



A question of trust

Despite competition from social media and other online channels, readers in 2019 are remaining loyal to Irish magazines, writes Pavel Barter.

Fake news. Digital fraud. Spamming. Pop-up ads. Disinformation. In 2019, the online world is a perilous environment where our senses are assaulted with a barrage of information: some of it untrue, most of it unwanted. Yet as social media companies and search engines dabble in an avalanche of dubious content, consumers remain loyal to traditional media brands such as the magazine you now hold in your hand (or read online).

"There is still a core, niche group of people who follow a particular magazine, who are engaged with it and who trust the editorial," explains Grace Aungier, CEO of Magazines Ireland. "Irish magazine brands, whether online or elsewhere, are producing well-curated content for a specific audience. Journalists who write about the hotel and catering business in a magazine brand [such as H&R Times] come with the endorsement of an entire industry."

In Ireland, 63% of adults read magazines regularly; 2.2m read one in the last month.

The definition of magazines has transformed in the digital age. Magazines Ireland incorporates 185 publications - covering everything from fashion to food, beauty to business - and print is just one of their manifestations. These brands span areas such as digital, video, social, events, and licensing.

Print remains the ultimate glossy indulgence, says Aungier. "Print publications provide immediate connection with large audiences. There's the quality of the paper and the design. You can create gatefolds, binding, inserts. The tactile nature of magazines is important. People want good quality content, curated and edited by a professional journalist."

Magazines carry a societal imperative. Not only do they bring footfall into local shops, driving other purchases, but indigenous titles such as H&R Times reflect Irish society and arguably drive democracy. "So it's important the government realises the importance of magazines that are targeted to an Irish audience. On a micro level they have an important role to play in education and informing audiences on a range of issues. Business-to-business titles have an important role in the continual professional development of their members."

There is also a question of trust. Digital advertising is huge in 2019. Google and Facebook soak up a lot of this revenue. Yet following multiple scandals around digital fraud and brand safety, there is a crisis of trust online. According to a report from Radio Centre, the UK's industry body for commercial radio, "digital detox, banner blindness and ad-blocking are all symptoms of an advertising ecosystem that is overloaded".

Online journalism has been usurped by influencers. Yet following a litany of ethical and legal controversies, there is a dearth of trust for many of these so-called role-models.

Last year, BBC Radio 4 in the UK asked 1,000 shoppers for their opinion of Instagram influencers. 82% of those who took part said it was not always clear when an influencer had been paid to promote a product. Print ads in newspapers and magazines, on the other hand, are consistently described as the most trusted advertising channels.

Unlike social media channels, where consumers either block ads or skim through them at speed, there is more dwell time in print. According to a new report by Magnetic, the trade body for the magazine sector in the UK, magazines are a "high-attention environment".

"There is more engagement in print," agrees Aungier. "People are not distracted when they read magazines. They're not going down an online rabbit hole. Many brands advertise within a particular context, within a particular publication, such as the hospitality industry."

Until last year, the hospitality and magazine industries were bedfellows. In 2011, the government reduced the VAT rate for tourism and magazines from 13.5% to 9%. This was raised back to its original amount for tourism in Budget 2019, but magazines retained their 9% rate. Magazines Ireland also successfully lobbied for the rate on digital publications to be reduced from 23% to 9%.

However, there remains 0% VAT on print and digital publications in the UK and other European jurisdictions. Magazines Ireland is campaigning for the Irish government to implement the same standard in Ireland. "We want an even playing pitch," says Aungier. "80% of the titles on our newsstands are from the UK. It means UK publishers have bigger marketing budgets and deeper pockets. They have a huge advantage in the Irish market."

Following Brexit, Irish publications may be disadvantaged even further. "Who knows what's going to happen? Will it be bad for Irish magazines? Is there an opportunity for magazines? Are there going to be tariffs on UK titles coming into Ireland? We are an all-island association, so we have some members who print their magazines in the north of Ireland and some who maybe print abroad. Sterling rates affect all of that."

Magazines are asserting their digital footprint, though. Magazines Ireland, as part of the European Magazine Media Association (EMMA), recently reached an agreement as part of EU copyright reform, which protects publishers against the unauthorised digital reproduction and distribution of their content. Once confirmed and published by the European Parliament, member states will have 24 months to transpose these new rules into national legislation.

"We're trying to have a fair system," explains the Magazines Ireland chief. "Magazine publishers need to be able to negotiate license agreements with Google and Facebook, so we must protect our member's publications in the digital world."

Publishers face increased competition from online channels but an engaged tribe of followers continue to support Irish magazines. "The editor of a typical Irish magazine is closely connected with their product. An advertiser places their ad in a trusted environment in an Irish magazine. There is reader engagement and affiliation with the brand."

Traditional media is not sitting still. It is finding new ways to keep its medium alive and stay relevant, migrating to new platforms to reach its market, diversifying its base, conducting native advertising, editorial partnerships, content marketing and events.

"Magazines are now in print, pixels and person," according to Aungier. "That provides lots of opportunities for readers. The audience has moved and magazines have moved with them."

For more information: www.magazinesireland.ie

