

The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

Are magazine brands the only beacon of trust in a world of noise and clutter?

“Magazines have a unique relationship with their consumer. One born of trust and a bond between an editor and a reader”. These were the words of Kerin O’Connor, Chief Executive, *The Week*. He was proposing the motion, ‘Magazine brands are the only beacon of trust in a world of noise and clutter’, at the Debating Group debate at the House of Commons on 6 July 2015. The debate was sponsored by the Professional Publishers Association and chaired by The Lord Black of Brentwood.

Kerin O’Connor asserted that the fact we live in a world of noise and clutter is universally accepted, so the debate is about trust. Trust is an emotive word. When one thinks of trust one thinks of an emotional bond. It is a universally understood concept, something defined not just by money, but something earned. ‘I put my trust in you’ is one of the most powerful things we can say to someone. It means the relationship between two parties is given freely and easily without suspicion. Trust is at the heart of how we relate to one another, how we get on with people and whom we listen to. What do people trust more? The intimate, personal world of magazines or the more aloof, mass one-way street of newspapers and radio?

This debate is not about measuring the size of reach or frequency of each of these media. So why do magazines create so much trust? What is their secret? Why do their voices resonate so successfully to people across so many different areas?

Kerin O’Connor suggested that the primary reason is how the titles start. The beginning of a magazine is usually a simple thought. It begins with an idea, an insight into a group of people that an editor has. These catalysts come from passion and personal interest. Magazines are rarely launched because someone ruthlessly identifies a new demographic or type of social group. Instead magazines are living, breathing things given energy by their editors. These editors have a strong sense of purpose and community; they are convinced that they speak for a group of equally-minded people. They provide hand-picked editorial in an area a reader is already passionate about, whether it be fishing, photography, current affairs or food. The magazine industry is brilliant at producing titles for whatever your interests may be. There are about 7,000 titles; of these only 59 sell more than a handful of thousand copies. Any magazine editor worth his or her salt obsesses over the publication’s readers. They have a sense of community built on trust.

Kerin O’Connor illustrated this with the case of *Good Housekeeping*. It sells 419, 525 copies a month with a readership much higher than that. There are over 200,000 subscribers. It outsells *The Times*

whose circulation is 397, 171. The *Good Housekeeping* promise is simple and effective: it acts as a bible of how to run one's house, the very best things you should do or buy – tested, reviewed and chosen by the editorial team for 90 successful years.

It works because it is trusted by hundreds of thousands of people to be on their side. Without trust at its heart, *Good Housekeeping* would wither quickly. This relationship cannot be faked; if a title does not speak for its community, it will fail. When magazines get this relationship right, longevity is achieved. Many household names have been around for decades, and for an elite few, hundreds of years. When we decide to buy something expensive, watch a movie or go somewhere on holiday, we seek advice – more likely than not the starting place is a magazine – whether in print or digital. An example is buying a car and people trust magazines to help them make the right purchasing decision. They are independent, trusted places that exist to help their readers.

Kerin O'Connor invited the audience to think how magazines are consumed and the language we use to describe our relationship with them. We speak of curling up with a magazine; we cut out articles; we collect them; we find time to read them. There is an unmatched physicality: we use our hands when reading them.

Kerin O'Connor went on to recount how Jon Connell started *This Week*, a curated précis of the week's news, a need identified by his wife, shared by thousands of people.

Magazines now are, of course, much more than just a bit of paper. Magazines have proved particularly adept at managing the transition of their print relationship to an online one. They are cross-platform entities, reaching their readers on websites, Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus, YouTube, apps, email and so on. You name the platform and you will find magazines there. They excel in social media. *Glamour* has 2.6 million fans on Facebook, more than *The Telegraph* which has 2.4 million. *The Guardian*, the world's largest broadsheet newspaper has 4.6 million fans, but *Vogue* has 6.2 million.

