"Seventeen: A Unique Case Study," 1945 April 15, Estelle Ellis Collection

Extracted on Apr-14-2020 12:44:19

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SEVENTEEN: A UNIQUE CASE STUDY

In eight months the teen-age magazine’s phenomenal growth has earned it an important spot in the ranks of publishing successes. (SEE COVER)

Seventeen, the sprightly service magazine for high school girls, likes to call itself "the biggest sellout since "Oklahoma." Actually, it is more than that. It is the "Oklahoma!" of the magazine publishing business. Like Life, it is the sort of dazzling success which attracts new money and new ideas to magazines, makes prospective backers overlook the many disasters and convinces the skeptics that publishing still has a frontier and a future.

Few publishers realized last September, however, that another magazine phenomenon was in the making. For its vital statistics were not impressive. Its name was Seventeen, which many considered the first mistake. Described as a highly-gearred, 15c slick monthly, it grew out of a defunct movie magazine. It belonged to Triangle Publications, Inc., an outfit with a reputation more for velocity than stability, and one which has scratched magazines and race horses with the same apparent unconcern. And its reader market, the teen-age girl, was regarded by many advertisers as a dubious, if personable, purchasing agent.

Nevertheless, in eight months Seventeen has left many of its growing pains far behind. This is its record to date: its circulation this month soared to 694,000; its fifth issue, January, carried a greater advertising linage than any of the women’s service magazines; it has lost $500,000 so far, or just about half what dynamic, 37-year-old publisher Walter H. Annenberg was prepared to gamble.* (See chart, p. 20.)

Next month, it will sprout some innovations. Its new page rate, up 60% from $750 to $1,200, goes into effect in May, will finally bring the space rates more into line with the circulation growth. (Since the new rate is based on a 400,000 circulation, there may be another rate increase soon.) And it will have the results of some exhaustive research, collected by the firm of Benson & Benson (Princeton, N. J.), which quizzed 1,000 readers and their mothers on buying and reading habits.

The curtain went up on Seventeen last spring, when Annenberg decided to revamp Stardom, a "none too successful," two-year-old movie magazine. As a starter, he added some "young fashions." Then, at the suggestion of Dr. Mehmed Fahmy Agha, who had been engaged as art director at the recommendation of agencyman Leo McGivva, Triangle decided to transform Stardom into a strictly fashion book, snare some of the overflow advertising from such magazines as Mademoiselle, Glamour and Charm.

Enter Mrs. Valentine

Next, Annenberg hired Helen Valentine away from her job as promotion manager of Mademoiselle, Glamour and Charm.

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manager of Mademoiselle, to edit the new magazine. For getting the Seventeen idea across, Annenberg and his general manager, Kenneth M. Friede, give all the credit to Mrs. Valentine who, though 51 and a grandmother, is as vivacious as the typical Seventeen reader. Mrs. Valentine agreed to take over on one condition: that the publication be edited as a service magazine to meet the needs of teen-age girls. Before going to Street & Smith to work on Mademoiselle, she had spent six years at Conde-Nast, doing promotion on Vogue and editing the Vogue Pattern Book. There she concluded that despite the healthy circulations of Calling All Girls (556,330) and the American Girl (202,752), the field still had great opportunities. The initial research on the project consisted mostly of working with government statistics; from there Triangle decided to gear Seventeen to the 6,000,000 girls between 13 and 18. The idea proved a natural from the start: even before they saw a dummy, 164 advertisers and their 85 agencies had bought up all the available space in the first two issues.

Newsstand Sellout

The first issue's print order of about 400,000 sold out on newsstands in a week. After two months, Triangle killed a school distribution plan, handled through Curtis and Crowell-Collier, because of the lack of copies. Principally a newsstand seller, Seventeen nevertheless now has on hand some 240,000 subscriptions. Finally, last Jan-

"To people outside advertising or publishing, a $500,000 loss in the first eight months might seem something to groan, rather than to sing, about. Such initial losses are more common than uncommon with big publishing ventures, however, and the fact is, on a relatively small capital investment and in less than a year, Triangle has built a property worth several times what it has plunged into it.

