

GETSON GETS HIS WAY

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Football Feild to First Issue, Publisher David Getson Makes all the Right Plays.

By Dominic Vecchiollo

A colleague of mine, who remembers David Getson from high school, draws Getson as "the guy who could get away with anything." Once when assigned to compare and contrast two novels, Getson and a buddy took the two books and put them through a series of physical tests, including seeing if one of the books would fall faster than the other from the top of the stairwell. My colleague remembers Getson getting an A on that paper without ever once writing about plot or imagery. Such is the stuff of legends on high school campuses. Now eight years later, as president of his own company, Icon Inc. and the publisher and editorial director of ICON Thoughtstyle Magazine for Men, Getson is still proving that he is the guy who can get away with anything.

METAPHYSICS OF MAGAZINES

David Getson began to perceive a market niche for his magazine, ICON Thoughtstyle, when he was preparing to graduate from Princeton. It was 1994 and the height of gen-x slackerdom. Success was "dirty." Everyone was sensitive about selling out. Yet Getson felt that everyone wanted to think of themselves as successful ó they just didn't want to be told how to do it.

Faced with the question of what to do after college, Getson began to look for models of accomplished men, inspirational human stories ó

people he could emulate. He read biographies and autobiographies like those of Lord Admiral Nelson and David Geffen. Getson felt he needed to find more immediate profiles of accomplished people and He discovered that up-to-the-minute profiles were difficult to find. There was no magazine that spoke to his need. "GQ was all about fashion, style and trends. It was idolatry. Details was all pop culture and bubble-gum shit. Forbes occasionally had a good profile, but it was all aimed at older business-minded men," Getson explains. "Esquire was kind of a missing link: it should have spoken to me but it didn't. ... Esquire's articles were served up with a generous helping of attitude, they were more about the writer than the subject. I think one of the articles I found was titled "Rudy Giuliani is a Big Asshole." Getson had a profound sense of being left out. There was nothing on the rack for him.

Then when he was working on his senior thesis late one night, Getson happened to catch a biography of Hugh Hefner on the A&E Network. Hefner's story captured Getson's imagination. The pioneering nature of Playboy fascinated him. "Here was a man who executed a new idea that was really well thought out," remembers Getson. He began to understand that Playboy was a great publication because there was a philosophy behind it. Playboy was glamorous, high profile, and intelligent. Then, coincidentally, someone sent Getson a copy of the

40th anniversary issue of Playboy, which threw the historic and cultural importance of the magazine into stark relief. "I suddenly saw how a publisher could generate a whole lifestyle and make a difference." This epiphany about publishing combined with his sense of being overlooked by men's magazines on the market were the two seeds from which ICON grew.

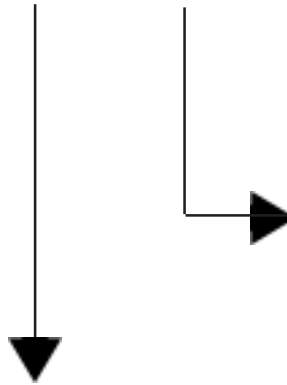
So when he and his fellow senior football players sat down to dinner with Princeton alumni to discuss the future, Getson had an idea what he wanted to do. "A lot of the alumni worked for Solomon Brothers and most of these guys wanted to go there too, but that zombie existence scared the hell out of me." That evening, Getson learned that there was an alumnus who was looking to invest in something: Why not a magazine?

Getson had pizza the next day with the man who would become his first investor and asked what had sparked his interest. The alumnus replied, "It was the first time in 10 years that anyone said anything different (than wanting to work at Solomon Brothers)." Interest was high, but by the end of the lunch Getson had convinced the investor to hold off. "I wanted to do it right. I knew what I didn't know and felt I had to go out and find that information." It was this serious, responsible approach that most impressed the investor.

Getson hit the pavement and started learning. He wrote to Hefner and later got together with him to discuss publishing. He went on to speak to every publisher he could get his hands on. Every one of them told Getson to not try publishing a magazine "it was bound to fail. Getson was not derailed, however, and he always stayed to hear why each of the publishers felt he should not proceed.

