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Subject Area - Marketing

Promotional Strategies

A case study into the promotional strategies of a consumer magazine and how these integrate into the marketing strategy of the sector of magazine publishing.

What I chose and why

For this case study I have chosen to critique Cosmopolitan. This magazine was chosen for numerous reasons. Firstly for its historical role within the landscape of women's magazines in the UK. Also because up until recently Cosmopolitan was the highest selling women's magazine in the UK. Due to the launch of Glamour, Cosmopolitan has lost this title. I will explore the promotional strategies Cosmopolitan has employed to try to regain their past position as top of the magazine rankings, and look at how successful they have been to date.

Cosmopolitan has been the magazine of choice until Glamour launched in 2000. Glamour broke convention by printing in a smaller size that could fit in a woman's handbag. Glamour ultimately ushered in the era of convenience in magazines. Women no longer turn to magazines for opinion, unless it's on makeup and clothes

Cosmopolitan's target audience

According to the Cosmopolitan media pack:

Cosmo women are young, ambitious, informed. The majority are in full-time work. They earn - and they spend! Cosmo women spend over 1 billion a year on fashion. They account for 1 out of every 11 spent on cosmetics and skincare in the UK. Cosmo readers live well: they spend over 2 billion on their homes, 3.5 billion on food and almost 1.4 billion on new cars.¹

PEST Analysis

Political Future

When the title launched in the UK in 1972, the editor - Joyce Hopkirk - and fashion and beauty editor - Deirdre McShany - both came from the Sun. Left-wing views were quite prominent in the UK version. In fact, in the second UK edition, Germaine Greer's husband caused a stir by posing nude in the magazine - an inside joke for feminists.

In its early stages, Cosmopolitan was constantly in the headlines. The Daily Mail was shocked by its use of the word "virgin" in an ad, and London Transport insisted that the word "frigid", used in another ad, must be covered up with a black strip. However, the black strip wasn't long enough, and on some posters the advert read, 'I was f....d!'.

The current trend in women's magazines is moving away from political and social issues and more into the world of celebrity and sensationalism. Despite this, Cosmopolitan is determined to maintain its political routes. In January

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2005, Sam Baker, the magazine's current editor, contacted the leaders of the Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties for interviews in the magazine to coincide with the 2005 general election. In an interview with Louise France for The Observer she explained her reasoning behind these political features:

Baker doesn't care what her readers vote, she just believes that they need to exercise their rights. 'If we don't, we're in danger of disenfranchising ourselves. And if we don't start voting we run the risk of never voting.'²

Economic Future

The magazine market has had a 5% year-on-year rise in the number of copies actively purchased according to ABC figures released for the period to December 2004. However, there has been fear about a possible saturation of the women's magazine market. ABC figures showed there was no cause for concern.

This year however, I believe is the year of the women's magazine market. These latest figures reveal an upward surge in women's glossies such as Glamour, Cosmopolitan and Marie Claire. This increase in circulation indicates that women's appetite for glossies magazines hasn't abated or reached saturation point like many feared.³

Despite a clear rise in women's magazine readership, Cosmopolitan - which rose 5.08% from 397,272 in December 2003 to 417,445 in December 2004 - Cosmopolitan still finds itself in an unstable position, trailing in second place to Glamour magazine, which had a 5.67% year on year increase, from 548,672 to 579,761.

Social-Cultural Future

Women's magazines, especially fashion magazines, tend to address well-educated young readers who are seen as loyal, independent, and ready to spend. This explains the overall conformity of magazine content, with their sections devoted to celebrity features, fashion, beauty, health, interior and lifestyle. But magazine publishers - like the media industry in general - are now viewing youth as an increasingly elastic category (Gough-Yates, 2003, p4).

On a whole, Cosmopolitan has tried to fight this trend towards celebrity and fashion, by maintaining a sexual orientation to its features. However, elasticity in their readership is more wide spread. Currently, there are large proportions of Bangladeshi, Indian, Black Caribbean, Black African and Chinese women in the demographic that Cosmopolitan targets⁴. Again, Cosmopolitan has resisted this cultural change; the majority of non-white faces in the May 2005 edition were from the advertisement pages.

Technological Future

Cosmopolitan has not bought into technological change as much as its contemporaries. Most women's magazines now have an online version of the magazine for people to view. However, Cosmopolitan choose to provide a service with their online presence; a means for its audience to purchase the branded items, and access other services related to the magazine and its readers. Cosmopolitan's website is more of a Cosmopolitan portal.

From the PEST analysis, it is clear that Cosmopolitan does not adjust well to change. It sees itself as an institution due to

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its early political routes and is finding it hard to shake this responsibility.

Promotional strategies employed

The Message

The strapline for Cosmopolitan is 'For Fun Fearless Females'. While it emphasises strength in women, there is an underlying element of not being afraid to be feminine, indicated in the use of the word females instead of women. This coincides with McCracken's (1993) belief that when buying a magazine we are buying into a feminine ideal. In fact, she believes that women readers are duped by magazines into becoming slaves to trends in fashion, beauty and femininity.

