

An Open Letter to the Surf Magazine Editors of the World

Am I getting old and jaded or are surfing magazines getting worse?

Possibly both. But after 20-odd (extremely odd) years writing for surf magazines, I feel compelled to offer a little advice to some of my colleagues. It seems to me surf mags are suffering from a slow drift into the realm of advertorial, where they become merely an extension of the marketing campaigns of their major advertisers. I can't count the number of times dedicated, lifelong surfers have said to me, 'I don't read surf mags any more.' While surfer numbers have boomed, the magazines' circulations have remained static or declined, which seems to say they are missing the mark somewhere. I would suggest it is by becoming beholden to advertisers and thus losing credibility in the eyes of discerning surfers.

Back in the day, advertising managers used to tiptoe into the offices of editors with sweaty palms and pounding hearts to nervously pass on some request for editorial coverage from one of their clients. The outraged editor would swear and curse and bang their fists on the desk, banishing the ad man from the editorial offices and sending them scurrying back to their desk, suitably chastened. These days, it seems, the ad departments run the magazines, and the editorial teams have the almost incidental task of filling a few pages of content in between the advertisements. The balance of power has shifted and advertising managers now lay down the law and editorial staff meekly oblige. Little wonder then that surf magazine readers of the world are beginning to feel a little used and abused.

The tipping point came when magazines first went over 50% advertising. This was something I personally fought and campaigned against as an editor, lost the battle at one magazine and moved on, to another magazine where I was assured it would never happen. When it did, I moved on again, this time to the uncertain world of the freelance contributor, where I could operate one step removed from the exercise of office and surf industry politics. In some ways, this has spared me the worst excesses of industry influence and control over the surf media, but it has been with some sadness that I have watched the magazines' descent into meaninglessness.

There are exceptions. *The Surfer's Journal*, *The Surfer's Path* and *Surfing World* magazine in Australia are all making valiant, genuine efforts at an intelligent, independent surfing media, with sometimes varying degrees of success. Other magazines sometimes have moments of inspiration, but they are more often lost and buried beneath the tide of marketing material, ads and advertorial, celebrity gossip and trivia. Read what passes for 'news' on any surfing website and in most magazines these days and it is almost entirely industry press releases or marketing material, sometimes barely even re-written.

There are plenty of skilled practitioners in the surf media trying hard to produce worthwhile material but it often feels like a losing battle in the face of the unremitting tide of advertiser favours, contrived sponsor trips or celebrity pap.

My argument has always been that you best serve the advertiser by delivering them a large, passionate and committed audience, which you earn by producing the best magazine you possibly can, without fear or favour to any advertisers. Every time you do a favour for one advertiser you do a disservice to your reader and every other advertiser, by diluting your relationship with the reader and weakening your magazine's overall content. Once magazines go over 50% advertising the battle has essentially been lost. No matter what brilliance and artistic mastery you can conjure in your editorial pages, it stands little chance of prevailing above the avalanche of sales' pitches, when editorial makes up a minority of the magazine.

Why does any of this matter? They are only surfing magazines, after all. And they are businesses, designed to make a profit, not perform some noble or charitable community service, right?

Well, we are living in an information age, we are told. The dissemination and exchange of information is the currency of the new economy. It stands to reason that being able to trust that information is more important than ever. The great unwashed public are tiring of misinformation, I'd argue. Every day we are bombarded with a barrage of marketing material, advertising, PR spin and sophisticated manipulation of our every human urge. Who do we trust in this environment? Having a credible, independent surf media seems to me necessary to have any meaningful discussion of environmental issues, surfboard design, the ethical considerations of travel to often

remote and fragile third world destinations, the influence the surf industry wields and how responsibly or otherwise they wield that influence. I'd suggest it's these very concerns that have given rise to the curious, slightly eccentric journal you are currently holding in your hands.

The guiding principle of my urge to write and communicate through surfing magazines is a simple one – live, learn and pass it on. We are all trying to make our own way through an often muddled world. And the more we can share and pass on our experiences to others, honestly and openly, without taint or spin, the easier it might make other people's passages through life. That is largely the point of our existence, I reckon, to share the journey and support and encourage and inform each other along the way. When you can't trust the messenger, when you suspect you are forever being "sold" something along with your surfing information, how do you know what to believe?

In the perhaps naive hope of encouraging a more independent and thoughtful surfing media, therefore, I've come up with a few pointers for my colleagues at the helm of the world's surfing magazines.

