

# BBC History Magazine embracing the new

BBC History Magazine is achieving sustained growth across the brand. Editor Rob Attar talks to Mary Hogarth about leading the way in digital subscriptions and why regular podcasts are crucial.

While the lifestyle sector is struggling, some specialist titles are thriving including *BBC History Magazine*, which has just celebrated yet another rise in its digital and print sales. The latest ABCs marked the magazine's 21st consecutive rise, with a combined digital and print circulation of 97,550, at a time when other brands' sales figures are rapidly dropping. This is a title that knows its audience and how to make content come alive across the brand.

According to Rob, who has worked at the title now for fourteen years and edited it for nearly five, podcasting has been the driving force for print and digital growth. "Our overall growth since the podcast launch has been huge in terms of circulation," he reveals.

"When we launched the podcast ten years ago, we were on about 60,000 ABC and now we are not far off 100,000. It's been a massive driver of brand awareness throughout the world because the podcast has been very popular, taking us out there to people who may not even have bought magazines before. It's a new way of reaching people, a free taster that can be downloaded."

## Not just a PDF

The podcast strategy has worked well across the brand. Digital copy sales are currently 16,469 (taken from February's ABC figures), making it the fourth largest UK digital edition. No doubt this is partly due to the reach strategy, but recognition also must go to the product. This is a team which understands that a digital edition should not just be a reformatted PDF with some interactive links.

Now I'm not a massive fan of digital editions, but looking through the March issue on my iPad, the magazine is

★ Rob Attar

as pleasurable to read on screen as it is in print. Every page loads seamlessly immediately adapting to the tablet size so there is no zooming in or out as with some brands, plus there are buttons for additional content together with an audio option.

This, Rob tells me, is because they have completely redesigned the iPad edition for that purpose, which he thinks sets the digital version apart from many other titles.

"It's not just a PDF replica. The app is designed to make the viewing experience as good as possible. People think history readers are old-fashioned, but they are quite modern in terms of their viewing and content habits, so that's driving our digital strategy."

Like me, Rob is a big fan of print but acknowledges it is struggling, despite healthy growth at *BBC History*. "All I ever hear is that print is dead and that magazines are dead. But

I think we are lucky because the type of magazine we are producing has been more resilient. Specialist interest is about readers' passions, so it's something they don't want to give up. We have been very lucky in that regard. Our readers are loyal and very dedicated; we haven't got that many casual readers who pick up the odd copy."

## A can-do attitude

Being able to grow the brand well in other areas has clearly fed back into print and strengthened it, but such sustainable growth should be credited to the can-do attitude of a team which strives for innovation.

His team has, Rob says, worked hard at improving every aspect of the magazine. Building a network of good writers has also been key. "Print is struggling so you need to stand out. The design of the magazine now is so much better than when I first started. We spent a lot of effort trying to make it look modern and fresh and elegant moving away from the old-fashioned style of some hobby / specialist magazines."

"There was a time – when people were hurtling towards digital – that print became a bit of an afterthought; they kind of forget that for most companies, it's their bread and butter. TV didn't kill the radio. Just because you have something new doesn't mean you have to jettison the old thing."

For Rob, it is about producing a premium print product, using good quality paper and simple things like making sure the magazine looks attractive. "It's quite hard to replicate the physical beauty of a nice magazine on an iPad or a Kindle. Marketing well is crucial as it's hard



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to reach readers in traditional ways."

What is important, he says, is to be more creative in the way you get your brand out there and try to work out the kind of people who still want the print magazine. Like many publications, brand extensions have played a big part in sustaining the title. BBC Magazines hosts various events throughout the year including history weekends. It also sells merchandise.

However, Rob is quick to point out that those extensions are more about brand growth rather than additional revenue streams. Their aim is to build relationships with experts to further strengthen the title. Events are also fantastic at engaging their most dedicated readers, while providing an opportunity for them to meet the editorial team.

"It makes our core readers feel part of the brand because we get to meet them plus it is also a different way of getting feedback about what we are doing."

