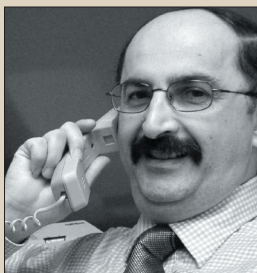


The Magazine About Magazines

# Masthead

## Q&A

Mr. Magazine,  
U. of Mississippi prof  
Samir Husni



**Q** You'll be speaking at Mags U next month. In a nutshell, what'll be your message?

**A** A lot has been said about the problems with magazine distribution. My thesis is that the real problem lies in the publishing model and not the distribution model. My message will be if we do not change our advertising-subsidized publishing model,

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# THE TOP 50 MAGAZINES

**Our annual barometer reveals 4% overall growth and vitality in surprisingly manly new places**

**N**ow, if this were a digital edition of *Masthead*, and if we were feeling cheesy enough to embed the file—you'd be listening at this very moment to the background beat of Thin Lizzy's "The Boys Are Back in Town." Why? Because an interesting thing happened on the way to this year's Top 50—male-dominant magazines elbowed their way past more feminine titles and into the top-performer category. And as a composite index of titles across an array of categories, our Top 50, trend watchers will notice, represents combined revenues \$572.8 million for a 4% gain over 2003's total of \$550.5 million. Recall there was 0% growth in the dot-bomb/9-11 hell of 2001, 1.6% in 2002 and 3.6% in 2003. So, to the men: well done in 2004.

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## PEOPLE IN PRINT

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then the future is not going to be great for those who will refuse to change.

**You describe magazines as the real information superhighway. Please elaborate.**

Unlike those who refer to the Internet as the information superhighway, I do believe that magazines are the real information superhighway. The Internet is like a country road with all kinds of potholes and stop signs. Until a device is created that does not freeze, intrude, or just annoy you, nothing will replace magazines as the best vehicle to deliver information in a smooth, nice ride interrupted only by the driver—you, the reader and customer.

**You're known to many as Mr. Magazine. You are said to have the largest collection of first-edition titles—more than 20,000—and you reportedly spend over US\$3,000 per month on newsstand purchases. You, sir, are a junkie. What's maintaining your passion?**

I think I passed the junkie stage some years ago. What maintains my passion is the high I feel every time I put my hands on a premiere issue. What a feelin'.

**You received your Ph.D. from the University of Missouri in 1983. Your dissertation was on success and failure of new American magazines. In your experience, what are some of the classic mistakes that publishers make resulting in their failure?**

The classic mistake is a grand business plan with revenues flooding the charts from year one. Very few people are willing to accept the fact that you have to plan and publish with the belief that you are not going to make a penny the first year of publishing. Every business plan I've seen over the years shows more revenues in the first year of publishing that never materialize, let alone the plans that show the magazine making money from issue one.

**You've been tracking annual magazine starts in the U.S. for the past 19 years and publishing the results in your *Guide to New Magazines*. What do you see as the hot new categories?**

Anything that has to do with home, family, neighbourhood, food, ethnic and racial heritage, and celebrities...better yet make that celebrities doing anything at home, with family, in your neighbourhood (including your living room), eating, drinking, and being merry (shopping will do that for you and the celebrities), and it wouldn't hurt if they are from a varied ethnic and racial background.

**What are the dying categories?**

Only one category is dying, at least on the newsstands: Sex. Readers or should I say users have discovered that no matter how much you shake your favorite sex magazine it does not move the same way it moves on the Internet. For the first time since I started tracking magazines, sex is no longer in the top 10 categories.

**What do you make of this trend whereby our shortened attention spans are being abetted by a profusion of so-called charticles, "caption**

**magazines" and other quickie-style formats? Is the magazine of 30 years ago all but dead?**

Magazines are reflectors of society and they owe it to their readers to give them what they want. There are plenty of choices. You want a caption magazine you pick up *Star*, you want in-depth analysis you pick up *The Atlantic Monthly*. I do not believe in one magazine style that fits all. The magazines of 30 years ago are not all but dead, they are just 30 years old. We have magazines that are five years old and some that are only one year old. The major question is how many of this decade's magazines will be with us 30 years from now? Change will continue to be the only constant in our magazine business and as long as we can continue to reflect the needs, wants, and desires of our readers, i.e., customers, we will continue to survive whether we use the quickie style or take our time.

**Newsstand sales have been declining for decades now. It's driving circulators batty. Now, with the advent of self-check-outs at the grocery store, the point-of-purchase racks upon which some publishers relied so much have been eliminated. What are publishers doing in the face of this huge shift?**

Charge the real price for the magazines. Look what's happening with *In Touch Weekly* and *Life & Style Weekly*. Priced at what it's really worth, *In Touch* has hit one-million circulation on the newsstands in less than two years. We cannot continue to expect people to pay \$5 for a magazine off the rack and less than 50 cents by subscription. Price equality should be the first and most important issue to address if we're to survive at the automated check-out counters.

**With all the challenges that network television is facing due to the Web and specialty television, ad buyers are saying that magazines have never been in a better position to gain ground against their old rival, network TV. In fact, the Magazine Publishers of America has launched a US\$40-million campaign to promote the medium. What is it about this point in time that's so opportune?**

In very simple terms our old rival is changing from broadcasting to narrowcasting. Add to that DVR and Tivo and you can kiss the mass reach goodbye. In less than 20 years, the U.S.A. has moved from a majority served by three channels to a majority served by hundreds of channels.

**What is your media diet?**

Having a teenager at home, I've lost control over the television shows. On the paper front, *USA Today* and *The New York Times* plus a host of local papers top the list. Web sites [www.iwantmedia.com](http://www.iwantmedia.com) and [www.bosacks.com](http://www.bosacks.com) are my daily media diets. As for the radio shows, NPR is my station until my son hops in the car and then we are jammin'. **M**