

Creating a magazine: satisfying the organisation and the reader

Cathy Perkins



About the author

Cathy Perkins is the editor of *SL* magazine at the State Library of NSW, where she also edits exhibitions and other publications. Before joining the Library in 2006 she worked as an editor for trade and legal publishers and as communications officer for the Australian Society of Authors.

Introduction

When the State Library of NSW was ‘rebranded’ four years ago, part of the brief was to rethink the role and scope of our magazine. As the editor of the Library’s *SL* magazine, I liked the idea of making the publication more satisfying for readers while continuing to promote the Library. We came up with a format that allowed us to broaden the range of contributors and expand the content to reward close attention. This is a personal account of editing a cultural institution’s magazine, and how writing, design and photography can complement each other to satisfy the organisation and the reader.

Passion to publish

When I started work as a publications officer at the State Library of NSW in 2006, I had little sense of the Library beyond its collection of books, newspapers and magazines.

I had no idea that among the Library’s collection of five million items—valued at \$2.142 billion—were nine of the 11 surviving First Fleet journals, one million photographs including the oldest known Australian daguerreotype, and the spear fragments removed from George Morrison’s nose on his 1883 expedition to New Guinea. In boxes several floors below street level are a lock of Mary Shelley’s hair and Henry Lawson’s death mask, as well as junk mail, fruit stickers and fashion swing tags. And everything with a story behind it: early 20th century ephemera found by a staff member in a skip bin; drawings saved from a bonfire after an architect’s funeral.

Among the many kilometres of manuscripts in the Library’s collection, I have come across papers that represent, for me, the continuing cycle of anguish and satisfaction experienced by people working in the publishing industry.

One example is a mock-up of Sydney Ure Smith’s magazine *Art and Australia*, launched in 1916. Ure Smith saw the value to posterity of this small bunch of scrawled pages, so he sent the mock-up to collector and State Library benefactor Sir William Dixson. In an accompanying letter he confides that ever since he was a child he had ‘desired to run a successful, well produced publication’. Ure Smith’s magazines *Art and Australia* and *The Home* are regarded as having raised the bar in Australia for quality of writing, photography and design.



Ure Smith's letter made me reflect on my own passion to publish—the challenge and satisfaction of being involved in all aspects of a publication. In 2009 I had the opportunity to go back to the raw basics of the mock-up and work with writers, designers, photographers and printers to create a new format for the State Library's magazine.

Evolution of a magazine

The Library's magazine had already gone through several incarnations since its launch as *Upfront* in April 1989.

The current publication has its origins as a newsletter, providing information about services offered at the Library, highlighting the generosity of donors and the work of volunteers. One or two longer feature articles would promote an exhibition or a new acquisition, but most of the 16 pages were filled with news.

Over the years *Upfront* underwent tweaks to the masthead, and the quality of paper stock and images improved. One of the final issues in March 2005 featured Nick Cave on the cover after he had appeared in conversation in the Mitchell Library Reading Room. In those days the Library was giving its magazine away in the foyer and the Nick Cave issue went quickly into the arms of fans.

I joined the Library soon after the magazine had been reborn as *atmitchell*. The new name tied in with a fundraising program based around digitising and interpreting the collection. The covers tended to feature collection images rather than people and the 20 pages had a slick format, with most articles featuring a Web link to direct people to online exhibitions.

A redesign in 2007 saw the magazine renamed *SL* and the content expanded, but in 2009 the Library embarked on a complete rebranding exercise that would change the look as well as the content of the magazine.



Rebranding the Library

The Library engaged the design company Frost to create a new brand for the organisation.

Their first step was to conduct market research to 'measure the current performance of the State Library brand and determine whether a repositioning strategy is required'. This involved one-on-one interviews with staff and stakeholders, focus groups with Library users and non-users, and internet and telephone surveys.

It was determined that 'a new brand position is required to enable the Library to increase market share'. The research showed that few people could recall the Library's logo, and that the Library had the potential to attract more 'cultural engagers' who visited other cultural institutions but were intimidated by the Library.

