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HOW TO DESIGN A POWERFUL COVER

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What's inside

Chapter 1

Creating a great first impressioin

Readers are perceptive, and they form their opinions quickly. So, it is no surprise that the magazine cover is the primary battleground for attracting readers. Unfortunately, because of unforgiving deadlines and overburdened staff, the cover is often resolved at the last minute without thorough design development.

Naturally, we are passionate about our stories and we are committed to excellent communication. But we can easily forget that the cover is the most powerful weapon in our armory.

The impact of compelling imagery is profound. After all, it is the cover image, and not the nameplate, which readers see first. As a result, the choice of a cover image is the single most important decision the art director makes. With each new issue we create, our covers offer us a new opportunity to engage our readers afresh, to be like the old friend with the latest gossip; to be welcoming and familiar, yet compelling and surprising. Our goal is to create a great (and lasting) impression.

Chapter 2
The design elements

The human eye can focus only on a small area, and though our eyes scan for information rapidly, we tend to receive visual stimuli in order of prominence. Our job as art directors is to lead the reader's eye to the right elements—in the right order. On a magazine cover, readers notice first the primary cover image, then the nameplate, followed by the primary cover line, corner splash or burst, secondary cover lines, captions, eyebrow lines, tag line, and utilities.

The image

The primary image is always the dominant element of any cover design, and its selection is the most important decision for each issue. It must be

compelling and distinctive, and yet it must also be appropriate to the magazine's purpose and style.

The nameplate (cover logo)

Often referred to as the logo, the nameplate presents the title of the magazine to the reader. Its design must be distinctive enough to stand apart, but simple enough to be flexible for use with new images from issue to issue.

The primary cover lines

As the most prominent typographic feature on the cover, the primary cover lines serve much the same purpose as an article title to attract and engage the reader. In most cases, they should relate directly to the cover image and promise the reader something new and relevant to their interest.

The corner splash or burst

The corner splash is a triangle of color in the upper right or bottom right of the cover containing special editorial content. A burst is similar, but may be anywhere on the cover in almost any shape and size. Although more common among consumer magazines, this graphic device is very effective in grabbing attention and promising the reader something special or unique.

The secondary cover lines

Even though many magazines do not offer secondary editorial blurbs, they are an excellent way to help guide readers toward something of interest. Naturally, no single topic appeals to all readers, even within a given market. This makes secondary cover lines an invaluable communications tool.

Captions

Captions can immediately identify persons and places on covers. The use of captions is an important style decision, since captions can either give a cover more value or add unnecessary clutter.

Eyebrow lines

Referred to as eyebrow lines because they rest above the nameplate, they are often short and pithy blurbs which give readers a quick look at a magazine's content.

Tag line

Most often placed under the nameplate, the tag line offers a pithy reminder of the purpose of the publication and its intended market.

Utilities

Many covers incorporate UPC codes and address labels such as ink jetting, which requires special design attention to ensure the necessary space is available.

Chapter 3
The measure of success

How do you measure a cover's success? Considerations of the following elements is necessary to separate merely adequate covers from those that truly communicate.

The magazine's staff must consider:

The identity and values of the organization

• **How closely should the publication visually reflect the identity of the parent organization?** How independent should it be?

• **What factors determine this decision?** Who decides the identity?

• **What design elements will be used to reflect the identity?** Color? Typography? Editorial perspective? Image content and style?

The mission of the magazine

• **Does the cover reflect the stated purposes of the magazine?**

• **Are the promises on the cover compatible with your mission?**

• **Is the visual tone of the cover reflected consistently throughout the magazine?**

• **Do your cover lines point to your overall objectives?**

Strength and clarity of message

• **What is familiar to the reader?** Every cover should have consistent elements.

• **What will surprise the reader?** Every cover should offer something new.

• **What is the primary editorial promise you want to make?** Identify how you will accomplish this task. Discuss it. Evaluate it.

• **Keep it simple.** Make it logical. If everyone shouts at once, no one is heard.