But have these contributed to its growth in circulation? Rob doesn't think so as the number of people who attend these events isn't comparable to their podcasts which can generate audiences of up to 100,000 listeners. "If we do an event, we might only have 1,000 come to it over a weekend so the scale is bit different."

Talking to Rob and looking at the ongoing success of the title, events appear to be a key part of the brand ethos – and that the whole package is a major factor in *BBC History*'s growth. This is a team where innovation and a passion are core values and not just for the subject. There is also a burning ambition to make history come alive for their readers. And that's what has grown this specialist title.

### Strong editorial values

Having edited the title for nearly five years, stagnation could have set in, but it hasn't. Rob is as passionate about the magazine as the day he joined the team in 2004, shortly after graduating from Cardiff with a postgrad Diploma in Magazine Journalism.

Complacent he is not. Neither is his team. "We are lucky because there is so much of history," he says adding that they are very much in touch with the history community which is constantly feeding in new ideas.

Editorially, the magazine has remained solid despite being sold, along with other BBC titles, to Immediate Media in 2011. The acquisition didn't change anything. "We still

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### Career lessons

When asked about the most important lessons of his career, Rob cites three.

#### 1 Be alive to and embrace new opportunities

*"I think I'm naturally a cautious person, but one thing I've learned is the value of spotting new opportunities and using them to our advantage. So many of the successes we've had have come about because one of the team has spotted a new technology or market and thought about how it could be made to work for us."*

*"Even though not everything has come off, overall this attitude has put us in a much stronger position than more conservative titles."*

#### 2 Take a positive attitude

*"This probably isn't my default state, but I've seen the difference that attitude can make to a team's morale and performance."*

*"While it's important to be realistic, and no-one appreciates blind euphoria at a time of crisis, having the attitude that problems can be solved and that setbacks are only temporary, I think, are crucial factors to ensure a team functions well."*

#### 3 Choose the right people

*"The more recruitment I've done, the more I've seen how vital it is that team members are selected for their personality just as much as their ability. Quite often, we've been presented with several equally talented people at the interview stage and it's generally been the personality of the candidate that has got them the job."*

*"I've seen numerous examples of how brilliant, but difficult people can cause all manner of problems. Whereas we've been lucky to have a team that's generally been friendly, supportive and harmonious – even when we've run out of biscuits..."*

have just as much editorial oversight as we used to have and are connected to BBC TV and radio upholding their editorial guidelines. From our readers' point of view, it shouldn't make any difference, but commercially it means we are not owned by the BBC anymore."

Where does he see *BBC History* five years from now? Not a straightforward question, because as he points out, this is a team always open to new possibilities, embracing new opportunities that come along. "We are more agile than we were," Rob explains, noting that five years ago, they weren't doing specials, or World History and barely had any additional editions.

"In five years, I think we will have definitely grown our global digital brand – and hopefully our print will still be pretty solid."

Rob cites their publisher and former editor, Dave Musgrave, as a key source of inspiration, revealing they have a folder on the server called 'Dave's crazy ideas' where he comes up with some big new plan for the brand. He admits that although the crazy ideas don't always work, some are incredibly successful. "The team has a can-do attitude so we always think 'let's try it' rather than thinking 'oh this isn't going to work' or 'it's too much like hard work.' That way we will always try something or at least give it a go. We are bringing history to life and making it accessible for the public."

My verdict? This is a title to watch. There are many lessons that can be learned from the brand's ethos. But, for me, those key lessons revolve around teamwork. Traits such as the ability to embrace change and give zany ideas a shot are always going to result in growth. ■

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### About Mary Hogarth

Mary Hogarth has nearly 20 years' experience of magazine publishing. An educator, media specialist and writer, Mary led the Features Journalism programme group at Southampton Solent University and now lectures at Bournemouth University. She recently published *How To Launch A Magazine In This Digital Age* and has a consultancy practice (themagazineexpert Ltd) specialising in new title launches, editorial development, business strategies as well as audience engagement.

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