

The Design of Real Simple: An Interview with Robert Newman

By Ron Reason

This is an interview conducted in October, 2002, by Ron Reason, creative director of Garcia Media. It was published on his website ronreason.com, one of the best online resources available for intelligence about publication design and creation.

Ron Reason: *Real Simple's* covers obviously kick off the magazine with an uncluttered, spare look, well-suited to its content and mission. Can you say a bit about how the magazine's design reflects this mission and the audience?

Robert Newman: *Real Simple* is a women's magazine serving a very unique audience. Readers of the magazine are equally divided in the 25-35, 35-45, and 45-55 age groups. This is very unusual for any magazine, most of which are focused at a particular demographic. In fact, it's more like the demographic of a newspaper, except that it's all women. We refer to it as a psychographic. Our audience tends to be college-educated and working, many with children, so it's a group of people who have very busy and multi-faceted lives. *Real Simple's* mission is to present information that gives our readers tools to simplify, de-stress, inspire, and help make their lives more satisfying. From the beginning, the design and imagery of the magazine has been an integral and essential part of that mission. The design not only delivers information smartly and easily, but also creates a visual, tactile experience that both accents and advances the editorial. Imagery needs to carry helpful information, and look beautiful. The typography and color is set up to accommodate multiple layers of charts, sidebars, factoids and lists, while at the same time setting a graceful, relaxed tone.

The bulk of *Real Simple's* newsstand sales come in supermarkets, drugstores, Wal-Marts, etc., with the magazine often being displayed right

at the checkout counters. The cover imagery, typography and color are designed to stand out in the middle of a bombardment of celebrity, screaming headlines, and dayglo colors that decorate the covers of other women's magazines. It's a quiet, intelligent oasis in a world of chaos and superficiality, at least on the magazine newsstand. At the same time, we try to deliver a level of service and do-able ideas on the cover. There's always something on there that a potential reader will look at and think she can do herself at home.

Reason: I'm struck at how the display of your contents page very much sets the tone for that spirit. The first page feels like well-organized cabinets, or desk drawers. Items on the second page feel like an uncluttered closet. What lesson does this kind of indexing have for other publications, including newspapers?

Newman: I've always felt that most indexes/contents pages serve as little more than tools for the editors who put out the publications. They're overstuffed, with too much data in too small spaces. One advantage magazines have over newspapers in this area is that advertisers love placing their ads opposite contents pages, because it gives them placement far in front. Some magazines have as many as four single contents pages, while others like *Time* and *New York* cram a full issue's worth of material into a single page.

At *Real Simple* we look at the design and architecture of the magazine holistically. The traditional approach, and one that newspapers certainly use, is to design each page or section individually, and let the information on that page or in that section drive the look, even if it ends up being detrimental to the overall package. To us, the contents/index pages are not just reference tools to find stories, but an important window into the magazine as a whole. The pages set an important early tone, they give the reader a sense of the magazine's interior design and mission over and above the information and data they deliver. They are also very accessible and easy to maneuver, which is good, because we strive to avoid feeling like any part of the magazine is "work" to read and look at. We also spend a lot of time selecting photographs for the page, making sure the content is balanced, the images are arresting, and that there's a diversity of color and style.

Reason: What, if anything, is different for you in directing the design of *Real Simple*, versus titles you have worked for in the past? Would you say your design philosophy has evolved over time, and if so, how?

Newman: I've designed a pretty diverse range of publications:

Entertainment Weekly, which was a riotous overload of color, images and digital wizardry; *New York*, which was very sophisticated and cool, with lots of artful black and white photos; *Details*, which was a crazy rock and roll hodge-podge of provocative type and imagery; *Vibe*, which featured stunning, sexy photography; and *Inside*, which was super-understated and densely packed with charts and graphics. *Real Simple* is a mix of the highly evolved information delivery and arrangement of *Entertainment Weekly*, and the understated, restrained design (and generous white space) that we did at *Inside*. Except that it's much prettier than either of those magazines.

