

WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

Then and now

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Blame the industrial revolution for women's magazines. That was when women began to need help.

Before then, families pretty much worked and lived together. If you had a problem, there were other grownups around to ask for advice, whether your family, your neighbours or your servants – if you were grand enough to have a few of *them*.

But the arrival of machinery and factories in the 19th century meant a chasm opened up between work and family life. Instead of working close to home, blokes were leaving in the morning and not returning for many hours. Domestic workers who'd once washed the sheets and swept the stairs also went off to run looms and conveyor belts.

Many wives also went off to mills and offices, but there were legions of housebound mothers who now had to do *everything* in the home.

Because newspapers focused on men's affairs like war, economics, politics, cricket and shipping news, women needed publications to help them cope with different challenges. That might include making a perfect sponge, writing a thank-you letter, planning a charity fund-raiser or nursing a child deathly ill with scarlet fever.

And let's not forget the need to look good. What outfits should be worn, in which colour and at what hem length, was always a matter of moment.

Once again, daily newspapers didn't care. The time for the magazine had come. The first English *Women's Weekly* came out in 1911.

Titles poured out during the 20th century, from the high-end fashion bibles like *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Elle* to all the weeklies, such as *New Idea* and *Woman's Day*. That includes the *Australian Women's Weekly* which, while monthly, is still called a weekly because it was one once. It was such an institution that they dared not change its name when they altered its frequency.

There were also many more: *Family Circle*, *Woman's Realm*, *Woman's Own*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman* and *Stitch...*

When I was little, in the late 1950s, Mum would send me off to the local newsagent for her weekly order. There were named wooden pigeonholes behind his counter filled with rolled publications for everyone in the street. We got *The Weekly News*, which was a big newsprint thing with a drab pink front cover, and a mid-section of black-and-white, slightly shiny pictures of boring things like prime ministers, horses, princes and yachts.

My prize was the *School Friend* comic from England, full of earnest stories about lacrosse-playing girls whose lives were in no way like mine.

I always knew Cynthia and Marcia would be the mean ones. The good girls had short, merry names like Pat and Joy.

My mum got *English Woman*, full of ads for Odo-Ro-No cream ("no more unkind remarks about your personal freshness"), and soap sold with the impossible-to-prove slogan: "Nine out of ten film stars use Lux".

There were endless knitting patterns and advice on gardening, baby feeding and wifely duties. If I saw one today I'd think it laughably staid and turgid. But then, I was enchanted.

When Mum was finished, it was my turn to leaf through it, sucking in grown-up life.

The perming-solution ads showed me two identically pretty ladies and asked me, “Which twin has the Toni?” Then there were mysterious ads of ladies in satin ball gowns with the same puzzling caption – ‘Modess because...’ (Modess was a brand of sanitary napkin.)

There were romantic serials, and stories about young Queen Elizabeth and her handsome Philip and their chubby children, Charles and Anne.

There were recipes for Anzac biscuits, madeira cake and rice pudding.

So far, so drab. Little did I know that decades later I’d be editing magazines for the same sort of reader, even though her aspirations would be much higher.

My reader would “want it all” – marriages, kids *and* careers.

My first was *More* magazine. Pretty damn popular it was too. In 1983 it grew out of the same stable that had launched the then new, self-assured, glossy city magazine, *Metro*. I had a feature-writing job there, bestowed on me by editor Warwick Roger.

God, I was grateful. I was done by then with nappy-folding and the kindy run – office life was calling.

Metro’s then publishers, Bruce Palmer and Clive Currie, looked around and saw nothing locally-made for women but the dear old *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, already 50 years old. They saw a gap. I got the editor’s chair and we launched a new monthly. It was for women who wanted more, and so we called it *More*. Within a few years we were selling more than 60,000 copies. Woo-hoo!

But really, I just took up where others had left off.

In the 60s I’d adored a radical fashion magazine out of London, called *Nova*. It was *so cool*, its fashion photography featuring the work of groovy David Bailey with the glorious Jean Shrimpton fixed in his lens.

She visited the Melbourne Cup and shocked the locals with her mini-skirt. Above her knees!

Other editors had done brave things here in the 60s too. There was *Eve*, a modern monthly launched by Bernie Hill and his wife Jane. Bernie was killed in an accident on then new-ish Newmarket viaduct, and Jane bravely carried on, but *Eve*’s time was over in 1975.

The intelligent *Thursday* was popular in that era too, published on Thursdays by Wilson and Horton and edited by Marcia Russell.

She sponsored a visit to Auckland by women’s rights activist Germaine Greer. Greer didn’t make news with her mini skirt but with her language. She got arrested for daring to say “bullshit” in public.

Even more fiery feminists were also snapping up copies of *Broadsheet*. It was proudly averse to advertising that didn’t support the cause – a tough stance for any magazine to take – but it still ran for 25 years from 1972.

Simultaneously, the women’s market was fragmenting further with the arrival of young women’s titles like *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan*. *Cleo* had “sealed sections” with advice about sex – crikey! Readers could hardly wait to get busy with the scissors to access frank secrets.

By the time the 80s came along, things were a bit tamer, or maybe everyone had just got over being outrageous.

Even so, when I dreamt up *More* in 1983, I wanted it to be about much more than just the standard roll-call of food, fashion and beauty and so we also ran in-depth, serious features on big issues.

We wrote about AIDS and infertility, murders, missing people and drug abuse.

And we pioneered big pushes for women at work, running national Businesswoman of the Year awards. In its first year the first prize was a gleaming BMW.

Fashion magazines rising in the 80s included *Cha-Cha* (short-lived) and *Fashion Quarterly*, still going strong. *More* was eventually merged with another magazine called *She*, and that awkward combo soon died.

But meanwhile, I'd had another idea and *next* was born in 1991. Once again playing with life-stage ideas, I planned it for women who were in the 'next' stage of their lives after early womanhood.

So at first, *Next* was strongly home-focused. We did lots of decorating and DIY and health and motherhood issues – including the eternal, ongoing female angst over how to “have it all”.

As we considered each issue's contents, we focused on what we were hearing on the street, at the school gate, the office and around dinner tables. If there was a topic women were talking about, we needed to be covering it.

The huge challenge for every magazine team is what to put on the cover. The safe thing is a well-known face, which is why celebrity thrives. I tried to avoid the cliché, but knew famous faces would always secure good sales. I look now at stars from past covers, many still prominent today, and smile. How fresh they looked back then.

There's Lorraine Downes – radiant in her Miss Universe reign, 1983. Ilona Rodgers, glamorous star of TV soap *Gloss*, 1989. Actress Annie Whittle, showing off her garden, 1994. Hine Elder, then fiancée of the famous Paul Holmes and mother of a not-yet famous little girl called Millie, 1990. Top TV personality Judith Kirk, 1991. Favourite newsreader Judy Bailey, 1995. Theresa Gattung, CEO of Telecom, 2000.

As I flip through magazines I have worked on, some of the content is quaint, and some is as relevant as ever. *More*, and a short-lived, new-millennium magazine called *Grace*, didn't last, but I love that *Next* is still thriving in capable hands.

The graphics have changed over the decades but basically a good magazine still works the same way. Something about it sings to you. You enjoy holding it in your hands, yes?

When you fall for a magazine, all the internet's whizzbang smarts still cannot outdo the allure of a beautifully printed page.