

Scouting Precis

INTRODUCTION

Scouting is a large circulation, bi-monthly publication delivered as a non-paid subscription to a largely male, mostly over-30 audience that participates in leadership roles in the Boy Scouts of America who work to organize, direct and advise local troops. Their involvement is voluntary, and is a critical link between the national organization and the scouts themselves. Keeping their involvement enthusiastic and rewarding is important.

Scouting should be directed specifically to the needs and enthusiasms of its primary audience, and deliver content that empowers them to do better as organizers, mentors and role-models for their charges. Stories should inspire readers, foment community and deliver practical information of specific use to the age-segregated groups of scouts. All of the content should reflect the mission and ideals of the BSA credo, and be delivered in a sophisticated format that is in keeping with the age, education level and economic status represented by your demographic.

How well does the current iteration of the publication succeed? The readership survey indicates most readers find the content engaging and notes the departments that provide interesting ideas for the readers to use in their activities rate highly, along with the feature stories. They find even greater use for the non-editorial insert, since it contains program information. Dig a little deeper, and some cracks emerge. Readers are interested in outdoors and camping topics and all the related parts of that experience, but not so much urban, technical or popular cultural content. When asked to actually suggest content, it seems overwhelmingly oriented to providing better resources and tools for making their units learn more and have more fun. Finally, although readers agree the magazine is engaging, only a third answered that the publication is very effective at helping them do a better job as a scout leader.

A disconnect has developed between the mission of *Scouting* and the design and content. Even at the basic level of the tagline, the title misses the point. The magazine does have relevant content but it is buried under the weight of an old-fashioned, cluttered design that

seems inappropriate to the demographic, an issue structure ill-suited to the page count, and a lack of rhythm and structural variation in the editorial make-up.

Many of the design attributes that are mentioned in the scope letter are worth exploring, but most of them require a new editorial approach that is more in keeping with the sophistication of today's media-savvy readers. In some ways, the magazine actually needs to do less—shorter stories, more graphic approaches to relating information, a more deliberate interaction between the magazine and the web site. This doesn't mean turning the book into some overly-designed modern template full of contemporary visual ephemera and ironic dispassion, but rather creating a better packaging of content scope into more digestible chunks, a stronger attitude toward branding the editorial packages, and more directly applicable content based on the needs of the readers and the goals of BSA.

CRITIQUE

COVER Despite the suggestion that a new nameplate is desirable, the current one has a long history and still works fine. Perhaps some exploration into updating the font while keeping its character might be worthwhile unless it is determined that a “relaunch” level of effort should be applied to the redesign. The tagline is way off the mark for the scope and mission of the book. It's supposed to be for scout leaders and should be something like, “Leading Inspiration,” or Tools, Resources and Inspiration for Leaders,” or maybe something more high-concept, like “The Leading Edge.”

Cover concepts are pretty good, although I think featuring a leader on the cover every issue is a better idea, emphasizing the community at the same time highlighting an interesting activity. Covers like March/April 2008 are an OK approach, but the cover lines should direct attention to the benefit, as is more successfully carried out in the following issue about GPS. Still, even these covers need to feature a leader doing something with their name on the cover, even if only in a caption outline format. If the image on May/June had been a tight shot of someone looking at the device, and a small caption style said, *Dennis Everett, Troop 177 Denver, gets digital*, it would have been stronger. Obviously just having a hand and a magnifying glass could be improved in the same manner.

Perhaps a more dramatic redesign might provide a cover template with more newsstand-like opportunities for cover lines, including some stories above the nameplate or an inset image.

TOC This page is purely functional but probably ignored by most of the readers who likely graze through the issue, or go to *Outdoor Smarts* or *Front Line Stuff* to dive into the book. The TOC actually makes obvious a problem with the issue structure—the front and back of book departments are way underdeveloped and the features are undifferentiated in their priority. At the very least, the cover story, should get special treatment, but the leadership story, by far the longest (and maybe least “outdoors-y”) story also deserves some special treatment in the TOC. There isn’t much attempt at branding franchise content either in departments or features, except maybe the “Family Together Feature” noted in October 2007.

DEPARTMENTS The department design looks like something from another era, and the reason for the departments against the mission is unfocused. The illustrations only serve to clutter the page and distract the eye from moving to the meat of the page. They have no artistic style and end up making the book seem like it’s aimed at a much younger audience, not adult scout leaders.

Scouting is a small book, and the lack of pages makes the departments underdeveloped in the current issue map. It’s easy to see why *Front Line Stuff* and *Outdoor Smarts* are popular as it serve both a community and a practical purpose directly in line with the reader’s needs. Clearly, departments need to be explicitly mission-oriented and have more discrete structures than the essay format that most of them follow. What does this approach mean for the book? The *News Briefs* section seems especially dense in this format, begging for more editorial variation in both length and visual impact. *Family Talk*, and especially *Family Fun Page* are clearly out of place in the book.

