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Hearst Still Tweaking Shop Etc.

Stephanie D. Smith

MAY 29, 2006 -

Hearst continues to tweak Shop Etc.'s editorial pages and circulation strategy in order to build the brand

Two years ago, Hearst Magazines emulated Condé Nast's successful shopping monthly Lucky by introducing a small-sized, product-focused version called Shop Etc. But as Hearst works toward building a viable business, it has put the magazine through a few wardrobe changes.

Last fall, Shop Etc. swapped its cover formula of bags and shoes for celebrities such as Angie Harmon. Then in April, the title went further, doing away with page flaps that separated sections, adding newsier columns, and enlarging the trim to a standard-size format. Now, in an about face, Shop Etc will switch its covers back to products with the June/July issue.

Editor Mandi Norwood explains the changes as nothing out of the ordinary. "The thing about working on a relatively young brand is that you have the privilege of trying new things without people throwing up their hands in horror," said Norwood.

Cynthia Lewis, Shop Etc. vp, publisher also noted that product covers this spring tested well with readers, resulting in higher sell-through averages than celeb covers. "Product is the right direction," she said. Readers don't think they can be a celebrity, but by showcasing a great Hogan bag on the cover, she explained, they could think it could be theirs.

Although some women's titles, including Lucky, use celebrities to boost newsstand sales, John Harrington, editor of The New Single Copy, noted that strategy may not work for a magazine still building its newsstand base. "One of the

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things about celebrity covers is volatility. With celebrities, you may have a cover that sells 800,000 copies or one that sells 200,000," he said. "With advertisers looking at each issue, that creates more problems when looking at the rate base."

Moreover, as Shop Etc.'s demographics skew older—the median age is 36 versus Lucky's 29.9—"maybe celebrity wasn't as appealing to the demographic that they're targeting," surmised Pattie Garrahy, CEO of PGR Media.

Beyond Shop Etc.'s editorial tweaks, the magazine continues to work out kinks on the business side. Shop Etc. launched with three cover prices—\$1.99, \$2.99 and \$3.49—to find its newsstand sweet spot. While it has since stopped selling \$1.99 copies, as of March, nearly a third of its distribution was marked at \$2.99, say executives familiar with Shop Etc.'s newsstand strategy.

Harrington believes Shop Etc.'s price fluctuations may be an effort to find the balance between maintaining its 600,000 rate base and becoming profitable. "Many publications that are trying these lower prices under \$2 or \$2.50 are finding that it's not enough. You may be able to sell copies, but you're not able to generate enough revenue to make it profitable," he said. "At \$1.99, Shop Etc.'s circulation was high enough to maintain rate base, but [Hearst] probably wanted to see if the magazine could get more revenue out of the newsstand."

Media buyers are still waiting for Shop Etc. to be reviewed by the Audit Bureau of Circulations. And that wait may be over soon. Figures for August through December 2005/January 2006 issues are expected to be audited this fall. However, Shop Etc. has not yet decided whether it also will be audited by BPA Worldwide, as it had said it would in October 2004 (a Hearst spokesperson says the dual audit plan was merely a "consideration").

While the editorial tweaks and circ uncertainties may raise a red flag to some media observers, others say they are willing to look the other way. "If it were a single title from an independent company, I would be a little more concerned," said Garrahy. "If Shop makes more dramatic changes, then it can be damaging. It's got to settle here and see how it works."

Hearst does have plans to grow Shop Etc. In August the monthly will raise its rate base by 12.5 percent to 675,000 and expects to announce two more increases in 2007. In September, the magazine will launch an e-commerce site, ShopetcUSA.com, an online mall where consumers can shop from a selection of Shop Etc. advertisers.

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But Shop Etc. is still playing catch-up to Lucky. For the second half of 2005, Shop Etc. sold on average 175,000 copies per issue, according to publisher's estimates. Lucky sold 263,181 copies during the same period. For the second half of 2005, Lucky's paid circulation grew 5.6 percent to 1.1 million compared to the year prior, according to ABC; though newsstands sales fell 9.8 percent for the period.

As for advertising, Shop Etc.'s pages through June rose 9.3 percent to 313 over 2005, reports the Mediaweek Monitor. Pages for Lucky stayed flat compared to the year prior but are more than double what Shop Etc. carried, at 776.

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