

GQ



GQ magazine is studied by AL and GCSE students alike. But what's it really like to be one of the key decision makers at one of the UK's best-selling men's lifestyle magazines? We caught up with Stuart McGurk, now a freelance editor but formerly Associate Editor at GQ UK and asked him the questions that Media students need answers to!



Photo: Claire Pollard



When choosing a celebrity for the front cover, what factors influence your decision? What can you tell us about the process?

Choosing covers is, by turns, the most rewarding and most infuriating part of the job of working on a glossy magazine. In the UK, getting the cover right is paramount – at GQ especially, most sales of the magazine are retail rather than subscription, so the cover has a huge impact on sales (for whatever reason, this is flipped in America, where the majority of sales come from subscription, meaning you can screw up the odd cover without too much consequence).

The mistake, though, is to simply try to get the most famous person for any given month who has a ‘hook’ – a ‘hook’ being a film/ TV show/ album etc they’re promoting, and hence the reason they would do the cover in the first place – but the reality is this often doesn’t work. It needs to be the right person at the right *time* – that always matters more than fame.

A very famous person – Brad Pitt, say – who’s not in a particularly interesting stage in their career/ life will often not sell. But getting, say, Phoebe Waller-Bridge just as the second season of *Fleabag* starts, will. Endings are often more popular than beginnings – two of GQ’s best-selling covers during my time were Jon Hamm and Bryan Cranston, just as *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*, respectively, were ending their runs (notably, the hooks for both were different projects, standalone films, though the interviews touched lightly on these).

Occasionally, there is no hook, but simply someone who will do a GQ cover to help their brand/image etc. Mostly these are not actors but footballers/ politicians etc. But the same rule is true: what’s interesting about *that person* at that time? GQ’s cover with the footballer Raheem Sterling, at the time he was speaking about racism in the British press, is a case in point, and was one of GQ’s best-selling ever. That cover proved something else: how key execution can be.

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**A risk worth taking:
Raheem Sterling with wings!**

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wary of looking silly; mostly, young actors they just wanted to look cool in a suit on the cover of GQ. But on the few occasions we were able to convince people to try something different – as I did by convincing Sterling to be stripped to the waist wearing angel wings, the coverline reading, ‘Guardian Angel – how Raheem Sterling saved football from itself’ – the cover can really fly, if you excuse the pun.

Exclusivity, also, is everything – you want them to be the first to talk to that person about the very thing that makes them newsworthy. Even coming second after another publication means you’ll often miss out on most of the press ‘pick-up’ – i.e. newspapers and websites who will write up news stories from the most interesting quotes, which gives you free publicity.

And all of the above is further complicated by fact, for a glossy monthly magazine, covers have to be booked *at a bare minimum* three months ahead of time, simply to allow time for the various negotiations with the publicist/agent over the shoot, the magazine production process, and the fact that even after you ‘send’ the magazine to the printers, there’s still another month to wait before it’s on the shelf.

The result is an ungodly mix of prediction, intuition, organisation (keeping up with LA and New York publicists, who look after everyone important, even the UK stars, about release dates of projects), execution, and no small amount of luck.

How much are you thinking about your target audience and their aspirations when designing the magazine and choosing front covers? Do you discuss their potential response?

We were certainly always thinking if a cover star is a ‘GQ cover’, while also trying not to let ourselves to become too restricted by it. Put another way: just because the standard GQ cover would be a cool actor in his mid-30s experiencing a career spike, we would never only feature that type of cover, as the magazine would become predictable and boring very quickly. At the same time, a huge part of GQ is aspiration, and we often found that if

we go too young or too old we would lose that crucial aspiration factor. Young men in their early 20s in superhero films often didn't sell as well as we'd imagine, and the same went for silver-screen legends in their 60s and 70s. Our readers certainly may want to read about them, but not to represent them. (For this reason, the *GQ Men of the Year* issue – where we published up to ten different covers for the same month – could be liberating, allowing us to put, for instance, someone like Greta Thunberg on the cover, a cover we might not have done as a regular solo cover, purely for fear it wouldn't sell).

And 'represent' is a key word here: people see a *GQ* cover as an endorsement. As a journalist, this can be frustrating, as controversial people are naturally interesting subjects, and certainly worthy of longform articles, assuming those articles are rigorous and suitably critical, not fawning and unquestioning. But we found these should only be the subject of inside stories, lest it be seen that we're excusing / supporting them.