The Cover

It is a convention among women's magazines to have their featured star celebrity adorning the covers. This is a major promotional tool in the current celebrity-focused climate. Cosmopolitan strays from this slightly. While the magazine will have a celebrity featured in every edition, these celebrities are often not featured on the cover. Instead, Cosmopolitan has created a cover element called 'Cosmo Loves', and a celebrity of choice is placed on the cover under this banner. There is a page inside the magazine that offers the cover star a small focus - without this, the audience would feel cheated.

Cosmopolitan still uses cover layout conventions and takes note of page real estate, with the word 'Sexy' - a word synonymous with what people expect of Cosmopolitan content - written in a large font in the top left hand corner. There is also the use of numbers in the top left hand corner, and even a circle in the area - a tool used in shops to mark sale or special items, the red circle has become a symbol of the 'good deal'. This real estate formula of putting the items most attractive to buyers in this area was due to product placement, but is not as necessary as it used to be. Before magazines were overlapped on the newsstands and their only exposed area was the top left hand corner. Now larger magazines like Cosmopolitan are given premium space on magazine stands in shops like WHSmith, and the whole front cover is visible. However, making use of page real estate is still valid if you take into account that people generally read from top to bottom, left to right.

Content

Cosmopolitan has seven main sections:

Celebs

New & Real Life

Love, Sex & Success

Youniverse

Health

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Shops

Every Month

The 'celeb' section only has four features and there is notably no features section. Instead the magazine is very compartmentalised with standard pages like Cosmo Money, Cosmo Careers and Cheat's Guide. Cosmopolitan is ultimately a service magazine. It offers a lot of advice and how-to information. Where there are features, the focus is on real-life stories, which often have a sensational element.

This paired with the colloquial use of language creates intimacy. Not only is Cosmo your friend, it's a life manual; it is an necessary element in the reader's life. This element of necessity is key in the marketing strategy of the magazine, and also the overruling strategy of its parent company, Natmags, which publishes other manual-like titles including Good Housekeeping and Men's Health.

It also has a 'Cosmo Offers' section. This month, the offers consist of 20% off at Oasis. Affiliation with particular shops is a newer magazine promotion convention; it gives the reader an added motive to buy the magazine, and broadens the scope of the magazine's ethos, by including the connotations of the shop they have chosen to be associated with.

Layout/visual

In an effort to reclaim the top spot, Cosmopolitan has copied Glamour's handbag size. They have also copied other layout elements from Glamour magazine, like the information strip at the top of the magazine. They do still produce the magazine in their larger A4 format. For the May edition, the A4 version had a free book, while the smaller version had no free gift. This could work adversely for Cosmopolitan, as it implies that the larger version is less valuable and so needs the book to justify the price.

Price

Cosmopolitan have opted for premium pricing, at 2.95. There doesn't seem to be clear justification for this price, considering Glamour, the market leader is a pound cheaper at 1.95, and Marie Claire, which is rated just behind Cosmopolitan, is now 2.50. Considering Cosmopolitan appeals to the everyday aspect of its audience and doesn't go into fantasy or celebrity, they make price themselves out of the market. For a magazine about the real world, the price comes across as unrealistic.

Advertising

Cosmopolitan has earned a reputation for being shocking and sensational through sexual politics. This has often been represented in its advertising campaigns. In 2002 the magazine embarked on an ad campaign that had visual ambiguous images. One was of an open fake fur bag with pink satin lining; another was a woman in a bikini with a thin stream of white liquid running down her stomach and another was a lipstick that was shot to look like a vibrator.

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Extreme tactics like the ones mentioned above are necessary for a magazine like Cosmopolitan. Many sexual taboos no longer exist in current society; without them there is no need for Cosmopolitan. Their ad campaigns prove we still have problems with sexual themes, and thus validate the need for the magazine.

The May edition of Cosmopolitan has 300 pages (304 including front and back cover). Of these, 122 pages are advertising, excluding classifieds and Cosmopolitan's own adverts. According to McCracken (1993, p91): It is no longer appropriate to assume that the magazine is only useful for advertising food and cleaning products. The magazine needs to increase the range of products it advertises to ensure consistent and ongoing revenue.

Brand Expansion

Some believe that modern society has broken so decisively from the past we have lost the certainty of the past and no longer have traditions to live by. Without traditions we have no idea of how to live. Brands, however, can provide us with a substitute to traditions: brands have become the new traditions - they shape and give meaning to everyday lives - brands are the new traditions in our society. (Grant, 1999)

Cosmopolitan have strived to create a brand, through extended products. They have associated magazines: Cosmo Girl! and Cosmo Bride; they have their own awards, which is an extension of their position to recommend people and products; and they also have a lingerie line. On top of this, their cover mounts are often branded. For the A4 May edition, the free book is an edited version of a book that has not yet been released, and has Cosmopolitan edition written on it.

Overview/conclusion

Cosmopolitan have maintained their political stance and prove that there is still a need for what some might call a feminine political crusade with the use of shocking sexual advertising and the recent coverage of the general election. These have marketing strategies and promotional strategies that it has employed since its launch in the 1970s. However, with social changes, and the reader's new love affair with celebrity - which is not just fuelled by other women's glossies, but also by the influx of women's weeklies - Cosmopolitan will need to do more to regain its position as most read women's magazine.

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