

# The membership challenge

Can you build a community through a print magazine and come through the pandemic even stronger? Mary Hogarth speaks to Guy Procter, editor of Country Walking magazine.

I first spoke to Guy at the PPA Leadership Summit earlier this year about the magazine's phenomenally successful Walk 1,000 miles challenge, now in its fifth year. Since then, Guy reveals that Country Walking has continued to grow in every respect.

Could it be that print is not dead, despite indications that the newsstand is heading in a downward trajectory? Indeed, Country Walking's subscriptions are rapidly increasing, moving up 28% year-on-year. The title, owned by Bauer Media, now has a circulation of 37,972 – subscription growth far outweighing newsstand declines during the pandemic.

Such phenomenal success Guy attributes to the magazine's legendary campaign, which has resulted in growth across the board, including in audience and commercial revenue. Without it and the partnerships it has helped established, he thinks "we would be in a very different place".

He admits that, like all magazines, advertisers' interest in print has diminished. "They are only interested in full-spectrum campaigns – social, print, digital, partnerships, newsletters."

For publishers today, multiple revenue streams are critical to ensure a magazine can thrive. While Guy can't reveal exact revenue figures for Country Walking, he acknowledges that the circulation and commercial revenue are equally important with both continuing on an upward trajectory. "What is significant about the partnership revenue is that it has more than filled the hole left by the flight of display advertising."

## Embracing membership

Membership is becoming a core strategy among the industry, so it is not surprising that two of Bauer's titles, Country Walking and Empire, have been piloting a programme to develop a stratified membership programme for the past year. "We were part of a pilot scheme within Bauer, to engage communities and see what the appetite was for upgrading the audience's relationship with us," explains Guy.

"Bauer is investing quite massively in the project which will roll out this enhanced subscription model across all the brands ultimately, so we made some fairly big hires of people who are in charge of things like the platforms and rewards."

As part of the strategy, his team are also utilising gamification to enhance the audience



★ Guy Procter: "I want the magazine to come alive."

experience. Infrastructure costs have been kept low because Country Walking teamed up with My Virtual Mission, a third party, instead of developing an app from scratch in-house.

My Virtual Mission has provided the technological platform for users to complete their Walk 1,000 miles virtual journey from Land's End to John O'Groats. To sign up costs £10, giving subscribers access to the challenge on the app, logging their progress on a virtual map from Land's End to John O'Groats and culminating in a real-world medal.

"Every 50 miles, subscribers get a message of encouragement from me to fan the flames of enthusiasm, saying well done, you are doing brilliantly – and by the way, there's a new issue coming up soon. We produce milestone graphics at 50-mile increments, which readers tend to screenshot on their phone, then post on the Country Walking social or tweet it. People just enjoy that element of gamification of their walking as it just adds another layer.

"It's a little bit Pokémon GO for adults because they're trying to get to these milestones – and I don't think we ever lose our appetite for validation and rewards."

Clarity and value are vital components of any membership offering.

"It is easy to get caught up in saying we



will give you some exclusive content here and a newsletter there," he says, adding that membership tiers must be clear-cut and citing Netflix as a good example.

"I think you need to stay focused on how it is going to greet the consumer when they're presented with the offering. It can't be a difficult thing to articulate or market. Otherwise, it is just a headache."

Membership is not just about revenue and creating financial stability. A vital part of the strategy is about enriching the offering for your community of readers. From Guy's perspective, the latest innovations demonstrate that the brand could have a more significant role in readers' lives.

"Country Walking has become a kind of coach, mentor and surrogate friend group, and that's really what I always aspired a specialist brand to be able to do. Because of Covid, everything came together at once. The situation we found ourselves in pointed our direction firmly towards enriching and deepening that direct connection with our consumers. Because if you don't, how are they going to find you, and need you?"

## Enhancing digital

A digital edition is a core part of any publication offering, but many are enhanced

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page-turners. However, Bauer plans to break the mould and launch an enriched, responsive digital version as part of the Country Walking+ membership.

“One of the subscription benefits is having an additional digitally enhanced magazine that plays to the strengths of the device. We will be augmenting with more video, bonus articles and content. We are banking on having a showcase offering which is a proper player in the market rather than being just something we do because we have to – and I think that’s important.”

Won’t this be expensive in terms of workload and infrastructure? Surprisingly not, says Guy. “I want the magazine to come alive, and a lot of the means to do that we have access to in the normal process of content creation.”

Like many editorial teams, they often produce surplus content, particularly on photoshoots, which can also facilitate video clips and sound recordings. Some aspects of production come down to the efficient use of content. For example, if the editorial team is shooting videos for social media and recording their interviews for the print edition, creating additional extras for a digital edition becomes more feasible.

“Recording an extra five minutes at the end where the interviewee answers some reader questions is an easy way to derive some exclusive content, only available to our Country Walking plus subscribers. That way, we can produce such extras without dramatically increasing our investment in



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find out what aspect of Guy’s leadership has contributed most to the title’s success.

He cites autonomy and clarity of purpose together with an ability to recruit people into his vision for the role that Country Walking has to play in people’s lives.

Authenticity is critical to Country Walking readers and the team who create it, which is why Guy defines enthusiasm and having a genuine passion for the subject as a deal-breaker when hiring staff.

This editor knows what he wants and

Finding a way to create that shared sense of enterprise and excitement is the secret why Country Walking has been a wonderful place to work for the past five years.”

Has his leadership been strengthened by the past eighteen months? Ultimately, yes. “You have to reframe the situation you are in to make it feel like it is the most important and valuable contribution you could be making to the world.”

### Heading in the right direction

Country Walking has been an inspiring example of a magazine that understands its audience’s needs and wants. Leadership is a critical component of its strength, along with the robust editorial vision from an editor who is willing to take chances and listens to his team.

Going forward, Bauer taking a tiered approach when developing its membership strategy is also critical. It is vital to offer your audience a choice. Then the question becomes: which option should I choose, not should I subscribe?

Has the title peaked? I suspect not. But it is evident that without Guy’s unique engagement with his readers, along with that ability to lead from the front, the title might have been in danger of stagnating.

Country Walking offers an excellent lesson in leadership and sustainability. 📌

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time and effort.”

That said, he reveals he has been unequivocal on what his team can and can’t do in terms of additional content. Yet, for Guy, it is about bringing the magazine to life and enriching the reader experience.

“A few weeks ago, I was on a walk in Rutland with my photographer. It was a beautiful scene, but there was no way to capture that atmosphere fully – the distant baying of the lambs and the swishing of the breeze – in print. But now we’ve got this enhanced digital edition coming, readers will be able to touch a photo, and it will all come to life. Ultimately they will be there with us.”

### Leadership impact

Having the right team is crucial. Editorial leadership has a significant impact on a title’s ability to be sustainable, so I wanted to

needs. “More than I need expertise and experience, I need people with an ability to take the flame and come along with us on this wonderful, exciting journey. To delight our readers by any means necessary.

“Positive people are worth five of those who are good but a drain on morale. I don’t care if you are the best writer in the world. Are you ravenously curious? Madly enthusiastic? Indefatigable?”

Guy sets out his vision for the magazine but is not a “micromanager”.

“Ultimately, I’ve got a bloody good art editor, a fantastic features editor, a wonderful deputy – and I let them do their thing.

“Positive people are worth five of those who are good but a drain on morale.”



### About Mary Hogarth

Mary is a media specialist, educator, speaker and writer with more than 20 years’ industry experience. Her consultancy practice, The Magazine Expert, specialises in new title launches, audience intelligence, editorial development and business strategies. Mary is currently working on a PhD investigating sustainable business models in magazine publishing.

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