Emotional resonance

• **How do you want your readers to respond emotionally?** With joy, pity, anger, melancholy, compassion, resolve?

• **Avoid apathy.** Don't bore your readers.

• **Readers want to be engaged.** Will they open the magazine? You only get one chance to draw them in.

The power of color

- **What complementary colors provide the most emotive impact?**

- **Use the fewest number of colors possible** to create the most impact.

- **Consider color as a tool** to reinforce the tone and emotion you want to achieve.

- **Color is powerful**; use it to enthuse, not confuse.

Chapter 4
Develop the cover style

It has been said that the most important design decision is not what to include, but what to omit. Practice restraint and consistency to give your magazine a strong and unique personality.

The primary image

By far the most common image on magazine covers worldwide is the human face. Whether celebrities, business executives, or everyday heroes, readers like to see people on the covers of their magazines. Even so, many magazines put tight guidelines on their portraiture in an effort to create a distinctive and identifiable cover.
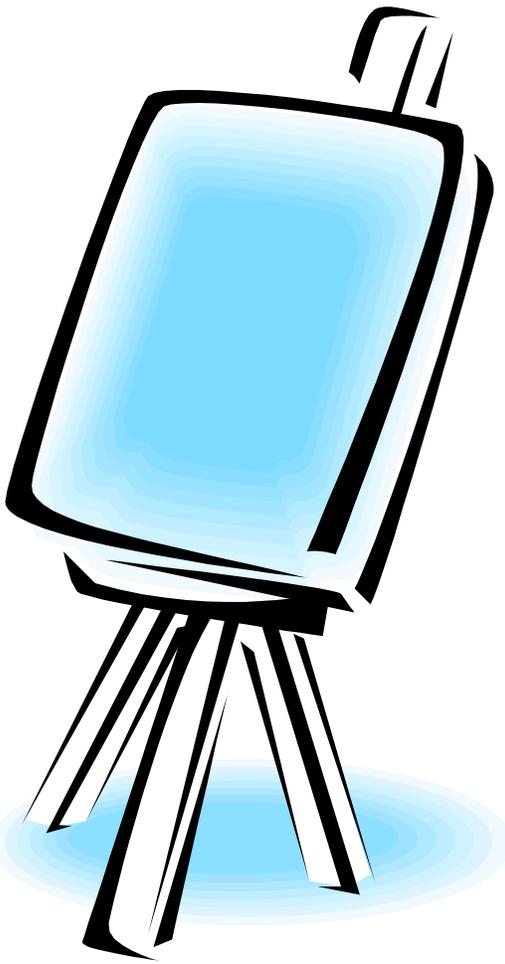
For example:

- **Some covers keep the scale and posture** of their models the same from issue to issue.

- **Some always have eye contact**, while others prefer three-quarter perspectives.

- **Some insist on visible teeth**, avoid showing too much of the model's clothing, or demand a certain physique.

- **Others will print only black and white images**, while some will run only color.

- **Many insist on a clean background**, whether stark white or black or fields of color.

Even with strong reader preference for people on the cover, there are a myriad of other possible image solutions to consider. Each has its own set of criteria to consider.

- **Will each cover feature photographs or illustrations?** Very often the content of a publication will strongly suggest an image philosophy; rarely can a magazine successfully balance both approaches.

- **If the images are predominantly illustrative, are they traditional or contemporary?** Are they conceptual or narrative? What principles guide them to be both consistent and distinctive from issue to issue?

- **If illustrative, what conceptual metaphors do you want to create?** Though readers are perceptive, they quickly tire of poorly-executed

clichés or complex metaphors. You must know your reader in order to develop a visual language they will understand and enjoy.

- **If the images are predominantly photographic, will they be conceptual, representative, or documentary?** Conceptual images might be digital photo illustrations, while representative images could be environmental portraits. Photojournalism might be used to document someone's life work.

- **What subjects will appear on the cover from issue to issue?** Men, women, children, landscapes, cityscapes? Cars, toys, money, clothing?

- **How will they be photographed?** And in what style? Photojournalism? Environmental portraits? Studio portraits? Digital illustrations?

