



THE RISKS +
REWARDS OF

EXTREME INNOVATION

INTRODUCTION



EXTREME INNOVATION AT its best is intentional, systematic, and frequently the only way to create meaningful change. It's also a culture and a practice for many of the world's leading companies and their visionary leaders.

And yet 'extreme' sounds risky, expensive, even dangerous.

In July 2021 the IMEX team explored this theme of Extreme Innovation by inviting several people who'd done just that - innovated extremely or during extreme times - to tell their stories and share what they've learned.

One such story was the launch of UK Grazia magazine in 2004. **Anna Gyseman**, now the IMEX Design Manager was part of that launch team together with Creative Director, **Suzanne Sykes**.

This Snapshot Report is a distillation of the learnings from that conversation, which was moderated by IMEX Communications Strategist, **Kit Watts**. We also filled in some of the blanks retrospectively...



A MOMENT IN TIME

IN 2003 PUBLISHERS EMAP approached the Italian publishing company Mondadori, to talk about their weekly magazine Grazia-and explore whether it would work in the UK market.

They had a hunch. If it succeeded, Grazia would become the very first glossy weekly for women in the UK. As such, it would revolutionise the women's magazine market. Of course, if it failed, there would be more than bruised egos on the line.

The parallels between events and magazine production are many. Both are here one minute, gone the next. Both are produced in a flurry of intense, focused activity. Both require drive, creativity, tight deadlines, relevance, quality, consistency and memorability.

The story of what happened between that first hunch and final magazine launch has lessons for every event planner, every creative team and perhaps even every CMO. »



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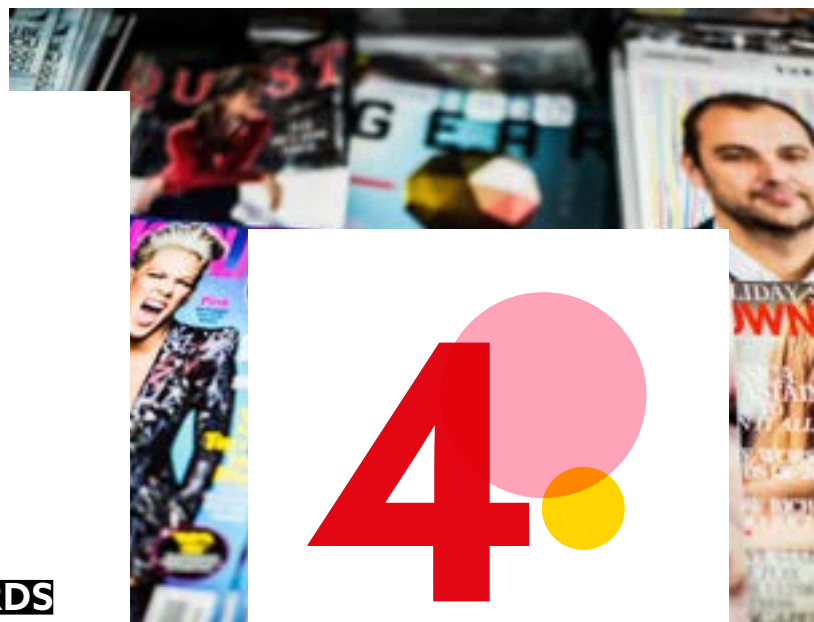
PUTTING THE TEAM TOGETHER, RISKS & REWARDS

WHEN SUZANNE SYKES got 'the call' to ask if she'd be prepared to put a team together to launch UK Grazia she didn't hesitate.

As a creative director with over 20 years' experience in magazine design and production, she says, "this just felt too exciting to say no to. Yes, it was risky. Yes, it would be a lot of hard work. Yes, it meant leaving my existing, secure job to step into the unknown. And yet I couldn't say no. I didn't want to. Moments like this don't come along often in any career and if you're a creative, you live to create. You feel drawn towards the energy and action of creation. Like event planners - I'm guessing - there's a visceral need to produce 'things' that have a life and that touch and connect us to the collective human experience."



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GET THE VERY BEST PEOPLE YOU CAN

AS SUZANNE EXPLAINS, "For this project to work I needed the very best people. I wanted brilliant designers who were adaptable, dynamic and could work well under the time pressure that a weekly format would involve.

"I also knew from experience we'd be working long hours together so shared values and a good sense of humour were important. Again, like event planning, being on a magazine is intense. There are highs, lows, dramas, challenges. Each individual needs to be mature and robust enough to handle those with grace.

"There's a stereotype that creative people are prickly prima donnas ready to throw their toys out of the pram at the first sign of discord or disagreement. That's not been my experience. I find good creative people to be well-organised, systematic and motivated to work with others. Creatives spark off each other and that increases the quality of their creative output," declares Suzanne. »



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TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY, WHICH SOMETIMES SEEM IN SHORT SUPPLY NOWADAYS, BECAME THE BEDROCK OF THIS PROJECT

IF HE'S IN, I'M IN!

