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'Numbers Race' Dropout

Curtis Plans August Start for Cuts In Post Circulation, Format Changes

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NEW YORK—The Saturday Evening Post, founding flagship of the Curtis Publishing Co. magazine fleet, has firmed up its plans to jettison most of its subscribers and steer a new editorial course.

Beginning with the Aug. 10 issue, the venerable magazine will begin paring its circulation to 3 million from the current 6.8 million and start evolving a more sophisticated editorial package. Readers are to get breezier picture layouts, easier-to-read type, more subtle cartoons and articles in greater depth.

Martin S. Ackerman, who stepped in as Curtis president last month, is expected to win approval for his plans for the Post from directors at a special meeting in Philadelphia today. The board also will discuss other Curtis operations, including Mr. Ackerman's previously reported negotiations to sell the company's paper mill at Johnsonburg, Pa.

Revamping the Post, which has accounted for most of Curtis' 1961-67 operating losses of \$54.9 million, is the keystone of the 36-year-old executive's program for saving the company.

Taking time out during one of his 10-hour days, the shirt-sleeved Mr. Ackerman swung his feet up onto the desk of his small, unadorned office on the editorial floor of the Saturday Evening Post and said: "The Post can't make it in its present format; it can't compete with television. We're getting out of the numbers race."

Goal: To Compete With TV

The "numbers race" was the effort of the Post and most other mass magazines in the 1950s to add circulation rapidly, usually through costly promotions, cut-rate subscriptions and other special inducements. The goal—to compete with television's huge audiences—proved unobtainable for the Post and it slackened its efforts.

After adding 2.3 million circulation in the 1950s, the Post has put on only another 500,000 since 1960. But maintaining circulation on such a high plateau has been costly, with millions spent each year just to find new subscribers to replace those not renewing expired subscriptions.

The Post lost the numbers race long ago not only to TV, but also to close competitors Life and Look. With more pictures and fewer words than the Post, these magazines enjoy greater "pass-along" readership. The average copy of Life is read by 4.7 adults, Look by 4.1 and the Post by only 3.5, according to the widely accepted 1968 magazine audience study of W. R. Simmons & Associates Research Inc.

The result is that Life and Look, while selling only a few hundred thousand more copies per issue than the Post, have vastly larger total audiences. According to the Simmons study, 32.9 million adults read Life, 31.8 million read Look, and only 22 million read the Post.

Advertisers accustomed to measuring the efficiency of their spending on TV in terms of the total number of people watching the shows they sponsor usually pay more attention to a magazine's total audience than its base circulation, and the Post has suffered in the comparison with Life and Look.

Newsstand Sales of 400,000

Of the Post's 6.8 million circulation, newsstand sales account for 400,000 and subscriptions the remaining 6.4 million. Mr. Ackerman said the newsstand price will remain 35 cents and distribution to newsstands won't be curtailed. However, the subscription list will be cut more than 50%.

Mr. Ackerman conceded he hasn't been able to sell the undesired Post subscription list to other publishers, or even find one willing to assume the liability of fulfilling the unexpired Post subscriptions by substituting his own magazine.

The subscription list will be pruned by sending fewer subscription solicitation letters to nonsubscribers, fewer renewal notices to persons whose subscriptions are expiring, and cut-off notices to many current subscribers. Subscribers to be cut off will have the option of a refund or a subscription to another Curtis magazine. In addition to the biweekly Post, the company publishes four monthlies, the Ladies' Home Journal, American Home, Holiday and Jack & Jill.

The Post's circulation will start going down this summer and won't reach the 3 million level until the end of the year, Mr. Ackerman said. In the interim, advertisers will benefit from more circulation than the 3 million on which advertising rates will be based.

Ad rates will drop sharply, while cost per thousand circulation will remain \$4.26 for a full-page ad in black and white and \$6.39 in four colors.

Reaction from advertisers and ad agencies has been "excellent," the executive said. He noted that the higher-income, metropolitan and suburban subscribers the Post will keep are better prospects for most advertised products than the less affluent small-town subscribers who will be dropped in droves.

Can Break Even With 1,000 Ad Pages

Under the new plan, he said, the Post can break even with \$13 million in net ad revenue a year, and 1,000 ad pages or less. Last year the Post ran 1,052 ad pages and grossed \$41.3 million before discounts and ad-agency commissions. Net ad revenue wasn't disclosed.

Mr. Ackerman expressed confidence the biweekly can find a safe niche as a "reading magazine in competition with the newsmagazines." Three million circulation will put the Post 18th in the magazine hierarchy, behind Time (3.7 million) and ahead of Newsweek (2.1 million). The Post is currently ninth, behind Look (7.7 million) and Life (7.3 million), but ahead of the National Geographic (4.4 million).

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Although there isn't any clear precedent for the Post, action, several magazines have successfully sloughed off modest amounts of circulation. Farm Journal lopped off more than 300,000 nonfarm subscribers in 1953, reducing its circulation to 3.1 million. The nonfarm readers don't appeal to our advertisers, the magazine said. Nonfarm subscribers were offered a refund or a subscription to one of 17 other magazines, among them the Saturday Evening Post. Most took another magazine.

