).

The selling point of print magazines to advertisers has always been the targeted nature of their audiences. Manufacturers of specialized products for business and leisure have been able to choose a magazine that targets their desired audience. Magazines adapted and survived beyond the competition from radio in the 1920s and television in the 1950s because they offered access to these special-interest audiences (Sumner, 2010). The challenge to magazines created by the Internet is that it offers even more specialized niche audiences for a lower cost to advertisers. Therefore, Internet advertising continues to grow significantly. While magazine advertising has rebounded from the recession-level figures of 2008, its overall growth remains shaky.

This analysis suggests that the print magazine industry will survive, but it will become smaller, leaner, and more focused on specialized content for increasingly narrow audiences. Davis (personal communication, February 25, 2012) described the prospects ahead:

What we're seeing, at least in the consumer arena, is that the Big Four publishers—Time, Condé Nast, Hearst, Meredith—are growing significantly, while the rest are shrinking. The small publishers are vulnerable, while those with brand recognition will weather this storm.

Magazines not only give their readers raw information but also create an emotional bond unique among mass media. In that sense, magazines are "comfort media," according to Professor Samir Husni (personal communication, November 9, 2010) of the University of Mississippi.

Magazines reinforce the positive things that make you feel good about yourself. You will never see a magazine that makes you feel bad about yourself. Magazines were always positive agents of information as opposed to newspaper and TV, who were the bad news carriers.

Cathie Black, former president of Hearst Magazines (personal communication, November 30, 2010), offered a similar perspective:

The connectivity that a reader feels with his or her magazine is one of the very unique and special attributes of a magazine. We hear that over and over. A

magazine also may in fact become a respite, a retreat; a place to be yourself, be inspired, aspire to be; and give you creative ideas about your home, your clothing, your life.

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<i>Appendix 1 Magazines in This Study</i>			
Association American Legion Auxiliary American Legion Magazine The Lion Rotarian Scouting VFW Magazine	Fashion Allure Elle Harper's Bazaar Life & Style Weekly Lucky Marie Claire Vogue W	Hispanic Latina People en Español Siempre Mujer	Parenting Parenting Parents Working Mother
Automotive Automobile Magazine Car and Driver Hot Rod Magazine Motor Trend Road & Track	Fishing/Hunting American Hunter American Rifleman America's 1st Freedom Bassmaster Ducks Unlimited Field & Stream Game & Fish Magazine Guns & Ammo North American Fisherman North American Hunter Outdoor Life	Home Service Architectural Digest Better Homes and Gardens Coastal Living Country Country Living Country Sampler Elle Decor Family Handyman Handy, Handyman Club Of America Magazine House Beautiful Mother Earth News Southern Living Sunset This Old House Town & Country Traditional Home Veranda Midwest Living	Science Discover Popular Science Scientific American
Business Atlantic Economist Entrepreneur Fast Company Forbes Fortune Inc.	Gardening Birds & Blooms Gardening How-To Organic Gardening	Men's Details Esquire GQ Maxim Men's Fitness Men's Health Men's Journal	Sports Bicycling ESPN The Magazine Golf Digest Golf Magazine Lindy's Football Annuals Runner's World

<p>Kiplinger's Personal Finance Money SmartMoney Wired</p>		<p>Outside Playboy Popular Mechanics</p>	<p>Skiing Sports Afield Sporting News Sports Illustrated Tennis Magazine Ski Magazine</p>
<p>Entertainment Entertainment Weekly Globe In Touch Weekly National Enquirer OK Weekly People Soap Opera Digest Star Magazine TV Guide Us Weekly</p>	<p>General Editorial Ebony Guideposts National Geographic New Yorker Reader's Digest Smithsonian Vanity Fair</p>	<p>Music Rolling Stone Spin</p>	<p>Travel AAA Living AAA Via Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel Audubon Condé Nast Traveler Encompass National Geographic Traveler Travel + Leisure</p>
<p>Epicurean Bon Appétit Cooking Light Dwell Every Day with Rachael Ray Everyday Food Food & Wine Food Network Magazine Gourmet Midwest Living Saveur Taste of Home Taste of Home Healthy Cooking Wine Spectator</p>	<p>Health/Fitness Arthritis Today Diabetes Forecast Fitness Health Muscle & Fitness Prevention Shape Women's Health</p>	<p>Newsweeklies Economist (The) New York Newsweek Time U.S. News & World Report Week (The)</p>	<p>Women's Cosmopolitan Family Circle First for Women Glamour Good Housekeeping InStyle Ladies' Home Journal Martha Stewart Living More O, The Oprah Magazine Real Simple Redbook Self Seventeen Weight Watchers Woman's Day Woman's World</p>