He learned that a magazine is a business before anything else. He soon saw that most magazines were "exercises in masturbation" or an ode to myself. A lot of entrepreneur publishers are on a holy war and they fail to see that publishing is as

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complicated business as any other business. "To succeed a magazine has to satisfy a real need, have a reader base that advertisers want to reach, and people out there that want the product.

From his year or so interviewing publishers and his study of Hefner's enterprise, Getson developed what he calls the metaphysics of the magazine, consisting of three key elements. First, as a publisher you must know why you exist and infuse that reason into every inch of the magazine. Second, you must pay close attention to presentation and make sure it falls in line with your *raison d'être*. In the case of Playboy, Getson points out, it was always done with class, style, and sophistication. Finally, the mission of the magazine must be published and explored in every issue. Hefner essentially immersed the pages of his magazine in his philosophy and created something more than a monthly publication "he created a brand.

BUILDING THE BUSINESS

Next Getson took his idea "to create America's leading source of in-depth profiles of the world's most accomplished people" and started to build a business

around it. Like the candy coating around the chocolate center of a tootsie roll pop, Getson coated his idea in a tasty, protective business plan. "You have to assume that your idea is good. Then you build a business plan that's better than your idea." So that's what he did. Getson hired someone to help him write a solid business plan and started to shop it around to potential investors. At this point, sleeping on a couch in some friend's apartment, dogged determination paid off. The investor search was long, hard work. Getson would get hits of \$15,000 and \$20,000 at a time. But when you're looking for a half a million dollars to start a magazine, raising money in those increments can seem to take forever.

Then with a stroke of brilliance, Getson made what he calls his best staff hiring move "he hired his advertising director, who had some experience in the business but who had never been an advertising director before. "This is key in hiring your staff," reports Getson, "hire people who haven't had the opportunity they've been dying for. Give them their chance. "Icon's first advertising director was also taking a chance, but he could see



that Getson had done his homework and that he was strapped to the front of it. Once again, the commitment and responsibility of this young entrepreneur impressed a potential contributor.

Getson and his advertising director continued to shop around for investors and advertisers. They carried hand-bound mock-ups of Icon, with ads copied from Wired (because Getson like the dimensions of Wired), and the business plan with them to every meeting. The connections provided by the advertising director yielded some high profile advertisers: Gucci, Swatch (more) and (more) to name a few.

Getson says that at this point he didn't realize the power of his audience. By chance Icon became an enormous opportunity to reach the men's market and not middle-aged, business oriented men, but young, ambitious men with money to spend. Advertisers responded appropriately, committing to advertise in the prototype issue.

At the time, Getson recalls, he also didn't realize how important the prototype issue would be from a business perspective. But that didn't matter so much because, once again, Getson hit the nail right on the head. The prototype issue carried live editorial material and live photography with paid advertisements. The prototype, while not actually appearing on the newsstands, was a real issue of Icon Thoughtstyle.

CREATING THE PRODUCT:

Getson builds a brand

With all of his hard work and earnest planning, Getson was now poised to launch his magazine onto the newsstand. Now he

had to take his original idea and create a magazine that was infused with the philosophy of presenting inspirational human stories about accomplished people. Getson knew he didn't want to be didactic, he didn't want to worship his subjects, he didn't want to sensationalize. He wanted to provide the market with a source for no-nonsense, in-depth profiles of the world's most accomplished people. And the only way to get the access he needed for his first issues was using guerilla journalism tactics.

One day in early (year) he attended a boxing match where Roy Jones Jr. was the winner. He was sitting there with his girlfriend and it hit him that Roy Jones Jr. needed to be in Icon. Here he was watching America's most accomplished boxer and he knew that he needed to include this man in his first issue. After the fight, he made his way as close to the ring as he could get and as Jones passed by, Getson shoved his business card into Jones's glove. Wilson kept it. Getson didn't have a plan, but he made his way to Jones's dressing room where six bodyguards were waiting outside. Getson steeled his nerve and headed for the door. They didn't stop him and before he knew it, Getson was standing inside the dressing room. The publisher and the boxer spoke for a few minutes and hit it off

and Jones was on the cover of the premiere issue of Icon.