The PPA and *Magnetic* recently surveyed 15,000 UK media consumers for its Rules of Attraction study. Magazines took the top spot of all media for trustworthiness at 60%. Another large survey by Millward Brown illustrated how this trustworthiness is useful to advertisers. In the survey of TV, radio, online, newspapers and outdoor media, magazines were the winner for awareness and associations. For campaign-specific messages, magazines doubled an advertiser's investment, taking 7% of spend to deliver 14% of associations. Magazines will double an advertiser's money. This is the power of trust in action.

Kerin O'Connor concluded by stressing how magazines build trust and create a personal relationship unrivalled by television or radio.

Hybrid platforms

Opposing the motion, **Siobhan Kenny, Chief Executive, RadioCentre**, argued that radio, not just magazines, has an intimate relationship with consumers. She pointed out that the motion asserted that 'magazine brands are the *only* beacon of trust in a world of noise and clutter'. "In arcane surroundings one could expect that language, but gone are the days when media brands – or indeed any brand – would make that highly bombastic claim". In a world of scepticism, people do not accept only one source of enlightenment. "Is there anyone seeking enlightenment on sex who would *only* read *Cosmo*?" Siobhan Kenny cited FR Leavis who had felt that the critical function was undone by the sheer noise and clutter of the public space of modern life, epitomised by the poetry of TS Eliot. "Heaven knows what FR Leavis would have made of this digital world". The terms of the motion make magazines sound like a medium bewildered in the modern world, railing for good old days' readers who waited for words of wisdom handed down from the editor's desk.

There is a small case for radio being a repository of trust, but Siobhan Kenny would never suggest *only* one. She went on to cite figures: 90% of the UK population listen to radio every week. In 2014 Ofcom found that radio was the most trusted medium in the UK, with a 66% trust rate, higher than TV, magazines, newspapers, social networks or apps. Local radio stations are the prime source of local information. They have invested in localness. Apple is venturing into the world of local radio and it will be interesting to see if it has the same relationship with listeners as Lincs FM. RAB's Emotional Multiplier indicates that radio boosts people's happiness by more than any other medium. Trust; authority; fun; happiness – Siobhan Kenny suggested that this sounds like part of the sole beacon that magazines claim as their own. In war zones and repressive regimes what is the first medium to be seized by those who want power? And where do people go for news? The BBC World Service, with its highly deserved reputation for impartiality, integrity and trust.

Life is more complicated today. We are dealing across multiple, hybrid platforms, producing content across platforms in ways unthinkable even ten years ago. We can choose to view that as noise and clutter or embrace it as an exciting new way to talk to audiences. Magazines are doing themselves a disservice by pretending to be the only repositories of trust in today's world. Siobhan Kenny concluded, "The motion is preposterous and makes our magazine colleagues seem like deluded old buffers, making self-aggrandising, nonsensical claims as they stare in bafflement at the changing world around them".

Reassuring hug

Seconding the motion, **Jo Elvin, Editor-in-chief, *Glamour***, described what her readers think about their relationship with the magazine. Just a couple of weeks ago, a reader wrote to her referring to her sizeable collection of *Glamour* magazines as her stack of bibles. This may seem ridiculous, but every day she connects with readers who draw strength from the magazine's pages. "There's a world of information, inspiration, knowledge and power to be had within those beautiful pages and certainly my readers – over a million of them – know this".

Jo Elvin contended that when you buy a magazine, you buy into your own private members' club. Your magazine validates your life choice. They are the most trusted beacons, because they have had to sweat to earn that trust and never more so than now. They cannot exist without trust. Magazines live or die on the strength of their relationship with their readers. If a magazine is successful and popular, it is because it has succeeded in being a trusted beacon of knowledge, inspiration, reassurance and entertainment in a word of clutter and noise. When you are crafting a magazine, you don't just strive to attract an audience. You are working to forge a deep, personal bond – a definite special connection between readers and magazine. Indeed, between reader and magazine editor. This bond has been strengthened by social media. Jo Elvin quoted messages and letters she received from readers, illustrating this bond – the equivalent, according to one email, of 'a reassuring hug'. Everything in the magazine is something to do with the reader. The readers feel like they know the editorial team personally. The beauty editor has a legion of disciples because she is very visible within her pages and personally stakes her reputation on her recommendations. The readers know that she and the magazine know what they are talking about. There have been high profile articles on, e.g. women and depression, cancer, sex. People have sought professional help for themselves or their loved ones, because of what the magazine said and how it said it. Magazines share the likes, dislikes, the hopes and stresses of their audiences. When readers buy a magazine they are validating that personality. Every issue that is produced is a lovingly crafted, bespoke book for people who are considered friends. This is in contrast to a newspaper where traditionally the sections get carved up. But everything in a magazine's pages is crafted for its audience.