The research tested perceptions of the Library according to a list of positive and negative attributes against two other Sydney cultural institutions, an art gallery and a museum. The Library had low scores compared with the gallery and museum on attributes such as 'adventurous, exciting and innovative' but had high scores on 'wise, serious and trustworthy'. Interestingly, an analysis that separated the perceptions of users and non-users showed that people familiar with the Library found it just as 'engaging, stimulating and surprising' as the other institutions.

Higher visibility and a less intimidating brand would reposition the Library so that it was seen as a place of leisure and culture as well as information and access.



Frost came up with brand attributes that built on positive perceptions of both users and non-users. These are ‘friendly’, ‘modern’, ‘wise’ and ‘engaging’. The ‘brand essence’ came from focus group members’ most positive responses to the Library: ‘surprising’ was summed up with the statement ‘I was amazed and excited by what I found’. From this comes the ‘brand personality’. If the Library were a person, that person would be:

- able to craft information into an enjoyable journey
- able to create a sense of anticipation and intrigue
- knowledgeable
- creative
- insightful
- intriguing
- a conversationalist
- a commentator
- skilful
- witty
- continuing an Australian tradition, from Lawson to Grenville.

The centrepiece of the Frost branding for the State Library was the Interrobang—a punctuation symbol developed by advertising copywriters in the 1960s combining a question mark and an exclamation mark to express seeking and finding information, as well as curiosity and surprise.

Frost developed a branding manual setting out fonts, colours and use of the logo, and came up with templates for the annual report and *SL* magazine that would be interpreted by in-house designers. These templates emphasised the use of photography to make objects such as rare books and letters look beautiful and intriguing.

The magazine was identified as having strong potential to communicate the new brand to the target audience of ‘cultural engagers’. It could become more like ‘a real magazine’ with feature articles, styled photography, news and reviews.

Having always (like Ure Smith) ‘desired to run a successful, well produced publication’, I worked with one of our in-house designers to adapt the Frost branding to appeal to, and challenge, our existing audience and attract a new one. The new serif font, Chronicle, made the text easier to read but had to be larger for an older readership. Fine diagonal lines were an effective branding device, but we decided not to let them cut into images. We developed a format that went beyond a newsletter, if not quite all the way to a ‘real magazine’, to allow dramatic use of photography and longer articles featuring original research.

At this time it was decided that the magazine would become an exclusive benefit of Friends membership, and would no longer be given away in the foyer. This brought down the print run but enabled us to increase the number of pages to include more in depth articles.

Planning the content

SL magazine has the dual role of promoting the Library and providing a benefit of membership that is satisfying to the reader. Its planning committee includes the Executive Director of the State Library Foundation, Mitchell Librarian and Director of Marketing & Business Development. The magazine must acknowledge donors and other supporters, represent the range of the Library’s collection and services, and promote the Library’s vision to be a premier cultural destination.



Over half of the 44 pages of the magazine are taken up with regular features, with a consistent layout. These include:

- the Chief Executive’s message—ideally written by the CE
- a bold photograph on an opening double-page spread—a design feature that will occasionally need to be set aside for breaking news
- News—most news items end with an invitation to action on the part of the reader—such as an event or website to visit. For example, rather than a report on the Family History Weeks sessions run at the Library, the news should be something of general interest to family historians that mentions upcoming Family History Week events. Some news items are taken from press releases and others are generated through the committee and go on to be featured on the website or in social media.
- On this Day—marks anniversaries of major and minor events using images that have already been digitised for other purposes and are out of copyright. For feature articles I will clear copyright if possible.
- New Acquisitions—staff members describe two new purchases or donations in the context of the Library’s collection.
- the Foundation section—separates the promotional articles from the main features. The primary imperative of this content is often to acknowledge a donor and encourage others to support the Library.
- highlights from recent events—kept to a double-page spread. As much as possible I try to include images that make the Library look inviting to everyone rather than simply note the presence of VIPs.
- the Q&A on the inside back page—works best if it features someone who has an unexpected connection to the Library. This might be, for instance, a fashion designer who draws inspiration from the collection, an artist whose works have been added to the collection, or an astronomer who has given a talk at the Library. Most of our Q&As are drawn from the literary world and I interview the subjects either in person, over the phone or by email.