Oliver North is also profiled in the premiere issue. Getson worked on getting him to agree to be profiled for quite a while. North was a little gunshy, however, after being previously raked across the coals by the press. Getson waited and waited for the go ahead on the interview, but heard nothing. As the date for the interview approached there was silence from the North camp. So, on the appointed day, Getson sent the reporter and the photographer to North's and, sure enough, the gamble paid off. Getson got his interview and his story. Icon wasn't brutal with North but they didn't make him look like a hero either. And North was pleased by the fair treatment from ICON.

That's a hallmark of Icon Thoughtstyle, fair treatment. Getson isn't out to sensationalize anyone. He's out to profile them. He isn't out to put anyone on a pedestal or send them down in flames. He wants to give a brutally honest picture of these people in their own environment. Getson won't settle for a 30 minute interview, his reporters spend days with their subjects. He won't settle for posed photography either. No stylists, no makeup, no gloss. Just original photography of the



Boxing champion Roy Jones Jr. and politician Oliver North were profiled in the first issue of ICON Thoughtstyle.



Including Clint Eastwood's interview for *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* release, Yassir Arafat, Jerry Adams, the legendary leader of Sinn Feinn, and the artist formerly known as Prince, graced the first ten issues of *ICON Thoughtstyle Magazine for Men*.

gritty, down-to-earth reality of these icons in their everyday skins.

Getson's vision of gritty, close-up profiles even translates to the feel of the cover. He was visiting friends one day when he picked up a piece of potpourri in the bathroom. He thought, "this is how the cover of Icon should feel." He sent it to his printer with a note and what he got back was not what he wanted. "They sent me press sheets and the cover was all wrong. It felt like the cover of *Wired*. You've felt that, haven't you? What I wanted was something gritty, almost dirty. I flew down there and forced them to reprint. We finally ended up creating a new coating where we actually ground up dirt in the varnish. We broke three presses on that run and the printer quit afterwards. We still don't get it right every time."

Icon's honesty and realism is building a reputation in the industry. Clint Eastwood did one interview when *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* was released on Icon. The first ten issues included profiles of Jerry Adams, the legendary leader of Sinn Feinn (who had never before posed for magazine photographs), the artist formerly known as Prince, Yassir Arafat, Larry Allison, Richard Branson and many others. "It is a miracle for us that on every issue we have gotten greater and greater access. We need that

access to create the product that we want. And the magazine industry is scratching its head," says Getson.

Miracle or not, Getson's die-hard vision and persistence is paying off. With a circulation of only 150,000, every issue is breaking the previous issue's advertising revenue record. After the third issue Icon paid for a reader study and discovered that the magazine was definitely reaching a specific market. The product was self-selecting a pretty impressive audience: 66% of the readers were college graduates and had a median income of \$70,000. Icon's readers were better educated and had higher incomes than the readers of *GQ*, *Esquire*, or *Details*, which has made for a field day in attracting advertisers. These days, almost every right-facing page is graced by advertisements from BMW, Burberry, Prudential, Range Rover, Breitling, and other high end advertisers.

Getson calls it all an accident. But from the start, he has had a good product, a very clear sales message, and a crystal clear picture of who his reader is. He says that "the product reflects the reader. But really, the timing was perfect. I saw an unsatisfied niche in the market and jumped to fill it." Even so, it hasn't gone to his head.

The man sitting across from me in the pub where we met was as gritty and down to earth as his magazine. He remembers when they got together to celebrate their first issue, "that night we burned holes in the cover and we tore it apart." He confides, "Every issue since then has sucked. But that will keep us going onward and upward. If you're never satisfied with what you do, you'll improve the next time." And this, more than anything has been the cornerstone of Getson's current success: Always moving onward and upward. □