Jo Elvin cited *Vanity Fair* with its access to the popular icons of our age. Only a few weeks ago, it released yet another decade-defining, Internet-breaking story with its cover on Caitlyn Jenner, who was in the process of gender transition. When the woman herself wanted to finally present herself for the first time, she chose a magazine. Magazines let their interview subjects exhale. And when popular

culture icons trust magazines, it only amplifies the esteem in which their audiences hold them. This is why Ellen Degeneres, at a time when it was an unthinkable admission, went to *Time Magazine* with her 'Yep, I'm gay' cover story. And it was a magazine, *The New Yorker*, which told the extraordinary, accurate, blow-by-blow account of the operation to kill Osama bin Laden.

Jo Elvin went on to talk about the Internet, because contrary to the popular belief that it is killing magazines, it is actually serving to highlight their strengths. The Internet is actually the most isolating place we have ever imposed upon ourselves. She sees magazines as more and more the antidote to that digital superficial isolation. She contended that it is certainly the place where *Glamour* readers come to be reassured that they are not the only ones feeling a bit empty by endless online comparisons. She added that generally people do not have to pay to enjoy Internet content. Magazines are bought. People buy magazines because they trust they are worth it.

Setting the agenda

Seconding the opposition, **Rufus Olins, Chief Executive, Newsworks**, contended that not all magazines are equal. He had some sympathy with MediaTel columnist Dominic Mills who wrote recently that they made him feel lectured at, paranoid and inadequate. How many beach diets can any of us stomach? He demonstrated magazines such as *Real People* and *Crime Confidential* which carried lurid and strange stories. Nothing about a magazine as such makes it a beacon of trust. Some deserve to be. Some do not. For every 1,000 blogs there is a handful worth following. They achieve trust through performance. The same is true of magazines. Some we trust and some we do not. The need for a filter is as great as ever. There are 7,000 magazines published in the UK, but only 230 are measured by the NRS to establish their readership for advertisers. Do we trust the other claimed readership figures? They have to earn people's trust: it is not the medium; it is the individual brand that is trusted. It is the difference perhaps between advertising and advertisements. Or newspapers in general and your chosen newspaper brand.

Oxford's Reuters Institute showed that while 60% of people trusted newspaper websites, this rises to 78% when it is the site they most regularly use. It was 83% for the quality titles. Only 9% of people trusted Twitter and 8% Facebook. Relationships last longer for being tribal.

Specialist magazines are of course trusted. But even some of their contributors are unable to explain where the advertising begins and the editorial ends. Even in some of the glossies, fashion photographers are asked to feature certain brands in their shoots. Would you trust *What Mortgage* more than the advice in *The Financial Times*? Magazines are not held to account like other national and local media which have to get it right or be found out, in real time. Magazines are certainly not the only place you go for trusted information. Which media do you consult when you are seeking hotel recommendation or catching up on the crisis in Greece or the horrors in Tunisia?