What else does *GQ* do to serve their target audience?

Fundamentally, *GQ* is a men's style magazine, and so *GQ* is always in service to that, both in print and online. Certainly, *GQ* wouldn't consider itself just this – at its best, it's also a brilliant forum for excellent profile writing and world-class photography and design, along with award-winning longform feature writing and sharp culture writing – but men's style is the magazine's core, and, along with high-end watch brands, is where the vast majority of the magazine's advertising revenue comes from.

This means nearly all shoots in the magazine – celebrities and otherwise – are done in tandem with the magazine's style editors to showcase the best new men's style on offer. And more simply, the service elements of the magazine aim to keep the reader up to date on the latest style trends.

How do you measure the success of each issue?

I suppose two-fold: sales (obviously), and impact. A particular issue might



The weekly digital Hype issue allows for a wider range of cover stars

Extra revenue streams are vital to the magazine business these days – it's almost impossible to survive without them.



Photo: Claire Pollard

not fly off the shelves, say. But with print sales becoming less and less important, just as key is how well the stories within that issue do online. If a profile or a feature goes viral, an issue that hasn't sold well on newsstand can still be considered a huge hit.

How do *GQ* choose which advertisers and sponsors to work with? What influences this decision most?

I suppose the obvious answer, in terms of advertisers, is brands that want to promote themselves in the sphere of male, high-end, luxury lifestyle. So, everything from top-tier tailoring to the latest sports cars. These brands are often heritage brands, so the names wouldn't change much from month to month, or year to year.

Sponsors tend to be a little more fluid. These will often be the brands who, for instance, sponsor individual categories at the Men of the Year awards, or partner with *GQ*'s live talks event, *GQ Heroes*. These won't necessarily be fashion brands, but crucially the goal will be to align their brand with the *GQ* one – a Chinese mobile phone manufacturer with a new luxury phone, for instance, may want to sponsor a Men of the Year award as *GQ* readers would be their target market, and the winner of the award

will, of course, likely be a famous, aspirational individual.

The only problem that potentially arises is if a brand feels that, by sponsoring an award, they have a say in who wins it – they don't, and GQ could never guarantee any individual winner anyway, as there are so many factors involved.

How has GQ responded to the rise of digitally convergent platforms like Instagram and Twitter? Does this change the way you design, edit or produce the magazine?

Both are crucial – Instagram for covers and shoots in general, and Twitter for articles. Both can have a hugely positive impact, and ensure stories from any individual issue are talked about, and in some cases, go viral. But I wouldn't say it has an impact on how the magazine is made, or if anything is created with Instagram or Twitter in mind. We're always thinking, anyway, about what will get attention, and what would make a must-read story, so it's just an extension of that.

One key launch, though, was GQ Hype – a weekly, online-only cover. Celebrities – and their agents/publicists – naturally want a GQ print cover, but with only so many on offer, previously the drop-off from not getting a print cover could be drastic – simply offering them an online-only interview, say, which was understandably a less-than-exciting prospect for established celebrities. So, GQ Hype was launched as a perfect middle-ground. With only one per week it still came with prestige, it was still a GQ cover, designed as one, and so that fact alone meant it would get more attention both on Instagram and Twitter than other online-only stories.

How has GQ responded to the economic context – namely the fact that people don't spend as much on print magazines as they used to?

Extra revenue streams are vital to the magazine business these days – it's almost impossible to survive without them. It's about deciding the key areas in which the brand is strong and focussing on those, rather than expanding into areas you are not

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associated with. So, along with the annual Men of the Year awards – using GQ's unparalleled celebrity contacts – GQ also had an annual car awards, and a food and drink awards. All subjects covered in the magazine, but crucially, focussing on high-end and luxury, as the magazine does. GQ's most recent innovation was the GQ Heroes event, where revenue is generated by both ticket prices and sponsorship.

There is no set process for how these events and awards etc. have been decided, but all staff are invited to contribute ideas, and good ones will simply be explored with GQ's advertising department, to see if they are economically viable.

Thanks to Stuart McGurk, former Associate editor of GQ for answering our questions!



from the MM vaults

New Statesman's Got it Covered: Analysis of Award Winning Magazine Covers – Tom Gatti, MM76

Fighting Fit or Bad Medicine? Men's Health Magazine – Georgia Platman, MM72

Photo: Claire Pollard



Additional revenue streams: GQ awards