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seventeen

...The first eight months [[image]]

of Circulation
[[image]]

Sept. 395,560 Oct. 483,580 Nov. 533,990 Dec. 574,880 Jan. 614,000 Feb. 639,000; March 690,000 April 694,000

of Advertising Linage*
*680 LINE PAGE

Sept. 29,969 Oct. 31,830 Nov. 34,594 Dec. 43,960 Jan. 46,297 Feb. 64,662 March 65,430 April 68,283

of Advertising Volume
[[image]]

Sept. $26,700 Oct. 30,000 Nov. 33,000 Dec. 47,000 Jan. 56,500 Feb. 83,800 March 84,400 April ---

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-urious, Annenberg, more than ever convinced of the magazine’s potential, pulled a publishing bombshell when he killed Click, Triangle’s monthly picture magazine with a million circulation, and diverted the paper to Seventeen.

Advertising-wise, the book has enjoyed the best of health. This month, advertising manager William A. Rosen imposed a ceiling of 100 pages of advertising a month, reported that his current waiting lists range from 50 to 120 pages an issue. Some of the advertising has produced remarkable results although the real test on that, as indeed on Seventeen’s final position in the publishing business will not come until after the war.

Teen-Age Copy

Advertising copy breaks down roughly into about 60% store and fashion copy and 40% national accounts—mostly cosmetics, jewelry, drugs, etc. Seventeen turns thumbs down on undesirable teen-age copy, encourages advertisers to gear their campaigns strictly to its youthful readers. An engaging booklet called, “Who is Teena, Judy Jeckyll or Formalda Hyde,” cracks down on advertisers who woo teen-agers with “a mumbo jumbo called jive.” Calling for copy on a par with the book’s editorial contents, it warns that the “overexposed photos and drawings some of our lingerie and hosiery advertisers put in Seventeen don’t make dollars and sense. For while we’d be the first to admit our girl Teena knows all about the birds and bees, we’ve been around her long enough to know she’s not the kind of girl you can win with ‘cheesecake.’"
Editorially, Seventeen lives up to Editor Valentine’s promise “never to talk down” to readers. A slick-looking, 168-page package, printed in rotogravure on 35 lb. stock, it measures 10 3/8” by 13 1/8”, features striking color, artwork and photography. In addition to gay and lively articles on fashions, beauty and boys, it carries some weightier reading. Recently, for example, it had pieces on Dumbarton Oaks and compulsory military training, which reportedly went over well.

Lavish Promotion

General Manager Friede ascribes a large share of Seventeen’s success to its lavish promotion campaign, as well as to the happy timing of its appearance and the lushness of the field. Triangle poured $250,000 into Seventeen's first year's promotion budget, which was considerably more generous treatment than it has ever dealt to its other publications. (The current list of Triangle magazines includes Screen Guide, Official Detective Stories, Gags, plus a newspaper division which features the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Morning Telegraph and a string of racing papers.)

In its first three months, Seventeen used $100,000 worth of paid space (via Al Paul Lefton, Manhattan) in newspapers, trade papers, high school papers and in spot radio. It considers a network radio show a real postwar must.

Tricky trade paper copy describes the fortune of Seventeen's mascot, Teena, typical teen-ager. Captions such as "Meet Teena, no one thought she could read" and "Teena is a copycat—what a break for you!" have recorded the magazine's progress and promise from month to month.

According to Friede, the principal reason for Seventeen's financial losses have been the fairly common ones connected with launching any new publication. Briefly he lists high production costs, the lag between advertising rates and circulation gains, and the low selling price. Printed by the Philadelphia Inquirer, the magazine's production problems may be solved ultimately by the $7,000,000 printing plant the Inquirer plans to build when the war is over.

Out of the Red by Christmas?

Quizzed on reports that the magazine would make money by the year's end, Annenberg said with considerable aplomb, “I knew that in order to do the job properly we would have to invest a great deal of money.” Also optimistic about the magazine's circulation potential, he believes that if paper available it could be selling 1,500,000 copies right now. And he happily hopes for a postwar circulation hovering about 2,000,000.

Annenberg, who inherited much of the enterprise and daring which characterized his father, Moe, and his uncle, Max, is equally unconcerned about the prospects of hot postwar competition. Contemplating it as an inevitable and somewhat stimulating phenomenon, he said the other day: "I suppose the wolves will be around after the war, and quite frankly if anyone is able to do a better job, they’re entitled to the business."
Annenberg was so confident of Seventeen's success that, before the second issue was out, he incorporated a history of the magazine's birth in the company's minutes; he admitted the other day that he had been offered over $2,000,000 by a prominent publisher, for Seventeen, early this year. But he promised emphatically that no sale was in the offing, pounded: "I'm going to stick in this field if I have to reduce the price to a nickel—and I don't fear anybody's competition!"
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