

THE INNOVATION ISSUE

Publishing

EXECUTIVE

APRIL 2014 • PubExec.com

The

INNOVATORS

Publishers
That Are
Cutting
Through
The Noise

Ken Olling
Co-Founder,
Katachi

PLUS

- Q&A with *Garden & Gun* Publisher Rebecca Darwin
- Fixing the Newsstand Supply Chain



Southern Personality

Garden & Gun publisher Rebecca Darwin discusses how she built a national audience around regional charm.

When Rebecca Darwin relocated from the East Coast to South Carolina, where her husband had accepted a senior pastor position at a Presbyterian church, she certainly had no plans to launch a magazine. And yet in her new hometown of Charleston, friends who were familiar with Darwin's big-city media career—she'd previously worked as the publisher of *The New Yorker*—couldn't help but encourage her. "Wouldn't it be great," they asked, "to have a *New Yorker* of the South?"

Darwin eventually relented, and took her idea for a smart and luxurious Southern culture publication to Evening Post Industries, a Charleston-based media and real estate company. In 2007, EPI chose to bankroll the launch of Darwin's project, which has since become a beloved and intelligently-produced celebration of the Southern lifestyle that carries the curious and often controversial title of *Garden & Gun*.

The economic crash of 2008 arrived one year later, and along with it came EPI's decision to fold *Garden & Gun*, which had quickly developed a rabidly passionate readership. Along with her business partner, Pierre Manigault, Darwin managed to buy the rights to the magazine, which has been published independently ever since.

Garden & Gun today enjoys swiftly growing subscription and circulation numbers—interestingly, 41% of its readership is located outside the Southeastern states—while its ecommerce site and busy schedule of events have led to healthy revenue streams. Below, Darwin discusses the unique personality of the magazine, and the management decisions that have kept it alive and thriving for seven years.

The original concept you had for *Garden & Gun* was that it wouldn't be a regional magazine, but rather a national magazine with a regional focus. Was it difficult to get advertisers on board with this?

Well, it certainly does take lots of explaining—or at least it did initially. We launched with a distribution of 150,000, which, for a magazine that's coming out of South Carolina and is not from one of the big publishing companies, was



a pretty impressive number to launch with. But I had been in the national publishing scene, and that's what I wanted to do—I wanted to make a statement.

To bring the advertisers along, it's taken some time. But advertising is still about making the calls and convincing people why your audience is so important to them. A lot of magazines are really heavily concentrated on the two coasts, and I think we offer up a very good group of readers who are not necessarily in the major markets on the East Coast and the West Coast. So it makes sense.

Do you think part of the magazine's success has to do with the fact that it's a niche publication with a very specific demographic?

Oh, absolutely. I think every magazine, whether it's big or small, needs to have a particular niche. And I do think that's kind of the sweet spot in publishing at this point—to not try to be all things to all people, but to really appeal to a core group of people.

But I do still like to think big, and I think just because you might be smaller, or more targeted, doesn't mean that you shouldn't play by the same rules and be very creative when it comes to the marketing ideas you're approaching your advertisers with.

Can you talk about some of the marketing initiatives you've undertaken?

Well, our events are, I think, outstanding. And I've always loved an event or a program that brings you closer to your reader. Part of my philosophy has been that we're going to keep the magazine at a bimonthly time frequency, and then come up with other touch points to connect with the reader. That way they really anticipate the magazine coming, but that they have a lot of other opportunities to live the *Garden & Gun* life, or to be close to the *Garden & Gun* editors.

And I've gotten to know so many of our readers really well. I mean, I'm friends with them on Facebook—we write emails back and forth to each other—because there's just this amazing connection. So our events really are a reflec-

tion of the magazine coming to life. They run the gamut from an amazing culinary event to a music event to a sporting event.

We also created a club in 2009—the Garden & Gun Club—with memberships where people paid an enhanced rate for their subscriptions to become members, and those people receive special invitations to certain things. We did an annual weekend event at Blackberry Farm in Tennessee that included having great music acts and incredible food, and bringing in artists that we've profiled in the magazines. Those weekends were really quite pricey, and yet we would sell that event out every year.

We've actually recently disbanded the club, and we're working on something else even more special, but I can't disclose that yet.

What advice would you give to a publisher who wanted to do something similar?

Well, there was a lot of interest in this notion of a Garden & Gun Club. I really think it worked for us because we had always felt like a club, and I don't think you can just take that concept and slap another name on it and think it's going to work like it did for us. That's always been my thing—to do things that are particular to what you stand for, and what your brand stands for.

Bearing in mind the way publishing is going today, do you think the idea of trying to build a tribe around your brand is especially important?

Well, I think it is for us. And I think it depends on what your strategy is. We have our digital edition, and we certainly have a very strong online strategy, and all those things are working for us. But at the heart of this brand is this very strong, old-fashioned print magazine. So I do believe that personal contact is very much a part of what our brand is about.

In fact, we have to move because we've outgrown our current facility—I'm looking at new properties now—and one of the key things for me is to be able to have a space where our readers can come and be with us and hang out. That's really a very big, strong part of what we do.

Now, does everybody need to do this? If your platform is much more of a digital platform, maybe not. But it works for us. And it is part of the Southern culture; we do like to talk, and we like to share our experiences, which is what *Garden & Gun* is all about. It's stories about people.

What do you think the future holds for publishers—especially publishers with a strong print presence?

Well, I continue to be big on print. I think if you're producing something people want, they will find the time to spend



time with it and read it. If you're producing something they can get somewhere else, or that they aren't really that interested in, they're not going to plunk down the money for your magazine nor find the time to read it.

And I think the biggest concern for many, many magazines right now is that they've been giving themselves away. They were doing that to hold up their rate bases, but now that the ad market is shrinking for them, that's just not paying off anymore. They're in a tough position, and that's why I've kind of taken the high road from the beginning. We're one of the most premium-priced subscriptions out there. But I still have faith. I absolutely have faith. **PE**