What women want - to read

Magazines that target fulfillment, 'real' people's stories – but leave in the supermodels, please

By Marjorie Coeyman | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

NEW YORK - Cravings for "authenticity" and "fulfillment" are a hot topic. Words like "spirituality" and "meaningful" get heavy use. And praise abounds for a firsthand narrative by a woman who recently rediscovered the joy of prayer.

If this sounds like a convention of New Age religious writers – held at a cabin in the woods or a commune in the desert – think again.

The setting is a trendy downtown Manhattan restaurant. The participants, perched confidently on tall stools and collectively projecting an air of understated chic, are editors at high-profile mass-market women's magazines.

Their issue for the evening: the future of women's magazines. It's a natural to engross this high-powered panel, whose members hail from "O" ("Oprah's magazine") Real Simple, Body & Soul, and the online iVillage.com.

The answer, according to many of these women – and their magazines – is "lifestyle." Think Martha Stewart Living, or the remaking of McCall's into Rosie (for Rosie O'Donnell) and the New Age Journal into Body & Soul.

What all these publications aim to do, some observers say, is to tap into a spirit stirring the new millennium – a trend more spiritual, a fascination with the interior lives of real people, and a hunger for more substance in daily living.

Their target audience is the same one that has long read Vogue for fashion and Good Housekeeping for recipes.

But unlike many of their predecessors, they don't build lengthy editorial sections around choosing the shade of lipstick that suits you best, or feature interviews with super-moms whose lives are effortlessly superlative.
"We profile people who struggle," says Valerie Monroe, beauty editor of "O."

"We use models up to the age of 70 of all shapes and sizes and colors," says Jenny Cook, editor in chief of Body & Soul. "What we do is more about inspiration than fantasy."

In some cases, though, the differences come in subtle shades. "Of course we do lipstick," Ms. Monroe says. "But we may approach it through some psychological concept – why we love lipstick, what draws us to lipstick."

"In many ways we're still addressing the things women have dealt with for years," says Lesley Alderman, news editor of Real Simple. "In 1964, women reading Ladies Home Journal wanted to know how to make the perfect dinner. They still want the perfect dinner – but they want to find a simpler way to do it."

That's because women are searching for deeper satisfaction with daily life, she says. A more organized closet and a simpler dinner menu are important only because they may allow what truly matters in life to take center stage.

Some hail these changes as a proof of a "spiritward" trend in society. Others simply see signs that a savvy industry is learning quickly to satisfy an increasingly sophisticated public.

"All magazines are always a reflection of society," says Martin Walker, chairman of Walker Communications, a New York City-based magazine-consulting firm. "Society has changed and evolved. People are more educated and more exposed."

What has really changed in women's magazines, he says, is quality. "There's better writing, better art, better production values," he says. "It's the idea of doing something with some chic and elegance, and yet having it be achievable in the everyday," he says. Today's readers are less content to simply turn the pages and indulge in a fantasy.

But the thing to remember about women's magazines is that they're a wonderfully fluid category, says Ellen Levine, editor in chief of the 117-year-old Good Housekeeping.

Helen Gurley Brown, for instance, shook the category with her vision of young women as ambitious and sexually active rather than demure when she become editor of Cosmopolitan in the mid-1960s.

A little later, Ms. magazine and Working Woman introduced their visions of serious, career-oriented women, concerned about sexual politics and eager to be in charge of their own lives.

"Now there's the Oprah concept, which is about being the best person you can be, looking for a personal guide," says Ms. Levine, who worked on the launch of "O."

For older magazines, "there's a biological need to evolve," Levine says. "If you don't, you become a dinosaur."
One way to evolve is to recognize that today's readers are more alert to hype. A genuine voice – and more first-person stories – have become almost a requirement.

Editors have also shifted their focus toward more racial and ethnic diversity, both in editorial and advertising content – a shift Levine credits largely to the efforts of Oprah.

Overall, throughout the women's magazine category, there's been a thrust towards reality, says Mr. Walker. "Even 10 years ago, some of the fashion magazines were a joke in that so few people could dress that way. But look at those same magazines today and you'll see they don't have as much gingerbread and icing."

And yet, some analysts are reluctant to call these changes more than a relatively minor adjustment.

It's harder than ever to launch a new magazine today, they point out, and only those with serious financing and real industry know-how are likely to succeed. And that means for the most part the new publications are staffed by industry insiders.

Certainly the panel members at the Tribeca restaurant bear out that observation, with the four women represented having worked a significant number of combined years at the established women's magazines.

Asked if the new feel of women's magazines marks any kind of enduring societal change, the panelists hesitate. "I'm pretty cynical," says Jennifer Howze, managing editor at iVillage.com. "It's just the swing of the pendulum."

But Ms. Cook disagrees. "Maybe I'm an optimist but I think we're making progress. I think we're integrating these good things into our lives."

Yet all agree that there are limits as to how far the new reality can be pushed. "We tried putting real people on the cover, but it doesn't sell," says Ms. Alderman, although she points out that models in the magazine represent a broad range of ages, with at least one plus-size always included.

Most advertisers still insist their products be associated with slim, youthful-looking women, they agree. When contemporary women's magazines brag that they feature a variety of figure shapes and sizes, says Monroe, that still generally means "a range between tall skinny and short skinny."

At the same time, she adds, when "O" recently did a beauty story in a recent issue, the article focused on what truly creates beauty – expressiveness, inner character – and tried to urge readers to reconsider if they were heading out for Botox treatments to erase facial lines.

The panelists were pushed by a moderator swathed in a pink feather boa to guess at what lies ahead. But the truth, says Levine, "is that nobody knows."
Still, the newcomers to the field are cause for optimism, she says. The economic climate is poor, and ad pages are a tough sell for all magazines. But "'O' and Living and Real Simple and Cosmo Girl were all born now and very quickly planted very deep roots," she says.

What that proves, she says, is the simple and wonderful fact that "woman want to read."

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