

Extra Extra! Read All About It!

In the era of the iPad and with print publications losing money, I have to wonder why new magazines keep popping up left and right.

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Did you hear about the new craze?

No, not cupcake shops.

East Bay magazines.

In the movie *Field of Dreams*, it was true that if you build it, they will come. But is this also true for magazines? If you publish one, someone will read it?

Apparently so.

Maybe it's the same inexplicable magnetic force that propels the people you work with to eat anything you leave on the kitchen table.

It seems like every month a new magazine gets delivered to my Walnut Creek home. These aren't national magazines. These are local print publications targeted to the Bay Area – and most are trying to reach the much-coveted Walnut Creek homeowner.

When you get home at the end of a tiring day, I bet your first five minutes go something like this. You park the car, grab the mail and sort. You end up with several piles. One pile holds the bills. The last pile has magazines, some of which end up in the junk mail/recycling pile, others in a final stack of the things you want to read as soon as you have more time. I'm here to talk about the magazine piles -- or Door Nos. 2 and 3 for those of you old enough to remember Monty Hall and Let's Make A Deal.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have worked for several Bay Area magazines, including 21 years at Diablo, based here in Walnut Creek. In addition to all the sales, marketing and writing experience I have garnered from working at newspapers, advertising agencies, online media and magazines, I now own my own marketing company, donnalynn Creative.

With that out of the way, let's move on. I say that with a wink and smile because having me talk about magazines is like going out for dinner with a chef or going wine tasting with a sommelier. With more than 35 years' experience under my belt, who better to explain how publishing works?

I eat, live and breathe this stuff. But there's another side to my being able to critique magazines. Remember that commercial for the Hair Club? "I'm not only the Hair Club president, I'm also a client." Well, yes. I'm not only an expert, I'm also a reader. I am exactly the demographic these magazines are trying to reach.

But when I see some of the publications parading up my driveway, I think they have not only missed their target, they missed their mark.

Let's look at the magazine piles: the local magazines I want to read and the so-called magazine-wannabes I don't.

On top is San Francisco magazine – quite frankly, because it belongs there. San Francisco is the premier Bay Area magazine and offers readers insightful editorial coverage of city, regional and local issues as well as entertaining and informative articles about food, travel, fashion and fun. It takes me days, if not weeks, to get through an issue -- and it comes as no surprise that San Francisco magazine won the 2010 National Magazine Award for General Excellence in the less than 100,000-circulation category

7 X 7 is another city magazine that arrives monthly in my mailbox. It lands in the "I want to read" pile because I love its covers -- but once I start reading it, I realize that I'm just not hip enough to enjoy it. It's filled to the brim with cool 20-and 30-year-old tall, leggy beauties and metrosexuals who go clubbing and shopping in the trendiest neighborhoods. It's all about

branding and labels and seeing how many cool people and buzzwords can reasonably fit in one sentence.

That takes care of the city publications, which brings us back to the local pile.

Leading the pack of East Bay publications is Diablo magazine and for good reason: It's the best. Diablo has been the mainstay of East Bay magazines since 1979. It has an audited and verified circulation and is mailed monthly to the highest valued homes in Walnut Creek and the East Bay. Diablo belongs to the City and Regional Magazine Association (CRMA), which means it is part of a national organization that represents the top magazines in the market. Diablo continues to provide readers with a well-rounded editorial package, delicious reviews, beautiful photography and innovative marketing and promotions. Every East Bay magazine that launches compares itself to Diablo, but it takes integrity, honesty and balanced content to even come close.

Next up is Walnut Creek Magazine. Since 2006, this glossy bimonthly publication has been seen everywhere around town and has successfully found its niche reporting on the who, what and where of everything Walnut Creek. Walnut Creek knows its audience and understands what people who live and work in this town want to read about. The writing is fun and fresh and more often than not, it scoops everyone on really big news.

Scene Magazine made a big splash when it came on the scene in April 2010 and rightly so. With the Bay Area News Group behind it, there's no doubt Scene understands what makes a successful publication. It publishes East and South Bay editions three times a year. Scene is big, bold and glossy — the quintessential women's guide to style and luxury. The magazine is loaded with good content and the photography is top notch. It's a great read and takes more than two or three sittings to get through. I wish it came more often than three times a year.