Rufus Olins questioned the word 'beacon' with its connotations of a lighthouse. "We can see the BBC as a beacon, maybe. And some newspapers. Even *The Economist*. However, *The Economist* has since 1843 referred to itself as a newspaper". Newspapers are subject to greater scrutiny than magazines precisely because they have such influence and hold power to account. As the *Washington Post's* Ben Bradlee puts it "The more aggressive our search for the truth, the more some people are offended by the press. The more complicated the issues and the more sophisticated are the ways to disguise the truth, the more aggressive our search for the truth must be, and the more offensive we are sure to become to some. So be it". It is hard to think of a major piece of investigative journalism that has not originated in a newspaper. From corruption at FIFA to the child sex scandal in Rotherham to Lance Armstrong's drug cheating and MPs' expenses. It is newspapers' ability to set the agenda and wield influence that on occasions makes them a beacon. Even *The Week*, which we trust to summarise the consensus in the newspapers is not in itself a beacon, but relies on other beacons. It relies on another medium for its success.

Magazines and newspaper have much in common. Audiences are growing because we are all on the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, Flipboard and so on. In other words we are part of the ‘noise and clutter’ in the motion today. Technology should be our friend; it presents opportunities for our brands. The UK’s newspapers reach 46 million adults every month across all platforms. They are not only part of the noise and clutter but influence the thoughts and views of almost every adult in the UK. The BBC is the most trusted medium. And it runs pieces on what’s in tomorrow’s papers on the news every night. This is surely a sign of trust and influence.

Rufus Olins concluded: “The implication that magazines are a bigger beacon of trust than other media is demonstrably not true... The motion that magazines are the *only* beacon of trust is manifestly absurd”.

Discussion from the floor

For the motion:

- The contributor spoke of his trust in the power of *The Archers* to show a beacon of light on sex! He also had trust in the magazine *Continental Modeller* which had published a double-page spread on his model railway.
- Magazines speak people’s language and provide entertainment to their readers. Readers trust them.
- Special interest magazines are doing very well because the information they give is so well thought out. The writers try things out. Special interest magazines are a central part of many people’s lives.
- The relationship between magazines and their readers is deep and trustworthy. The amount of trust readers have with the editors is incomparable in any other medium.

Against the motion:

- No medium is totally trustworthy. Some radio stations and some magazines are, but the *only* in the motion makes the contributor speak against the motion.
- There is not only one truth. What happens if magazines disagree with one another?
- We need to look at how readers feel and where they place their trust. In real time they do not place their trust in one medium only.
- The contributor maintained that *Good Housekeeping* helped her to cook, find a husband and have children. But saving lives and comfort comes from many spheres of influence: from e.g. magazines, peers, TV and newspapers.
- Information comes from so many areas. Readers trust magazines to give them the answers they want, but you can’t trust *only* magazines. There are so many places in the world where you get trusted information.
- Time changes things. Years ago magazines gave advice which today is clearly wrong. They cannot be the *only* beacon of trust.
- The contributor was initially attracted by the concept of a source of trust but had overlooked the word *only*. It is not true that magazines are the *only* beacon of trust.
- In a world of clutter and noise there is also more information. Magazines cannot be the *only* things to trust.
- Journalists get wined and dined by various companies, especially if it involves trips abroad. The contributor is sceptical about the concept of trust in media and moreover does not like the word *only*.
- Advertising sells products. Young people often do not see the difference between advertisements and editorial. Magazines have a relationship with their readers, but it is not trust. There are clever people working in advertising and what you think is trustworthy is not.

- The relationship between magazines and their readers is hierarchical. There is an illusion of reassurance.

Summing up

Summing up for the opposition, **Siobhan Kenny** stressed that trust has to be earned. There is often a unique bond between a medium and its audience. Listeners have a close relationship with their local DJ on radio. The idea of an intimate medium is not exclusive to magazines. Magazines are doing a disservice to themselves if they claim they are the *only* medium of trust.

Summing up for the motion **Kerin O'Connor** pointed out that there are 7,000 magazine titles with hundreds of owners, whereas ownership of radio and the press is in the hands of a few. Magazines are in competition and the editorial work is done by everyone. They are self-regulatory. Their power is in the trust their readers have in them.

The result

The motion was defeated.

Next debate

The next debate will take place on **Monday 26th October 2015** sponsored by The Market Research Society. For more details contact Doreen Blythe, Debating Group Secretary, e-mail: doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com