FEATURES The feature stories are interesting, and mostly on-point. The story types could be more dramatically branded, such as Troop Adventure, or The Great Outdoors, or Champions for standard story types. It is easy to see why readers find the features engaging, but the compression of the stories into the book tends to even out the impact of individual features, lending a busy yet rhythmically dull overall impression. Sidebars, which should serve as an antidote to the density of the body are similarly overburdened with text and often add to the busyness instead of relieving it.

On the plus side, there’s clearly an attempt to create dramatic openings and make use of interesting images; someone knows how to put together nice openings. But again, the second spreads often suffer from the need for a “big” opening. So clearly, there’s some editorial space

management that needs tweaking, especially if one of the stated redesign goals—more white space—is to be achieved.

Another aspect of the feature design reflects an issue with the book as a whole—the layouts and art choices look like they’re meant for kids or young adults—not the mostly 40-year-olds that actually get the magazine. While the editorial tone is more neutral than the art, there is little attempt at an editorial voice that speaks directly to the readership and implies a familiarity with the concerns and attitudes of the volunteer leaders. The illustration choices are the most egregious in this area, looking for all the world like art from children’s books. While no one is expecting *Esquire*-like sophistication in this product, there are plenty of illustrators who can create a slightly edgier and more contemporary feeling for the book. Perhaps the fact that the art staff is also doing *Boy’s Life* creates an implication that there should be a crossover in look-and-feel for *Scouting*. If that is so, it isn’t a great idea.

OVERALL DESIGN & PRODUCTION The primary impression of a cursory flip through an issue is one of consistency—and not in a good way. The pages tumble through as a dense mix of typography and smallish images punctuated by nicer opening spreads that are still jammed with “design” elements, and which, individually, are nice but taken together with only a spread dividing the openings one from the other, get overwhelming. There is little visual indication of parts of the book, or editorial priority.

There is too much use of production design techniques—knocked back images with type on top, vignetted images, cliché type and ornamentation that extends the feeling that the books intended audience is kids. Putting “snow” on the type of “A Wisconsin Winter Weekend” or a checkered border around “Racing for the Checkered Flag” are ideas better suited for a younger demographic than *Scouting*’s. In the same issue, “Against All Odds” is a very nice and appropriate opening.

On the production side, it is probably useless to rail against the yellow flimsy paper that makes the already-small book feel even less substantial, but it is worth mentioning if only for completeness. With a million-plus circ, you get what you can. The color throughout is flat and variable and could benefit from a correction step built into the production flow executed by someone who knows what he’s doing. In general, the typography has few glaring errors, but the letter and word spacing would benefit from better H&J settings in individual styles.

RECOMMENDATIONS & DIRECTION

Updating *Scouting* is more than a cosmetic exercise. Achieving the goals set forth in your scope letter means reducing the amount of stuff in each issue. White space and openness doesn't come from squishing somewhere else. Clearly, the intention of the design elements is to make the book more attractive to contemporary males that make up the lion's share of the readership. These are Baby Boomers and Gen X- and Y-ers who have been raised on edgier design and are familiar with content grazing and internet browsing. These suggestions address editorial and design issues that are inseparable from one another, and whose overall thrust is addressing a refocused mission onto the intended demographic, providing more relevant content in a more accessible package.

Make the scope to match the mission of the book. The mission of the magazine is to provide troop leaders with resources to help them do a better job; inspiration to encourage enthusiasm, embodiment of core values and retention; and connection to both the national community of leaders and the BSA organization. *Scouting* should reflect their needs and interests. They need more practical information about skills, management, social issues and tools to help them engage and connect with their scouts, vertically segmented by age. The magazine should disseminate innovation and success of the leader community and provide a forum for addressing issues that arise as part of their work and play with their troops.

Every piece of content needs to be parsed by the application of the question, "How does this help scout leaders do a better job and enjoy their responsibilities?"

Create a more elegant overall design aesthetic. Enlarging the margins all around, switching to a more compact body font, and using a modular grid that fits 4 and 5 units will make the book more elegant, easier to lay out and improve the legibility of the body copy. Adding rag right styles in conjunction with a more distinctive sans serif font will also improve the distinctive branding of the book. Simpler department navigation and branding (losing the folksy illustrations) and a brighter color palette will do much to modernize the look of *Scouting*.

More departments and fewer features. The book structure should be grazing, F-O-B dealing with kids resources (maybe branded *Leader's Handbook*), features, B-O-B package that is an expanded Outdoor Smarts (although maybe call it *Great Outdoors*) then the junk and then whatever is on inside-cover-three.