In 1963 Macfadden-Bartell Corp. bought True Confessions and Motion Picture magazines and decided it could make more money selling them exclusively on newsstands. So it eliminated all subscriptions, more than 500,000 for each magazine. Subscribers got a refund or a subscription to True Story or Photoplay, other Macfadden-Bartell monthlies.

The Saturday Evening Post always has been the mainstay of the Curtis Publishing empire. It contributed most of the company's \$21.5 million peak profit in 1929 and grabbed 28% of all advertising revenue in consumer magazines. In

zine ad revenue was less than 4% last year, and it accounted for most of Curtis' operating loss of \$4.8 million.

Some authorities trace the start of the Post's decline to the early 1930s when it opposed Franklin D. Roosevelt's Administration and appeared to lose touch with the mood of the American people. More important, outmoded headline type, antiquated layouts and often stuffy stories during this era contrasted unfavorably with the lively makeup and content of the new Life magazine founded in 1936.

The Post faced competition from other general-interest weeklies, notably Collier's and Liberty, before Life entered the field. But it was Life that cut deepest into the Post's vital ad revenue. Look, first published in 1937, started more slowly than Life, but came on fast in the 1950s and passed the Post in ad pages in 1962.

As general-interest magazines with large circulations, all three were more vulnerable than special-interest periodicals to competition from television. TV's ascendancy hastened the end of such well-known publications as Collier's, Woman's Home Companion and the American.

As the Post's circulation and costs rose, it boosted its ad rates beyond the budget of many advertisers, who drifted away to publications with lower rates.

Ad Pages Totaled 4,425 in 1950

The Post, whose advertising hit a peak of 5,576 pages in 1929, carried a still-hefty 4,425 pages in 1950. Then the skid began. Ad linage fell for 14 successive years, totaling only 1,407 pages in 1964.

The drop would have been even steeper if the Post hadn't drastically liberalized discounts from basic page rates. These discounts, introduced in 1962, succeeded in keeping some large advertisers and inducing them to buy more pages, but cut the profit-per-page to the vanishing point.

Curtis started losing money in 1961, and decided something had to be done. Its solution was to abruptly redesign the Post to make it faster paced, unpredictable and controversial. The innovations startled and displeased many old subscribers and advertisers, while others who always had looked on the magazine as unsophisticated were slow to change their opinion.

In redirecting the Post's editorial appeal toward a "class" audience, Mr. Ackerman hopes to avoid a repeat of the 1961 fiasco. He's eschewing all talk about a "new Post" and stressing that change will be evolutionary.

Four Changes in Editors

After the 1961 revolution scared off many advertisers, a rash of libel suits tarnished the magazine's image. The most widely publicized suit stemmed from a 1963 article charging Wally Butts, former University of Georgia football coach, with conspiring with Paul (Bear) Bryant, coach at the University of Alabama, to rig the 1962 Alabama-Georgia game. Both men sued successfully.

The Post changed editors four times between late 1961 and late 1964. Since then, under Editor William A. Emerson Jr., the magazine has kept out of serious libel trouble, but it hasn't developed a cohesive editorial formula or a strong and unmistakable personality of its own. Content has included exposes, personality profiles, fiction, essays and liberal editorials. Photographic layouts often have been lackluster. Stories have ranged from the superficial to

the profound, from the pedestrian to the brilliant, even though payment to writers has been consistently high—from \$2,000 to \$5,000 for an ordinary-length article and as much as \$20,000 for a special effort.

But the Post hasn't had the resources to bid seriously against Life and Look for the blockbusters, such as William Manchester's The Death of a President and Svetlana Stalin Alliluyeva's Twenty Letters to a Friend, that bring a magazine excitement and prestige.

To give advertisers a preview of the more sophisticated turn the Post will take, Mr. Ackerman plans to print 10,000 copies of alternatives to the June 15 and June 29 issues. The alternative issues will be distributed to Madison Avenue while subscribers and newsstand buyers receive the regular issues. In the June 29 issue, a "folksy" story about Lady Bird Johnson's tour through Texas will be replaced in the alternative issue by a spread on the new Broadway hit musical Hair.

Metropolitan-Area Audience

Hair presumably will have more appeal to the magazine's remaining metropolitan-area audience. Currently, the Post has 37.4% of its readers in the nation's 25 largest metropolitan areas, significantly less than Look's 43.7% and Life's 50%. Increasing the Post's percentage is aimed at luring advertisers who concentrate their marketing efforts in the big cities and suburbs.

Look has attracted 100 metropolitan-oriented marketers with its three-month-old Top-Spot Plan. The plan enables an advertiser to buy space in copies of Look going to one million residents of 1,068 high-income areas, mostly in suburbs of big cities.

The Post will have to show strong gains in the second half if it is to match last year's 1,052 ad pages. Ad pages in January-May issues dropped 12.8% from a year earlier, and June linage will be down about 18%.

Many advertisers have curtailed their spending because of the slowdown in the economy and uncertainties over the Vietnam war, taxes and other issues. Some have cut TV spending less because of a conviction that TV is a more efficient medium for reaching a dual audience of men and women. Dual-audience magazines like the Post also are suffering increasing competition from women's magazines, which are siphoning off ads for soap, drugs, cosmetics, food and their products purchased mainly by housewives.