The main feature articles—four or five in each issue—are about 1200 words. They capture a researcher’s process of questioning and surprise and draw on their skills as a raconteur. They complement Library-generated articles on exhibitions and new acquisitions. Often these articles are commissioned up to six months in advance to give the author time to tailor their work to our publication. With the length of the magazine capped at 44 pages, I have to reject or delay suggested articles (or run 100 word news items in their place) in order to preserve space for well-written feature articles that don’t directly promote the Library. I’m also reluctant to give an issue a theme, which would cause good material to bank up and topical articles to become dated.

Feature article suggestions are brought before the *SL* magazine committee to confirm that there is support for the idea. All sorts of writers are suggested at the meetings, but I have had the best success with authors who are at the beginning of their careers or are very well established, those who have recently published a book or have given talks at the Library.



Recent features include:

- ANU historian Martin Thomas on discovering 150 entries in the card catalogue referring to amateur anthropologist RH Mathews, who became the subject of Thomas's biography (*SL Summer 2011–12*, pp. 28–31).



A LIVING COLLECTION

Biographer Martin Thomas tells how his quest for RH Mathews, an anthropologist of the Federation era, began in the Mitchell Library.

With its laddered shelving reaching skywards, and light streaming through translucent panels, the reading room of the Mitchell Library is for me a beloved space. In the story of how I came to write the life of Robert Hamilton Mathews, it has special significance.

In the 1990s, when I was doing research on the Gundungurra people of the Blue Mountains, I quickly realised that Mathews was one of the very few investigators who took the trouble to personally interview Gundungurra people. I later discovered that he made similar first-hand enquiries in Victoria, Queensland and in many parts of NSW. What inspired him to do this?

At first I knew only that he was a semi-retired surveyor, residing in Paramatta. So I looked up his name in the Mitchell's old card catalogue, and was intrigued to discover that 'Mathews, R. H.' had more than 150 entries. Those waxy, yellowing cards, inscribed in the library's cursive or secret type, acquired more meaning in succeeding years as I began to investigate the publications they referred to, and to see others. That initial search for RH Mathews presented the extraordinary reality that this self-taught and little-known scholar produced an output of more than 2200 published papers on the life, language and culture of Aboriginal Australians. Mathews published in learned journals around the world. Most of his work was in English, but much was translated into French and German. Size is not everything, but Mathews' output was by any terms substantial. Few professors would be submitted to such achievement. For Mathews produced it without the support of government or the academics. Financially, his project brought no rewards. His achievement is all the more remarkable when you consider that he did not begin to publish until 1895 when he was already 52 years old.

*** WORDS Martin Thomas**

- Former NSW State MP and biographer Andrew Tink on the connection between British home secretary Lord Sydney, his great-uncle Algernon Sidney (who was beheaded for treason in 1683), and the American Declaration of Independence (*SL Summer 2012–13*, pp. 14–17).
- State Library Fellow Alecia Simmonds on her interest in early 20th century deodorant advertisements and the way smell is used to express anxiety over the entry of less privileged groups (such as women or migrants) into public space (*SL Summer 2012–13*, pp. 18–21).



FEATURE

Why is it that some groups in society are told they smell bad at particular times in history? A look at advertisements in early twentieth century periodicals in the Mitchell Library suggests broader anxieties are at play.

On 4 August 1908 Dominica, the beauty and health adviser for *New Idea*, answered an unusual query. An anonymous woman with peculiarly humid underarms was concerned about 'unsavoury perspiration'. 'BP', that most equivocal of terms, had not yet been invented, and complaints like this were rare. With characteristic skill and sagacity, Dominica advised her that it would be 'dangerous' to interfere with her perspiration.

