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Reader's Digest Association Trims Flagship, Eyes Niches

By Lucia Moses



While making massive cuts in the size of its flagship, Reader's Digest Association is making a bigger play for mature women as it shifts its focus from mass to niche audiences.

Reader's Digest will cut its rate base to 5.5 million in February 2010 million from 8 million and reduce its frequency to 10 from 12 issues a year. At 5.5 million, the rate base will be almost a third of its 15 million level in 1999.

Meanwhile, RDA is green-lighting a full launch of Best You following a two-issue test earlier this year. Best You was modeled after the Best Health magazine that RDA launched in Canada in 2008. Best You will launch in March 2010 as a quarterly with a 500,000 rate base. It'll be rounded out by a Best You-branded newsletter, books and videos.

Alyce Alston, president of RDA's Home & Garden and Health & Wellness affinity group, which launched the test issues, and Neil Wertheimer, who edited them, won't get to oversee the full rollout. Responsibility for Best You will shift to Peggy Northrop, who is editor of the U.S. flagship of Reader's Digest and just added oversight for its 50 international editions.

"The Baby Boom generation is the largest demo in the history of the world, and they're all reaching their 40s and 50s," said Eva Dillon, president of Reader's Digest Community, which will publish Best You going forward. "We believe there's a void for a health and wellness and lifestyle magazine."

Northrop knows more than a little about the over-40 audience, having previously been editor of More, Meredith's successful magazine for women in their 40s and 50s.

As for RDA's flagship, the rate base cut is the second since private equity firm Ripplewood Holdings bought the parent company back in early 2007. In January 2008, RD's rate base dropped 20 percent to 8 million as part of a series of changes aimed at modernizing the 86-year-old title.

The rate base cut will free up money to invest in a series of digital products in the coming year that will be branded Reader's Digest Version. The products will be based on service content RD already produces in video and mobile format and will be a mix of free and paid by consumers, Dillon said.