1. Advertisers buy advertising space, that is all.

Resist efforts to sway or influence your editorial content. By all means, be polite and courteous to our friends in the surfing industry but be aware that they represent one single, narrow vested interest in the vast world of surfing. Young, impressionable editorial staff are often left at the mercy of older, more experienced and powerful industry players to fend for themselves. I remember well walking along Sunset Beach one day many years ago, minding my own business, when an industry bigwig leapt out of the bushes and summoned me into his company's palatial beachfront rental house, where I found myself seated around an enormous dining room table with a group of industry millionaires, all 10–15 years my senior, who wanted to impress upon me the importance of representing their views on surfing through the magazine I then edited. I was a bit stunned and overawed, certainly, but would like to think I gave a reasonable account of myself and did my best to articulate the principles of editorial independence outlined above. I'm not sure how convinced they were, but to their credit no great harm befell me and I continued to preside over a fairly anarchic editorial product without further intimidation or undue influence. I suspect the magazine editors of today might not be so lucky.

2. You are in the communications business. Communicate.

I have been writing for surfing magazines for 20 years yet sometimes even I struggle to get a response from magazine editors regarding stories or ideas I have submitted. If I can't get a straight answer, what must it be like for any young, aspiring surf writers out there? There could be a young surfing Hemingway or Steinbeck producing literary gems but he would be lucky to even get his material read, unless he happened to get himself on a Mentawai boat trip with at least half a dozen members of the ASP top 45. No wonder there are so few promising surf writers coming up through the ranks, and old hacks like myself can continue to peddle our wares and cobble together a livelihood. Actually, on second thoughts, editors of the world, continue to ignore all those promising young surf writers!

Ironically enough, the one editor I can always count on for a prompt, thoughtful and courteous response is probably the best credentialed and most experienced of the lot. Drew Kampion, at the *Surfers Path*, who has been editing and writing for various surfing magazines almost as long as I've been alive, is always reliable and encouraging in his correspondence and a few younger, less experienced and less competent magazine staff could learn a thing or two from him.

If you are one of those aspiring surf writers trying to get a foot in the door and can't seem to get your material read, don't despair. Few magazine editors are very reliable judges of what constitutes good or bad writing and if your carefully crafted masterpiece has been rejected it certainly doesn't mean it isn't good. Send it to the editor of this fine journal and I trust you will get a thoughtful and compassionate response.

3. People read left to right, top to bottom. Black text on a white background is easiest to read.

Beware the excesses of your ambitious and over-adventurous art directors. More great stories and photos have been destroyed by insensitive art direction than by any other means. I don't care how impressive your page layout might look in your portfolio or what kudos you might earn from your art school pals by running type backwards, sideways, or overlaid on photos so that it is

rendered unreadable. That is not your job. Your role is to present words and photos to best effect for the enjoyment and edification of your readers. The art director is not the star of the show, they are a conduit to facilitate the best presentation of the writer's and photographer's crafts, and through them the ocean's splendour. If I see one more article defaced by elaborate backgrounds or overlaid on photos that leave the text unreadable, I am going to take matters into my own hands and start swinging punches.

4. Photographers are your best friend.

Even though I am a writer myself, I am more than happy to acknowledge that the real stars of surf magazines are, or ought to be, the photographers. Their job is infinitely more difficult than any other contributor to the magazine. They require tens of thousands of dollars of equipment (that is rendered swiftly obsolete by constant advances in technology). They are paid a pittance, require the patience of a saint, endure the tantrums and egos of fickle surf stars and often uncooperative natural elements. Yet it is their art that provides the basic building block of the surf media and the entire industry marketing machine. That is – the memorable image. It is what matters most about surf magazines and what etches itself most deeply in our memory banks, what inspires us to travel or want to surf better or to try and live adventurous lives. It is the great shame of the modern surf media that photographers earn far more money for an advertising photo than an editorial shot, so all those telephoto lenses are always going to swing towards the highly sponsored surf star when he or she takes off on a wave, rather than the logo-less charger who might be pulling into the barrel of the day, but who may as well be invisible for all the surf media cares.

There, now that I have all that off my chest, enjoy the rest of this fine journal, confident in the knowledge that there are no sinister or subliminal sales pitches or marketing messages being embedded into your consciousness without you even realising it...(*Go and buy one of my books*)...that this noble publication at least, is operating free of poisonous industry influence...(*Visit www.bytimbaker.com*)...and that you are safe amidst an environment of pure surfing stoke that exists simply for your enlightenment...(*Hurry while stocks last*)...that there is at least one place in our sullied surf culture where your soul may reveal itself and share in an honest exchange of information and ideas without hidden agendas...(*Major credit cards accepted*)...Honestly.

— *Tim Baker*