

# Hooked on controlled circ

*Isn't it time we kicked the habit?*

BY SCOTT BULLOCK

**A**s a 23-year circulation veteran, I was dismayed, yet not surprised, to read the findings of the recently published Masthead Salary Survey (November/December 2004).

*Masthead* reported that management types scored the largest salary increase, a juicy 21.7% upgrade. Circulators, on the other hand, registered the smallest wage hike; so small, and so anemic (less than 1% over a two-year period), that circulators' incomes actually regressed, indexed against inflation. Nice downgrade.

Why was I not surprised? It could be that I have a persecution complex based on too many years slogging away as a paid-circulation geek. Or it could be that I have been an astute observer of certain unfortunate trends.

With the exception of three recent high-profile, and very welcome paid-circulation launches in Canada (*The Walrus*, *Wish* and *Loulou*), the pages of *Masthead*'s Starts section are dominated by the announcements of primarily controlled-circulation magazines. Perhaps some ambitious Ryerson student that has more intestinal fortitude than I have will track this and report on it in the *Ryerson Review of Journalism*. Paid-circulation magazines are clearly the odd balls in Canada. What a pity...and clearly not good news for the salary prospects for circulation professionals in this country.

Canada is an immensely large and thinly populated country. It's easy to understand why publishers thirsting for instant audience and massive reach, and who have neither the patience nor the pocketbook to build a paid-circ base, might be tempted to reach for the crack cocaine of controlled circulation—*The Globe and Mail*.

But we all know that magazines compete with newspapers for precious reading time, circulation dollars, and advertising dollars. If Canadian publishers truly want to tell Canadian stories to Canadians and provide us with uniquely Canadian ideas and information, then certainly it follows that Canadians are prepared to pay for those stories and that information, and that advertisers will pay to reach those eyeballs, right? Perhaps all we really want to do is sell advertising, as quickly as possible, and if we get to tell a few Canadian stories in the process it's a happy bonus.

Have you noticed lately just how many magazines are arriving, free of charge, with your *Globe*

and *Mai!* *Toro*, *FQ*, *Dreamscapes*, *Driven*, *Avenue*, *Backbone*, not to mention *The Globe*'s own award-winning *Report on Business* magazine.

Don't get me wrong, these magazines are extremely excellent: with top-caliber editing, art direction, award-winning writers, fabulous cover and interior stock, generous trim sizes. I devour them eagerly. All of which makes it that much more infuriating. Why should I get these wonderful magazines for free? Or the corollary: if I can get these amazing magazines for free, why should I pay for *Toronto Life*, *The Walrus*, or *Canadian Business*?



I understand why advertisers want to reach the very educated and affluent audience that *The Globe* has cultivated at great expense over the years. The demographics are incredible. It's easy to see how tempting it must be for magazine publishers to inject the quick fix *The Globe* offers. But have you noticed that *The Globe* believes in charging its readers a rather handsome price for a subscription to receive well-written words and pictures with a uniquely Canadian perspective? Ken Thomson didn't get rich by giving away his newspaper, nor by paying his competitors for his product to take a piggyback ride.

A paranoid person might even suspect that *The Globe* has a hidden agenda: Why not facil-

itate magazine publishers who will devalue all paid-circulation magazines by giving them away? After all, Ken Thomson might well be thinking, if magazine publishers are hell-bent on avoiding the investments necessary to cultivate their own unique and loyal Canadian audiences, and if magazine publishers want to condition the marketplace to expect to get magazines for free, then why not help them weaken themselves and devalue the commodity, while simultaneously enriching myself by charging for the ride, and giving my own *paying readers* top-quality magazines that someone else is paying to produce and print, while raising the subscription and single-copy prices to my newspaper all at the same time? Brilliant.

Older readers of *Masthead* may remember the day when *The Globe* was taking a run at *Flare*, *Fashion*, and *Toronto Life*, when Mr. Thomson published *Domino* and *Toronto* magazines. After no doubt incurring hideous expenses, he shut them down.

But not to worry, he now has a fabulous fashion magazine, *FQ*; and a fabulous city magazine, *Avenue*, reaching his readers as a bonus, that other people pay to produce and print, and pay him to distribute. Plus, when their contracts expire, if he feels like it, and maybe just to have some fun now that he has the magazine publishers addicted to his circulation, he can cut them off and watch them squirm, or at the very least jack up the price of crack.

I fear *Masthead* will continue to report in every issue on magazine publishers who will find new and ingenious ways to give away their magazines. I have no doubt that the creativity and determination to give away top quality magazines, and thereby devalue all magazines in the process, will continue to be limitlessly astounding.

Thus, it will come as no surprise when *Masthead* reports, two years from now, that circulation professionals continue to mop up the rear in the Salary Survey parade. Unless—and there exists a flicker of hope in this jaded heart—the fine examples being set by *The Walrus*, *Wish*, and *Loulou* yield abundant fruit and point the way to the day when circulation professionals can command a 21.7% salary increase, too.

*Scott Bullock is now a paid subscriber to Masthead. Reach him at scottbullock@sympatico.ca*