The solution? Immerse yourself three times a week in a bath infused with pine cones. Dominica was echoing her rival beauty adviser Gipps, who had told readers of *Pure and Country* magazine that 'all outward applications are of no use and not to be trusted'. Tossing a few pine cones or rose petals in a fit weekly bath, however, could make you as fresh and fragrant as a daisy!

Who would have thought that the delicate nostrils of present-day Australians would have such rough and ready forebears? Our standard reports of summertime horror stories detailing the frightful mingling of public transport and pungent odours would have been unheard of at the turn of the century. Indeed the olfactory police have been out in force this year, beginning with metropolitan ministers advising migrants on the use of deodorant, through to the anti-tobacco lobby campaigning for the eradication of smelly smoke from all public places.

But smokers and migrants weren't the first to offend the collective social nasal passage. Tracing the history of smell through the lens of women's periodicals and magazines tells a much larger story about the regulation of public space, the birth of consumer culture and anxieties about women's new roles and freedoms in the modern era.

By the 1920s and 30s the lex advice of Gipps and Dominica had given way to shrill warnings on advertisements for deodorant products aimed exclusively at women. "The Talk", exclaimed a 1929

*** WORDS Alecia Simmonds**

- Historian and musician Toby Martin on his 'heady thrill' at finding a run of the rare country music journal *Spurs*, which exemplified the youthful exuberance and journey to maturity of mid-20th century country music (*SL Autumn 2012*, pp. 24–27).

A feature article related to the major exhibition showing at the Library has the most impact if a personal angle can be found. For *Patrick White: A Life*, an exhibition from the National Library, I approached writer Debra Adelaide, who had written a piece for *The Monthly* about her time spent in Patrick White's house after his death compiling a bibliography of the books he had bequeathed to the Mitchell Library. In a 1000 word article, Debra was able to create a sense of place — both in Patrick White's house and in his books — a sense of the writer ('White's contempt for poetry was legendary'), and to make you want to read his work.

Surprising photography

Just as the Frost brand is a mandate to commission 'surprising' articles, it also justifies taking time to produce strong images.

I work with our in-house photographers to produce a mixture of three-dimensional and 'flat copy' shots. If the designer is available to art direct, I will seek their input. The best photographs are set up with a sense of the page layout in mind. With intimate knowledge of the text, an editor is often in a good position to direct the layout. Where we have taken great photographs, they have been sent to the media, and used in publications, mobile phone applications and social media.

The future

Increasing the size of the *SL* magazine and the scope of its content—inviting external contributors and commissioning special photography—has raised expectations and increased the workload for everyone involved in producing the magazine. The strict timeframe and the fact that we are all working on other projects mean we sometimes have to cut corners—using existing photography or text produced for another purpose.

However, it lifts our motivation when the care we take in ensuring the high quality of the magazine gains recognition for the Library. The new format has won two Museums Australia awards for best magazine or newsletter. In 2010 the judges commented that 'the design has "morphed" the Library into a more contemporary organisation, progressive but sophisticated through use of new logo, images and playful typography'. In 2011 they commended the magazine for 'very good content management of collection material with interesting design layout'.

Friends of the Library have also responded positively to the magazine, with comments such as: 'I congratulate you on the outstanding periodical that *SL* magazine has become. It not only demands to be read but now, it seems to me, to be kept also.' And the Library Executive has requested that copies go to the Minister, Premier and other stakeholders. The magazine promotes the organisation not just directly, by spruiking its wares, but by showing the kinds of research and creativity that the Library can inspire.

We explored the potential to expand the reach of the magazine when we produced an iPad app with *Inside History* magazine that used our content and their design. As the Library's goal of 'digital excellence' brings the focus to the online environment, we will need to re-examine the format of the magazine and look at opportunities to use its content beyond its pages. *SL* magazine will continue to play a key role in promoting and rewarding a close connection with the Library.