Here's how the issue map would go: Reducing the features to four at most, creating feature packages of two or three short stories (not unlike the Leadership story in M/J08) will open up another 6 pages for departments. Expand *In Brief* another 2 pages with room for smallish stories and a better flow (plus more fun stuff) and make it a nicer grazing section. For the departments in the front and back, the goal is to add content from two archetypes: outdoor enthusiast magazines and teen pubs (repurposed to give leaders more insight into their mindset.) Change *Family Talk* into a more general department on dealing with understanding kids (and maybe breaking it out into age groupings) with specific suggestions and resources will make that department more relevant. Add another department called *15 Impressive Facts* (or *Didja Know?* or *Increase Your Cred* that is a list on a specific subject that leaders can use as a jumping off point for engaging the troop. Along with *Front Line* and the Boy's Life page (which I believe should be treated more like another Content's page up front) make up the F-O-B section. In the back, expand *Outdoor Smarts* into a full-fledged editorial package instead of a single story by adding new regular departments, one skill-based, two product based—maybe gear and clothes, then food and camping-issue based departments. Create a new opposite-cover-three department that is high-concept and community oriented. It could be photo-based, or a short story like *Worth Retelling*, or maybe it is a good place for a regular leader profile. The end result will be two department packages that can absorb most of the advertising, and still have space for nice clean department page templates, although each section will be a theme and variation on the other. Deliberately creating single-page departments will be helpful for making the book look cleaner. Partial pages can be grouped into full pages or used when departments are longer than one page.

Develop the features using A and B approaches. Designate an A feature to be longer. Make the cover story at least six pages and the other two or three features at least 4 pages. A well of 22 pages or so is still 6 pages less than the well in M/J08. Having a big cover story makes a big opening more appropriate, and regularizing the B stories with less-splashy openings will help the rhythm of the book.

Create mission-based franchise concepts. This advice works on both micro- and macro-levels. Franchise-oriented departments have already been mentioned, but small repeatable concepts in the grazing section up front, and magazine-specific (instead of story-specific) sidebar ideas help brand the magazine. For example, a feature sidebar could be a short leader interview that relates to a story, or an historical tidbit from the BSA archives, or maybe a

resources or variation-of-ideas box. called “Your Next Step.”

At the macro-level, branding two issues of your six-issue volume with annual special content helps create anticipation for readers and more compelling variation in the issues for advertisers. Maybe one special issue could be about the Jamboree, and another could be about new ideas, initiatives and products in a year-end wrap-up.

Improve the quality of your illustration and photography. The illustration is especially juvenile, and there is tremendous opportunity to find energetic, imaginative and quirky-yet-appropriate illustration for your stories. While photography might be more hit-and-miss because of the nature of the resources, there are still opportunities to get professional work done with enough planning. Perhaps more coordination with the needs and objectives of the promotion of the parent organization will provide synergies to involve professional photographers.

Create better web synergies. The web site might as well not exist based on the way it is used as an extension of the magazine. There needs to be constant reminders of links to unique content on the web site and resources that are easier to navigate on the Internet. Even a one-third page Web Contents box in the magazine would stimulate more traffic, but there needs to be a coordinated effort to create content crossover for this ever-increasingly important delivery stream. With such a tight book, the possibility of leaving out stuff that makes it onto the web site should be a great asset.

APPROACH

GRID & FONTS These need to be updated into a more modern and distinctive set of families and used with more discretion. In addition, less formal typography (meaning more sans serif body fonts, ragged-right justification and more variety of column widths) needs to be implemented in a new template. We will present multiple font and grid samples for approval, and then we will create prototype examples of pages in each section showing branding, navigation, color palette and fit for fractional ads.

COVER We will try lots of variations on the current nameplate, and show variations on cover templates that change the use of heads, contributor images and placements, and also show some completely different nameplate approaches that coordinate with the interior look of the new design. We also want to approach cover concepts from a more structured perspective

and make them feel more consumer-like and more consistent issue-to-issue through higher profile branding techniques.

TOC With a new issue map that has department packages, A and B style features, the new TOC can present the scope and priority of the content in a more direct way.

NAVIGATION We want to create a more open, adult and engaging presentation for the departments. Overall, we think this means smaller shorter headlines and decks, better reliance of illustration to tell a complex story and simpler variations on the basic grids and fonts that characterize the magazine, instead of a plethora of headline fonts. We'll present pages from each section, as well as the opening of each section in multiple variations.

CONCLUSION

There is tremendous potential to revamp *Scouting* into a book that ironically has less content but more impact, that is a better vehicle for selling ad space to significant clients, and provides more useful and directly applicable content for the targeted readers, who will enjoy being treated more like the grown-ups that they really are.