

*On July 15, 2002, Keith Blanchard delivered an address to a lecture hall of students at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Some excerpts:*

Maxim is sex, sports, beer, gadgets, fashion, fitness. And now, today, Maxim is the largest general interest men's magazine on Planet Earth.

Is Maxim a light read? Of course it is, because our form is dictated by our target reader in the same way that our content is. If you're trying to reach cranky retirees, maybe 6,000-word rants are still appropriate. But our readers are young affluent men, which means they're busier today than they will ever be in their lives; they have shorter attention spans than any previous generation, they are chronically overstimulated and easily bored. Now we can sit in a corner and bemoan this sad state of affairs, or we can get off our ass and adapt.

We have built a highly successful magazine by the astonishing methodology of figuring out what readers want and then giving it to them, an enterprise which in journalism is called pandering, and which in every other industry is called customer service.

The very notion of what a magazine is is changing, and it's changing fast. People across the board have shorter attention spans. People across the board have multiple interests. People across the board demand graphical interestingness of their media.

Now, you can deny the growing expectations of readers, or you can service them, as Maxim has, with eye-catching graphics, multiple entry points, short form writing, and all the rest of it. It's no shame to adapt your form to what the consumer wants—to do otherwise is to trivialize and insult your reader in a way that is no longer going to be tolerated in this brave new world. Readers have options, and by God they're going to exercise them.

The fact is most magazines in the U.S. are still publishing as if they are being laboriously pieced together in boxes of metal type. Solid impenetrable walls of text... images constrained to regular rectangular boxes. But today, the technology of printing is such that you can do literally anything that sets ink to page: any shape block of text, any photo treatment, any number of layers and backgrounds. The limitations on what you can do are no longer on the table... they're in the human mind. And hallelujah.

Reader attention spans, famously, have withered in the same time. Readers today demand, and have a right to expect, constant novelty and stimulation at precisely the moment in magazine evolution that we're able to provide it. We have become masters of the short form, because, for reasons entirely outside our control, the short form is what people want now. Adapt or perish.