I think my design philosophy has generally stayed the same over time:

- 1) The most important thing is to come up with a look that is both unique and perfectly suited to the mission of the magazine, and to deliver the content in the most readable, interesting and efficient way.
- 2) Stick to a controlled palette of typefaces, using as few families as possible. At *Real Simple* we basically use just two families of type, although there is a wide variety within those families.
- 3) Always think holistically in terms of design, architecture, pacing and imagery.
- 4) Images are the most important visual aspect of any publication. Always push to get the strongest possible photos and illustrations, and make sure that they are smart, memorable, unique, advance the story, and connect with the reader as much as possible.

I think the most important difference for me in designing at *Real Simple* is that we have to give the magazine a feel that will appeal to an audience that is almost 100% women. That's the challenge, and at the same time, we're trying to present a magazine that is perceived as more intelligent than the typical "women's service" publication. So the design has to be pretty, but still elevated and intelligent. And we spend much more time art directing the photographs than I have in the past. Most of the images in *Real Simple* are carefully thought out ahead of time, and we send art directors to all the shoots. It's a lot of work, but you end up with photographs that are filled with information, fit seamlessly into the overall look, and are beautiful at the same time.

Reason: Your color palette seems very restrained. Do you have a strict limit on the number and values of colors that can be used, and are your topics or departments color-coded? Is this all dictated in a style manual of some kind? Or do your designers have leeway to select accent colors for labels or headlines new each month, based on the color and content of photos, for example?

Newman: Color is an area that is still in development at *Real Simple*. I went in there with the idea that the color palette should be very rigid and structured, and color-coded by section and department. That's the general scheme that I've followed in the past. And with our recent retooling of the front of the book, which was directed by Time Inc. Editor at Large Michael Grossman, we instituted that kind of a color system. But then we found that the colors were too loud, and worked at cross purposes with the images. So we threw out that color system and implemented something a bit more free-form. We drew up a palette with a lot of options, and let the designers work with whatever colors in that palette that go best with the pictures they're working with. So they have some leeway, but they do need to stay within those colors. But there is a structured science to where color is used, and how, and there are standard colors for captions, sidebars, etc.

For the features, the designers tend to pick colors right off the photographs, and use those for display type, background tones, etc. We don't have a style book yet for all this, but we have a general feel for our overall palette that the designers stay within. If we see something that doesn't look right, someone will say, "that's not a *Real Simple* color." At some point I imagine we'll get more scientific and structured about the whole thing, but right now we think that the overall feel and flavor of the color and design is the most important thing, and we'll willing to bust out of formats and rules to make the mag look its best. However in general, I think this is not the best way to approach magazine design. It takes a skill level and a discipline (and the luxury of time) that is not always available.

Reason: *Real Simple* may use more white space than any other current title I can think of. Surely this reinforces the spirit of simplicity and organization that embodies the entire magazine. But do you think this has lessons for other magazines or newspapers who seem so reluctant to use white space (especially in the U.S.?) Is there a role for expanded use of white space in newsier publications (which often like to cram in as much information as possible)?

Newman: The white space is very important to *Real Simple* for exactly the reasons you stated. I've worked on plenty of designs where we crammed as much info and art as we could into every inch of the magazine (*Entertainment Weekly* is the best example of this). I'm of two minds about white space: editors tend to see it as wasted space, and forget the impact even a little bit can have. At the same time, designers oftentimes use it just to use it...just because you have a lot of white space on a page doesn't make the page better or more effective. Sometimes an extra six points between columns of type is a much stronger statement than a half page of white space. The point of white space is that it has to be used, there always has to be a point to adding it to the design. A good case in point is the recent redesign of *The Chicago Tribune*. The space between the columns of type was slightly reduced, and readers complained that the type had gotten smaller, that it was harder to read. In fact, the text face stayed exactly the same, but the readers were right that the pages were harder to read. Obviously the white space at *Real Simple* is a luxury that many people don't have. But it does create a feeling both of simplicity and gravitas at the same time, and that's something that a lot of other publications could use more of.

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