PUBLICITY & MEDIA

PITCHING A MAGAZINE: THINK INSIDE THE BOX

Magazine editors Dan Schechner, Marty Fiolka and Trevor Hocking explain how to study a publication, pitch the sections it already runs, and hand over content so complete it's hard to turn down.

By Alex Striler · 6 min read · Read online at sponsorshiptactics.com/library/pitching-magazines-think-inside-the-box

Most racers pitch a magazine as if it were a blank page waiting for their story. It isn't. Every magazine already has departments, recurring columns, an editorial calendar and an audience it knows well. When editors joined my Sponsorship Summits to explain what actually gets published, they kept coming back to the same idea: the racers who get in are the ones who studied the magazine first and then offered it something that fit.

READ THE MAGAZINE BEFORE YOU PITCH IT

Dan Schechner, editor of PRI Magazine, starts with homework that most racers skip. "There are so many different media outlets out there that if you don't know what you're pitching to and who you're pitching to and what kind of coverage they like, you are already starting out way behind the eight ball," he said. Before anything else, he said, find out "whether the magazine that you are pitching to accepts contributed pieces." Some do and some don't. PRI, he said, doesn't really take contributed pieces, but it still has room for racers who bring the right angle.

Then comes advice he admitted runs against the usual cliché: "I'm going to tell you something that goes against everything that you've ever heard, which is I'm gonna say think inside the box, and the box is right here. The box is the magazine." Go through it, he said, and "look at the columns they run, look at the departments they run, look at the features." Those are the slots an editor has to fill every issue, and they tell you what a realistic pitch looks like. ▶ WATCH DAN SCHECHNER EXPLAIN THIS

YOUR SPONSOR MAY BE THE BETTER STORY

Thinking inside the box often means the story isn't about you at all. A business magazine like PRI may not want a driver profile, but it may be planning a piece on a product category your sponsor makes. Schechner described the pitch he wishes he got: "Hey, I noticed that you guys are covering crankshafts next issue. This company that sponsors me is doing something really cool in cranks. Why don't you give them a call?" His reaction if a racer did that: "Nobody's ever done that with me before, and if they did it I would be so impressed." ▶ SEE THE FULL ANSWER

That pitch does two jobs at once. It solves a problem for the editor, and it puts your sponsor in front of a national trade audience, which is worth more to a marketing director than another decal.

To find out what's coming, ask. "Any magazine worth its salt is going to have an editorial calendar," Schechner said at a later summit. It lays out the topics for each issue months ahead, and it's not hard to get: "It's not a secret. If anybody asks for the editorial calendar, I'd be happy to give it to them."

▶ WATCH DAN SCHECHNER ON EDITORIAL CALENDARS

GET INSIDE THE EDITOR'S HEAD

Marty Fiolka has worked every side of this. He has raced, run magazines including Dirt Sports, written for RACER and worked in public relations. He broke his approach into steps. The first is to get the information out with good press releases and an email list. The second is to reverse engineer the pitch: "You have to get in the head of the editor and say what's going to be interesting to them."

The step that set him apart was doing the work for the editor. "A lot of times my successes come from actually saying, okay, this is what I like to cover, but I'm going to ghostwrite it for you. I'll get photography done for you at no cost." Editors who need a lot of high-quality content find that hard to refuse, as long as the piece stays balanced and fair. His third step, immersion, means bringing media into the program, inviting them to a race or out on a trip with the team, because "that's where you get the big long stories."

▶ WATCH MARTY FIOLKA ON THIS

BRING ART, AND SKIP THE STRUGGLE STORY

Fiolka said quality decides a lot. "The better the art, the better the chance of getting published," he said, and he wasn't talking about phone snapshots. His pitch to editors was simple: "I'm going to provide these guys turnkey beautiful content... it's applicable to their market, they're almost not going to be able to say no."

He also warned racers off the most common pitch of all, the hardship story about scraping together a season or following a parent into the sport. "Every editor has heard about a thousand of those stories. It gets down to trying to find something better, something deeper or something more unique." Linking the manufacturer to the race car through the team is one way to get there, he said, and sponsors like being introduced to media they wouldn't have reached on their own. ▶ WATCH MARTY FIOLKA ON WHAT GETS PUBLISHED

MAKE IT EASY TO RUN

Schechner once showed a summit audience an email he'd received for PRI's Featured Vehicles section, which profiles two race cars in every issue. The sender introduced his BMW drift car, said where it had been displayed, and offered photos plus details on the driver, the vehicle, the location and the race series. "Literally, the guy gave me a half a page, and that is wonderful," Schechner said. His first rule: "Make my life easy, okay, don't make me work."

His second rule came from football: "availability is an ability." If you aren't the right source yourself, point the editor to someone who is. "Be that facilitator," he said. "Be the one who comes to me with content or with connections, and I'll be thankful." ▶ WATCH DAN SCHECHNER'S THREE RULES

COURT THE MEDIA LIKE YOU COURT SPONSORS

Trevor Hocking, who produced years of motorsports television before joining Hi-Torque Publications (publisher of Motocross Action, Dirt Bike and Dirt Wheels), said magazines still depend on outside help. "Contributors are a big process of what we do," he said, and some are paid while others write out of passion. "As far as the racers go, it really is a collaboration and we're looking for that."

Getting there takes the same effort you put into a sponsor. "It's like anything else courting a sponsor, you got to court media… know who's covering it, know why, but have a relationship with them." And when you pitch, he added, give them "something relevant and recent," not a broad story.

▶ WATCH TREVOR HOCKING IN THE FULL SESSION

KNOW WHAT THE COVERAGE IS WORTH

Once a story runs, put it in your sponsor report. Schechner said the easy starting point is the rate card, meaning what a full-page ad in that magazine costs, and then you add the online reach, the social posts and the newsletter that carry the same story. Fiolka said editorial deserves more than the ad rate: "If you had a story written about one page on a driver that mentioned his sponsor, we always thought that was at least two or three times what the page rate was, because it was actually editorial."

▶ WATCH THE EDITORS PUT A VALUE ON COVERAGE

THE TAKEAWAY

- Buy or read three issues of the magazine you want. List its columns, departments and recurring sections, and pitch one of them.
- Ask the editor for the editorial calendar and look for topics where a sponsor's product fits.
- Offer finished work: a clean story, real photography with rights cleared, and the details the editor needs.
- Lead with what's new, specific and unusual, not the season you struggled to fund.
- When the story runs, value it at the page rate or higher and put it in your sponsor report.

VOICES IN THIS ARTICLE: Dan Schechner — Editor, PRI Magazine · Marty Fiolka — RACER Magazine · Trevor Hocking — Hi-Torque Publications

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Alex Striler runs SponsorshipTactics.com, a video library of motorsports sponsorship sessions with the brands that write the checks. Quotes come from recorded Sponsorship Summit sessions and interviews, lightly edited for clarity and length. Click any "Watch" link to see the speaker say it.

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