As a reader, what I truly appreciate about San Francisco, Diablo, Walnut Creek and Scene magazines is that they don't try to deceive their readers about who is writing and contributing to their content. The magazines clearly state when editorial content is advertorial and when a special section is paid advertising. That's where the word integrity comes in again. Which brings us back to the rest of the magazine pile.

The first time The Home Magazine came to my mailbox, it went into the oh-goodie-I-want-to-read-this pile. Not any more. It bills itself as the anything-and-everything-for-your-home magazine — so I thought it must be like a local Architectural Digest.

But it's not. It's 44 pages of ads and coupons. I looked through it again for this story and what bothers me the most is that it calls itself a magazine. I would have absolutely no problem with it if it called itself something else. A magazine is something you want to curl up on the couch with and read. I don't know about you, but reading ads for water heaters is not how I relax.

Another magazine I get but simply don't "get" is Alive. What exactly is it? And more importantly, who is reading it? I'm certainly not. It reminds me of the old Judy Garland/Mickey Rooney films in which they and their friends didn't have enough money to go to New York and one of them inevitably says, "My dad has a barn, let's put on a show!" That's what Alive looks like to me: a bunch of local businesses that got together and thought they couldn't afford to advertise in Diablo so they started their own magazine.

Remember earlier when I explained how real magazines have editorial integrity and clearly tell the reader when an advertiser or client is writing the article? That's what's missing from Alive. The magazine has a smattering of qualified contributors. More often, though, you start to read an article only to see that the person who wrote it has an ad on the same page. Can you imagine if instead of Diane Sawyer reporting the news, ABC invited someone off the street or one of their advertisers from, say, Carnival Cruises or Celebrex, to report it instead? That is so transparently wrong that you most certainly would change the channel to Katie Couric.

And to the question of who is reading Alive, my guess is only the people who are writing the articles or buying the ads – who as it happens are more often than not one and the same.

The newest magazine is called 86° and it will end up in the recycle bin with the all-ads "magazine" and Alive. I contacted 86° several times to get information about their circulation and editorial package, but still have not received it. I asked for this information not as a Walnut Creek reader but for donnalynn Creative. In addition to writing and designing print ads, brochures and websites, I am hired to recommend media. In order for me to recommend media I have to look at the rates and circulation and run the numbers to see if it's a good buy for clients. Much the same as you do in the grocery store when you compare one bottle of olive oil to another.

You have the bottles side by side and they look and feel very similar — even down to the label and the packaging — yet one costs twice as much as the other. There has to be a difference, and it comes down to the quality of their ingredients, flavor, consistency, freshness and quality control.

Just like buying a diamond ring at Nordstrom and the "same one" at Target. They are simply not the same. An ad during the Super Bowl is going to cost more than that same ad running on cable at 2 in the morning. Why? Because the Nielsen Ratings confirms the number of viewers, validating ads' value and return on investment to the advertiser. So whether it's olive oil, diamonds or magazines, what you pay for is what you get. In my experience, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

So let's get back to the pile on my coffee table -- and in particular the newest East Bay publication, 86°. When I asked about its circulation I also was curious about its name. After all, to "86" something means to remove it, throw it out or put the kibosh on it.

My point exactly.

I'm going to put my Walnut Creek homeowner hat back on and ask why, with Diablo, Walnut Creek and Scene -- three solid lifestyle East Bay magazines -- anyone would want to start publishing another. I just don't get it. There aren't enough hours in the day to start with. As consumers, we are becoming more discerning, not less, about who and what we want to spend our time on. I read the Contra Costa Times cover to comic every morning, check Walnut Creek Patch throughout the day for up-to-the-minute news. In between that I have a life. When I curl up on the couch with a good book or magazine, it's got to be worth my time.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for the entrepreneurial spirit. But do me a favor. If you're thinking about publishing a local magazine, please don't. Open a cupcake shop instead.