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BUSINESS | MEDIA & MARKETING

How Garden & Gun Magazine Defies Industry Slump

Southern-focused niche publication wins readers and ad dollars, even as spending shifts to digital outlets



Garden & Gun employs 14 editorial staffers and largely depends on freelancers to produce six issues a year.

PHOTO: GARDEN & GUN

By **JEFFREY A. TRACHTENBERG**

Feb. 1, 2016 5:30 a.m. ET

When Charleston, S.C., attorney J. E.

magazine in February 2010, he knew the magazine had already lost nearly \$10



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million in less than three years.

“My wife said print magazines were on the way out,” he recalls.

But Mr. Bell looked beyond the red ink. “The advertising trends were good,” he said. “I felt that if it could hang on, the magazine would break even, and we’d be on our way.”

These are rocky times for many magazine publishers as advertisers shift their spending to digital outlets and readers devote ever increasing amounts of time to social media services such as Facebook and Snapchat. Such pressures can be even greater for stand-alone publications such as Garden & Gun, yet the glossy pages of aspirational Southern fare have lured affluent readers and helped the title buck industry trends. Subscriptions and advertising sales are up, and the Charleston-based magazine now has “real, distributable profit,” according to Mr. Bell.

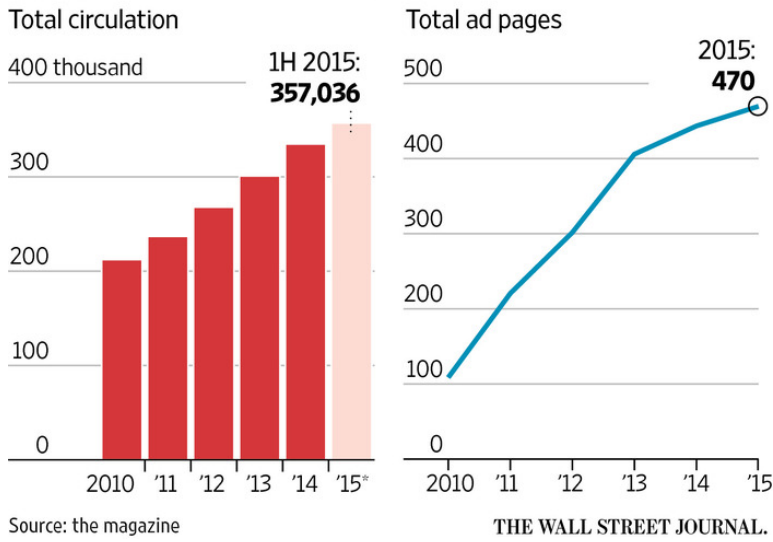
“The economics of single-title publishers have been dicey for a long while,” says Peter Kreisky, a media industry consultant. “One of the paths forward is to be niche, with intense reader engagement and a modest cost structure.”

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Garden & Gun fits the bill, employing 14 editorial staffers and largely depending on freelancers to produce six issues a year. It is owned by the Allee Group LLC, a closely held company whose three major investors include Mr. Bell; Rebecca Wesson Darwin, its chief executive; and Pierre Manigault, chairman of Evening Post Industries Inc., a family-owned media company primarily focused on broadcast television and newspapers.

Since it made its debut in April 2007, the publication has hewed to its own course, focusing on everything Southern from ham biscuits to bird-dog trainers. Its tone is chatty, never preachy. While it has tackled difficult subjects—including coverage last year of the shootings at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston—it remains tightly focused on food, drink, the land, travel, and the sporting life, including bird hunting and shotguns. Roughly

Garden & Gun, Getting It Done



72% of subscribers live in the Southeast or Southwest.

“It’s the essence of what I remember growing up with for 30 years in the South,” said Wallace Gibson, 70 years old, a Virginia resident and longtime subscriber. “We love our gardens, love our dogs, and love all the eccentric people in our lives.”

Garden & Gun has the lush feel of an upscale magazine and the affluent readership to match. Subscribers have an average household income of \$332,000, compared with \$66,000 for Time Inc.’s Southern Living and \$294,000 for Hearst Corp.’s Town & Country.

Despite guaranteed circulation of 350,000 that is far outstripped by 50-year-old Southern Living’s 2.8 million, Garden & Gun is luring more advertisers and readers to print at a time when many are moving online. Single-copy sales of Garden & Gun rose 17% for the six months ended in June, while paid and verified subscriptions were up 10%, according to the Alliance for Audited Media.

Garden & Gun sold 470 print ad pages in 2015, up 6% from a year earlier, compared with a 1.3% increase at Southern Living to 890 pages. Meanwhile, marketers spent \$17.4 billion on print advertising in consumer magazines in 2015, down 4.5% compared to the prior year, according to research firm Kantar Media.

“Our audiences are very different,” said Sid Evans, the former editor-in-chief of Garden & Gun who now edits Southern Living. He noted that more than 90% of Southern Living’s subscribers are female. Women account for about 47% of Garden & Gun’s subscribers.

The question is how to maintain Garden & Gun’s momentum. The magazine’s

readers have a median age of 54 and the niche publication has only a modest digital presence. It attracted 136,000 unique visitors in December, according to measurement tracking firm comScore Inc., up from 116,000 in August.

David DiBenedetto, Garden & Gun's editor, said other analytics showed the magazine has increased its online readership steadily since 2013. "Our numbers aren't huge, but it mirrors our circulation in that we aren't a mass magazine," he said.

But Garden & Gun isn't immune to increased competition for marketing dollars. Like many bigger magazine rivals trying to generate nonadvertising revenue, it operates an online store, a website for expensive real-estate listings and an event business. "It's a challenge," said Ms. Darwin.

With print readership and ad sales on the rise, Garden & Gun is committed to staying independent, she said.

At a time when gun control has become a heated topic of debate in the country, Garden & Gun has never shied away from its love of field sports such as bird hunting. The December/January issue, titled "Best of the Sporting South," includes a look at gun dog trainers and a feature story about bird shooting in England.

The publication's name was "initially a hang up, but they've overcome that now," said Leslie Tucker, media director for the Richards Group Inc., an independent Dallas-based advertising agency. "They position themselves as a national lifestyle publication with a fanatical readership."

She uses Garden & Gun to promote clients such as the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C., and Sub-Zero Group Inc.'s high-end Sub-Zero and Wolf appliances.

The title is what immediately appealed to Eric Hunter, an actual hunter, longtime subscriber and resident of Montgomery, Ala. "I thought it was a cool mix of life in the South," said Mr. Hunter, 55. "I enjoy all of it, and when I put it on the table, my wife picks it up and enjoys it as much as I do."

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