

# The basics of buzz

*Measuring the impact of “those cartoons”*

BY SCOTT BULLOCK

Some magazines have a knack for generating publicity. Who can forget the *Vanity Fair* cover featuring Demi Moore, pregnant and nude? Or the *Saturday Night* cover depicting Farley Mowat with a Photoshop-adjusted Pinocchio nose? Or the infamous masterpiece of publicity stunts—*Frank* magazine’s contest inviting readers to “deflower” Brian Mulroney’s daughter?

The *Western Standard* has attracted the publicity spotlight recently. Its first media coup was getting the Liberal policy book leaked to them in the middle of the last federal election. Veteran CBC journalist Don Newman admitted on air that he was impressed, noting that he wished he’d broken the story.

Then it published the controversial Mohammed cartoons after all other mainstream media in Canada took a pass. *Toronto Star* media critic Antonia Zerbisias concluded on her blog that, despite her employer’s policy, “the media should have run at least one of the cartoons.” Apparently her fellow journalists agreed. According to a *Compas* poll, only 30% of Canadian journalists supported their employers’ decision to self-censor.

Recently, *Frank* made *Western Standard* publisher Ezra Levant its whipping boy, featuring him wearing a Nazi uniform, despite the well-known fact that Levant is Jewish. Ezra took it in stride. “The picture in *Frank* magazine was slimming. And women love a man in uniform,” he told me.

I’ll leave it to media critics to determine what’s fair play and what’s offside regarding contentious content. What I’m principally interested in is: what’s the circulation value of free marketing? How do you quantify the buzz of publicity? How do you measure the impact of free coverage on TV, radio, blogs and in print?

We all know how much pressure advertisers exert when asking for “editorial” coverage. Clearly, ad agencies understand the value their clients’ products would gain with an editorial mention or two. Editors and publishers quite rightly resist, knowing that the value is not—or should not—be for sale.

When Air Canada de-listed the *Western Standard* from its lounge and inflight program, and Chapters/Indigo banned the controversial cartoon issue from its stores, industry pundits were quick to pounce. In fairness, some analysts denounced the censorship. Others pointed out that there was a price to pay for hubris and for

breaking rank with the more enlightened and restrained journalistic brethren. Fair enough.

However, the *Western Standard* was back onboard Air Canada flights just weeks later, in response to letters protesting its removal. The *Western Standard* is back in Chapters/Indigo stores, too. These developments were not considered blog-worthy.

Disticor, the *Western Standard*’s distributor,



reports that sales of the Feb. 27 issue jumped by 124% (even without the benefit of Chapters/Indigo stores). Imagine how many more copies might have sold if the cartoon story was actually the cover feature, instead of the invisible afterthought of a sell line in the lower right-hand corner—what circulators call the “ghetto” in cover real estate.

Rita Phillips, circulation manager, acknowledges that in the first few hours after it was announced that the magazine intended to publish the cartoons, and in the days that followed publication she received 35 subscription cancellations, with 51% coming from offended Albertans. However, the phones were also ringing with requests for new subscriptions, too. Total new subscriptions numbered 1,292 when things finally simmered down.

Interestingly, Ontario purchased the most new subs, 39% of the total, followed by Alberta (32%), British Columbia (16%), Saskatchewan

(4%), Manitoba (3%), Quebec (2%), the Maritimes (2%) and the U.S. and other countries (2%). Many of these subscriptions were for multiple years, resulting in a total new subscription revenue windfall of \$104,579. Had the *Western Standard* paid a typical direct-mail acquisition cost of say \$20 per order to generate 1,292 subscriptions, it would have cost them \$25,840. That’s a net windfall of \$130,419.

Plus, the magazine offers its readers an opportunity to become Sustaining Subscribers for an additional donation of \$100, or for a \$500 donation they can become members of the Publisher’s Circle. Donations generated an additional \$8,600 in revenue (13 Publisher’s Circle and 21 Sustainers).

Demonstrating their enthusiastic support for the magazine, 448 subscribers phoned in renewal extensions, generating \$44,977 in advance renewal income.

It also sold out its stash of office copies, with 300 copies sold in the first few days, as customers who couldn’t find the magazine at Chapters/Indigo called in to order a copy at the full price of \$4.95, generating another windfall of \$1,485 that didn’t have to be shared with distributors, wholesalers, retailers, or RDA collection agents.

Did the *Western Standard* demonstrate more courage than *Maclean’s* and *Time* (Canada)? Or was it really just a shameless and irresponsible publicity stunt designed to boost circulation revenue? Perhaps it was just blind luck.

One thing is for sure, the *Western Standard* is honouring what D.B. Scott calls the cardinal rule of publishing: “Don’t bore your readers.” In fact, it’s not boring its non-readers, either. Circulators know it’s a lot easier to sell a magazine that sells itself thanks to free buzz.

Since anyone who was curious about the cartoons could simply find them on the Internet long before the *Western Standard* covered the story, in hindsight the resulting media frenzy, and the bounty of circulation revenue that resulted from it, seems like manna from heaven.

The fact that there was so much media attention when the cartoons were such old news by the time they appeared in the *Western Standard*, demonstrates to me that the power of the magazine print medium remains something very potent indeed.

Positive circulation metrics aside, this is something magazine publishers should celebrate. ■



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