- How will digital imaging tools like Photoshop affect your cover image? Readers are suspicious; they can usually tell the difference between an untouched image and one that has been altered. Be careful to create conceptual images with obvious distortions, but preserve the integrity of photojournalism when documenting some actual place, event, or persons.

- How will the image be run graphically? Consider a tighter or unusual crop. Experiment with black and white or silhouettes.

The nameplate

- **Keep the nameplate simple, yet distinctive.** These seemingly contradictory principles can be reconciled by focusing on only one or two distinguishing typographic elements.

- **Simplicity is important** because of the need

for flexibility. The nameplate must be strong enough to be readable against a variety of images and cover lines. Furthermore, simplicity enables the reader to recognize your magazine cover more quickly.

- **Consider a typeface that is not used elsewhere in the magazine.** By choosing a font not found anywhere else in the magazine, but is still within the larger typographic family, the nameplate will be more distinctive.

- **Consider graphic embellishments to enhance readability and prominence.** By using an outline or an in-line, a hard shadow or a soft shadow, the nameplate can become more legible and have more graphic vitality.

- **Research shows that red, black, and white are the most common color choices.** If other colors are chosen, they should correspond to the color palette and work well with each issue's photograph or illustration.

The primary cover line

- **Consider placement carefully.** The size and scale and placement of the primary cover line should tie directly to the image.

- **Create adequate contrast between the images and cover lines.** Texture, pattern, color, and value play a role in readability.

- **Type set at the bottom of the page can be effective, if it is large enough**. Be sure to consider placement of mailing labels and UPC codes.

- **Take care to create cover images with appropriate negative space for cover lines.** Complex images will only clutter the design and weaken communication.

- **Consider soft shadows and retouching the photograph to enhance readability.** Although great care should be taken, subtle shadows and image softening can significantly improve legibility of type placed over part of the photo.

- **Select typefaces that are highly readable.** Look for fonts with open counter spaces and a large x-height.

- **Consider other typographic factors for readability.** Line lengths that are too short or too long are uncomfortable to read. Upper and lowercase type is easier to read than all caps. Use all caps only for small amounts of text. White type on yellow or other pastels is difficult to read. Avoid fonts that are too thin or too bold. Use leading to group related type elements and separate different elements.

The corner splash or burst

- **Consider a graphic type element for special editorial messages.** Even though they may distract attention from the image, corner splashes and bursts have been proven to draw readers into magazines.

- **Experiment with new shapes and placement.** Although corner splashes are effective, consider using a well-designed box or other shape instead.

The secondary cover lines

- **Some magazines create special areas for secondary cover lines.** Graphic panels or boxes that are separate from the primary image can keep the image clean and ensure readability.

- **Clarity beats clever.** Speak directly to your readers. Avoid clever lines that potentially confuse the reader.

- **Know your reader and key words that resonate with your audience.** Research shows that the following words are most attractive to readers: free, now, exclusive, you, secret, surprise, plus.

- **Readers like numbers on covers if they make a promise.** However, avoid big numbers and too many numbers on a cover.

- **Remember to offer great promises and then to fulfill them.** It is gratifying for readers to have a cover promise delivered.

- **Sometimes clutter is good, if it's well managed.** If the numerous entry points to a cover are well designed, the overall effect can be compelling and invigorating for a reader.

Captions

- **Determine how you will use captions as part of your cover philosophy.** Based on the kind of imagery you will run from issue to issue, decide whether captions should be a normal part of your covers. If you use captions, be consistent.

Eyebrow lines

- **Consider eyebrow lines as a subtle alternative or addition to secondary lines.** Placed above the nameplate and with much more concise wording, eyebrow lines are known to draw readers. Many magazines run them consistently from issue to issue with little variance.

Tagline

- **Tag lines provide a natural opportunity to distinguish yourself.** The small editorial tag below your nameplate can position the magazine within the marketplace and clearly identify your

Chapter 5
Test the cover

brand promise.

