Eight Tips For Improving Your Magazine Right Now

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**An annotated version of this presentation
can be found at www.jandos.com/folio06**

Design

1. **Simplify.** Some magazine clutter pages with non-communicative elements—boxes, rules, frames and decorative standing art. As a result, signage and doodads overwhelm content. Eliminate redundant and decorative elements from layouts. Good design "sells" rather than distract from images and words.

2. **Right-size page elements.** Layouts can feel disorganized or confusing if too much emphasis is given to less important elements. Placement, size, color and value decisions should be guided by the relative informational value of each element.

3. **Don't design a loaf of bread.** Some magazines are like a loaf of bread—no matter where you cut them open, they offer a consistent texture and predictable "sameness." Bread may be the staff of life, but a loaf makes a dull read. Common examples of bread design: pages contain too many "middle-sized" elements; the same single color is sprinkled everywhere; or photos are cropped similarly. Any magazine can support variety within its structure. Solving "bread" design can be as simple as making sure spreads look different from one another and each spread (or page) has a main visual focus.

4. **Get the space you need.** A million dollar art budget is useless without the room to display the art you purchase. Design is fueled by space.

Art

5. **Become an art whisperer.** Good design is responsive to imagery. Design to enhance rather than compete with art and photography. You cannot save bad art with design.

6. **Good photography is not always good.** Looser crops, outtakes, and action photos (even if they are slightly blurry) often give more insight into the subject than a perfectly lit, composed, (and predictable) portrait. Look for images that will intrigue and surprise your readers. Thoughtful cropping can breath new life into tired images.

7. **Two clichés don't equal an original idea.** If you must use stock art, choose it carefully. Many stock images (by themselves or through the use of photoshop) juxtapose two stereotypes creating a melded image. (Example: lawyer in powdered wig with a laptop used to illustrate a story on legal software.) This approach generates a simple-to-decode pictograph rather than an illustration. Real illustration renders insight or comments on the topic. Invest in fewer, more specific ideas, invite freelancers into the creative process. Visuals are merely decorative unless they emerge from an article's core argument.

8. **Banish your canards.** Many fields have an obvious visual vocabulary (teachers = apples and bells, lawyers = scales and gavels). However, using apples in the pages of an educational magazine makes the publication appear superficial—the reader's understanding of teaching goes deeper than a couple of icons. Banishing these obvious though misleading images also improves the thinking behind assigned art because it forces freelancers to engage issues deeper than the magazine's demographic.