

## CUSTOM PUBLISHING

# Customary success

Once scorned, customer magazines have come into their own

**AT A TIME** when many doubt the future of printed publications, custom publishing is "absolutely booming", says Bridget McCarney, MD of New Media Publishing, South Africa's biggest specialist publisher in this field. In Britain - and probably here, too - it's the second fastest growing publishing genre after online.

And it's surprisingly big. McCarney reckons around R1bn/year is spent producing about 200 titles. Custom, customer or "contract" magazines are produced for all kinds of businesses - typically retailers - as a service to their customers and as a marketing vehicle.

Once a small niche, the category includes many of the largest circulations in the country.

The biggest - MultiChoice's *Dish*, now segmented into five focused issues - distributes 1,6m copies/month and 18 of the 20 biggest magazines in SA are custom publications. The biggest consumer magazines are *Huisgenoot* (300 000) and *You* (200 000), but they look like midgets in the company of *Dish*, *Discovery* (940 000), *Clicks' Club Card* (620 000), *Edgars' Club* (900 000), *Foschini Club* (900 000), *Jet Club* (1,2m) and *Levis Stores Club* (470 000).

New Media publishes 30 of these, including seven biggies.

Why is the category doing so well? McCarney cites several reasons. "The products are getting better, as the industry has attracted a better quality of



**BRIDGET  
MCCARNEY**



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journalists and clients. Savvy clients see it as a form of marketing, not of publishing, and research has shown it works. Up to 20% of marketing budgets are going towards contract publishing."

There's plenty of evidence pointing to their effectiveness. Local research for Edgars has found 48% are prompted to go shopping after they receive a magazine.

"Magazines fit the modern mood so well because they engage and don't interrupt. Marketing has also changed. Intervention marketing has been superseded by 'conversation marketing'."

The perception that people wouldn't read such mags because they're free has been truly knocked on the head by the online experience, where publishers can't get people to pay for content.

Some magazines (like Woolworths *Taste* and Plascon *Decor*) are actually sold, a

testament to their quality. More than half of *Taste's* readers spend one to four hours reading each issue and 75% keep it for future reference.

Custom mags don't try to be consumer magazines: they are product magazines, conveying an essential message with the help of journalistic skills. As a direct marketing tool they're most likely to create a positive brand perception for the corporate owner.

The biggest challenge is to tell clients you need content specifically developed for you. It will cost money - but it will deliver returns. They mustn't think of it as a self-funding promotion.

"Agencies are working closer with custom publishers. We understand stories. They understand brands. Ideally, we should look at creating great content and pushing it across as many platforms as possible." ■