Test your cover as much as possible. People on the Internet or on the street can form invaluable focus groups. Create formal or informal focus groups to consider the following:

• **Show people your top two or three cover images** without the type. Evaluate their response.

• **Show them three radical crops** of your favorite image. Watch how they react.

• **Test several different cover lines.** Measure emotional responses, comprehension, and whether they like what they see.

• **Have the courage to make changes**, even at the last minute. Get it right; don't just get it done.

Chapter 6
Bringing it all together

In our ever-expanding media culture, readers worldwide have developed higher expectations regarding content, but have less time to consume it. The resulting mantra is not unlike the rock anthem: Here we are; now entertain us. This is unfortunate, because not all vital truths are immediately entertaining, but are often complex and difficult to understand.

As magazine designers, we have the daunting task of presenting the editorial in ways that are visually stimulating, without sacrificing substance or betraying our readership. We want to guard the trust

of our readers and the values of our magazine. But we also want to attract new readers who previously have not had the time or interest to read our magazine.

It begins with the magazine designer, and the design begins with the cover.

Beyond the book

Pick out several magazines that you think have excellent covers. Compare them to each other and to your magazine. What is it that makes their covers stand out, and how can you apply those features to your own magazine cover design?

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"How to design a powerful cover" is an excerpt from the "Design for Magazines" training manual. To purchase the complete manual, visit: www.magazinetraining.com.

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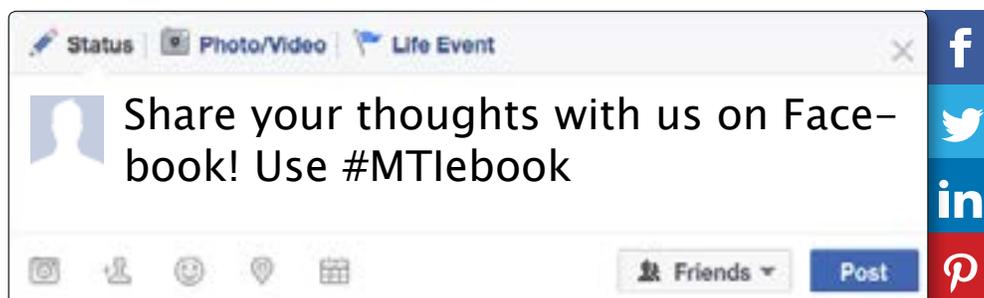
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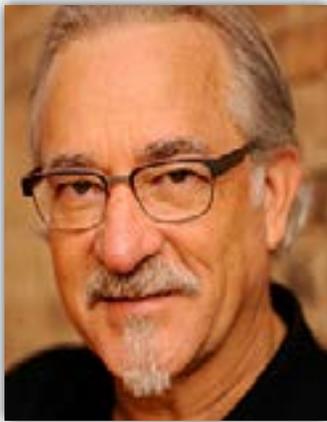
Gary Gnidovic is the founder and creative director of Gx3 Creative, a visual communications firm that specializes in design, photography, and consulting. For 14 years he served as design director of *Christianity Today* magazine. Prior to that he had art directed *Books & Culture* and *Today's Christian Woman* magazines. Gary's designs have received awards from the Evangelical Press Association, *Print*, *HOW*, and *Communication Arts* magazines. He has a B.A. in photography from Southern Illinois University and an M.A. in fine arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Gary has taught design and/or photography courses for Magazine Training International in Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Croatia, India, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

Greg Breeding serves as president and creative director for Journey Group, and puts his stamp on a body of work that cuts across the world of evangelical publishing. Recent clients include The Salvation Army, Moody Bible Institute, Campus Crusade for Christ, Family Life Ministry, World Vision, the American Bible Society, and World Relief. Greg has consistently received awards from *Print* and *Folio* magazines, the Society of Publication Designers, Florida Magazine Association, and the Evangelical Press Association. He holds a B.A. in fine arts from Virginia Commonwealth University, where he studied under some of the nation's best-known academics in design and typography. Greg has taught design courses with Magazine Training International in Ukraine, Malaysia, and the Czech Republic.

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