

# HOMEMAKER'S

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*Homemaker's* is an anomaly among Canadian magazines: deceptively titled, deceptively small, deceptively free of charge. In these three ways, it flouts conventional wisdom in the news media. According to conventional wisdom, a serious and substantial magazine is not addressed to women (let alone to housewives!). Digest-sized magazines are thought to contain predigested information. And freebies? Well, everybody knows that no one ever bothers to read freebies. But *Homemaker's* has positively thrived on breaking the rules. In fourteen years, what started as a small independent company has broken industry records for financial success. *Homemaker's* has had demonstrable social impact and has become, in its own way, a national institution.

The first question most people ask about *Homemaker's* is, 'Why is it delivered free?' The answer is that advertising revenue pays for all the editorial, production and distribution costs. It sounds like a crazy way to run a magazine until you consider that radio and TV function the same way. In the magazine world, the concept is known as 'controlled circulation.' That is, the magazine guarantees advertisers that their messages will reach at least 1,232,000 households per issue. Controlled circulation guarantees a minimum national audience comparable to, say, the CBC's top-rated shows—and advertisers get tangible proof of impact in the form of returned coupons.

The second most-asked question is, 'Why isn't it on the newsstand?' Again controlled circulation is the answer. Advertisers want an affluent audience, people with money to spend. It's also in the magazine's interest to appeal to a specific audience. In Canada, affluence tends to go hand-in-hand with education. *Homemaker's* articles are tailored to appeal to young (30 to 50 years old), educated, financially comfortable, responsive and responsible family women. About 750,000 readers are male, but the magazine is mainly geared to a female audience. Fan mail proves that the audience does indeed find the product appealing; so *Homemaker's* prefers to remain with a

good-sized responsive audience than to change the product in an effort to reach a larger readership. 'Our subscription service was created mainly for the benefit of readers who move out of a *Homemaker's* area and miss receiving it,' said the circulation manager. 'We have no intention of soliciting subscriptions. The fee we ask barely covers the postage.'

Why would anyone want to subscribe to what is patently an advertising vehicle? This innocuous looking freebie tackles tough issues long before other media latch on to them. Items such as teenage suicide; deciding whether to place an aging parent in a nursing home; vandalism; prison reform; gun control and abortion have appeared. *Homemaker's* was the first Canadian magazine to publish the how-to of contraception. It is the only national mass medium to carry a regular column reporting on the feminist movement. And when *Homemaker's* articles are clipped, photocopied, mailed from friend to friend and included in community college workbooks, it's a sign that the feature articles are providing needed information.

Manifestly, people do read a freebie, despite conventional wisdom. A writer can get quite spoiled by receiving dozens (sometimes hundreds) of letters in response to a feature article. Such feedback is otherwise fairly rare from a mass market audience. On surveys, response runs to two or three thousand replies. Readers often take a very personal tone in writing to *Homemaker's*, revealing their innermost fears and thoughts. 'Growing Up Dead,' Brenda Rapkin's feature on teenage suicide, brought hundreds of letters from despairing teens. Every letter was read and answered. Sometimes the mail carries impressive letterheads. In 'Male Logic,' I used an anecdote about former federal minister Marc Lalonde, exhorting an audience of women executives not to get emotional about delays in improving women's status—when he was the most emotional person in the room. Lalonde sent a three-page letter in reply, stating that *he was NOT emotional*.

Another question often asked about controlled-circulation magazines is, 'Don't

the advertisers control the editorial content?' Actually, a truce has been declared between the advertising and editorial sectors of the operation. They have agreed that each should be autonomous. 'It's rather like the principle of the separation of Church and State,' said Jeffrey Shearer, director of editorial and marketing services and originator of the *Homemaker's* idea.

Advertising and editorial communicate with each other through Shearer. When 'Thank Goodness It's Only Booze' appeared in the February 1975 issue, liquor companies were told well in advance that the article might make their product look bad. No liquor ads appeared in that issue, but the advertisers returned to support subsequent issues with their revenue. At times *Homemaker's* has a tendency to bite the hand that feeds it, editorializing against white sugar and decrying harmful images of women in advertising. *Homemaker's* editor Jane Gale Hughes has been actively involved in committees and commissions created to persuade advertisers to abandon stereotypical images of women.

But most of all *Homemaker's* is a crusading magazine, a bit brash at times, but firmly founded in principle and firmly planted in its readership. While the magazine actively solicits reader response at the end of each story, probably the main reason readers send so many letters is that every article presents a point of view. Never mind any pretences to objectivity (and that's all objectivity is: a pretence), writers at *Homemaker's* wear their biases on their sleeve so you always know who's talking to you. Under Jane Gale Hughes, the feminist perspective has been given more space in *Homemaker's* than in any other Canadian magazine. Sometimes two differing feminist views on the same topic are presented back to back (as in the issue with a feature and a column examining feminist reaction to pornography).

*Homemaker's* may be an anomaly, but if you take the time to read it and get past the deceptive title and format, you will see that it represents an important addition to Canadian journalism—especially for women.