THERE'S VALUE IN having a hunch and there's value in being strategic. Suzanne reminds us if you're thinking of forming a new team you'd do well to think strategically. "It's like pitching a movie script to a big Hollywood studio. No-one wants to be the first to commit or say yes. Everyone wants to know 'who else is in?', 'Who's got the lead role?'. That means working very hard to get buy-in from a key person or influencer early on, one whose mere presence will persuade others of the project's validity," she says. As Anna Gyseman explains "Once I heard that Jonathon-Clayton-Jones had said yes there was no way I wanted to be left out. Can you imagine years later me being the one saying, 'yes they invited me, but I hesitated and felt too scared to jump in even though they had the makings of one of the best creative teams in UK magazines at the time'. I didn't want to be that 'coulda, shoulda, woulda' person and, apart from that, there was something incredibly exciting about this. To be in at the very start and to have so much input while bouncing ideas off these high calibre people at the top of their game. No. I wasn't about to miss that!"



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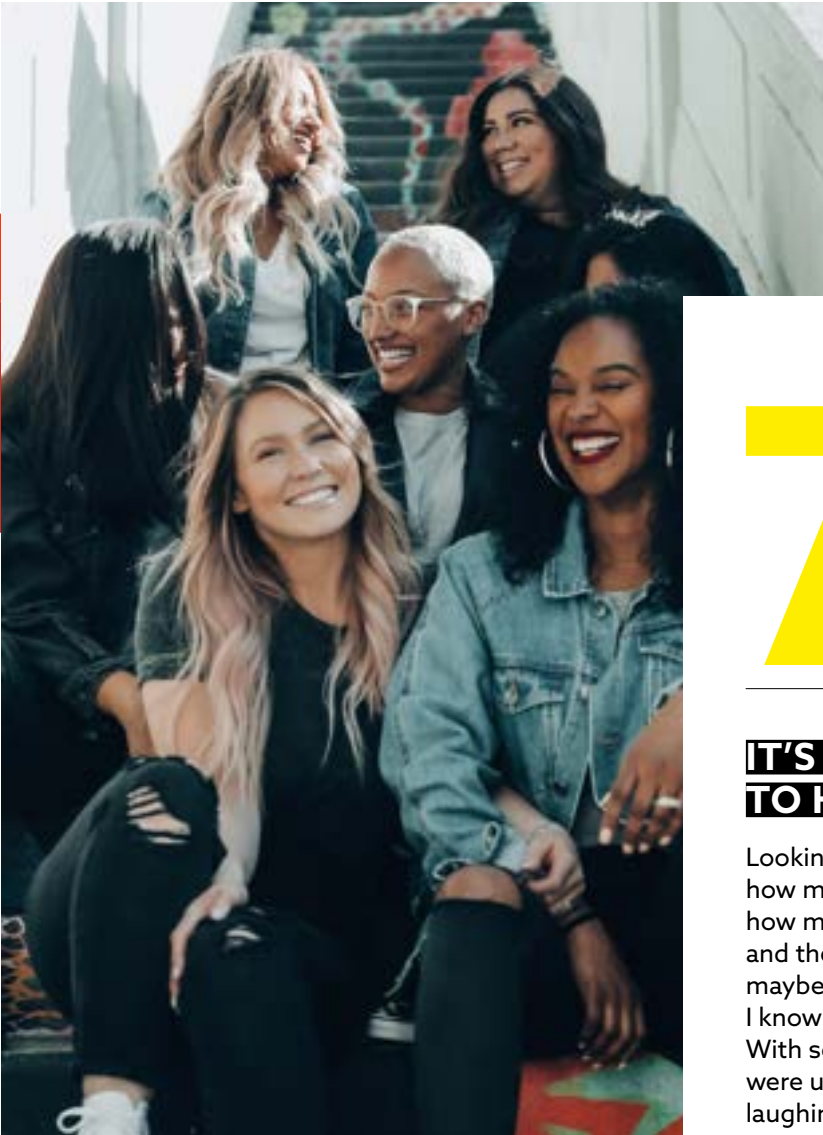
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BE HONEST - DON'T HIDE THE TRUTH

ASKING PEOPLE TO leave existing jobs for a totally unknown project is both thrilling and totally unnerving. It's a big responsibility.

Suzanne was open with each designer about the risks of a new venture. "I was straight up with everyone from the start. 'whatever happens, I'm certain we're going to have an amazing time trying' became my mantra. Jobs and reputations were on the line and, again, although creative people have a reputation for being maverick and 'out there', most of them still have rent or mortgages to pay, and they certainly do not want to hinder their careers with just one wrong move.

Trust and transparency, which sometimes seem in short supply nowadays, became the bedrock of this project. She goes on, "All our reputations were on the line. We were all in it together and, although our backers and owners had a lot to lose as well, they had buffers such as other brands and other products. As individuals in creative professions, we were mostly as good as our last project or client testimonial." »



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IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE FUN

Looking back both Suzanne and Anna remember how much they laughed. "It's easy to romanticise how much fun we had...long nights in the office and then in the pub took certainly their toll. And maybe we laughed out of sheer exhaustion, but I know it felt good - and necessary - to laugh. With so much riding on our combined efforts we were under tremendous pressure to succeed and laughing together was a brilliant way to release tension and to humanise what we were trying to achieve," says Anna.

Suzanne adds, "Obviously you can't plan or contrive laughter. It's the function of a healthy team; one that's bonded, forgiving, empathic and supportive. Looking back our team spirit seems curiously British and eccentric now that I think about it, frequently choking on our tea and biscuits as someone voiced a perfectly timed, clever remark. These are the work colleagues that become lifelong friends.

"There's another important point. You must agree ground rules from the start, but you can't dictate or govern every detail of how a team interacts. In my experience if there's a level of parity in everyone's emotional intelligence, any team can flourish and perform," advises Suzanne. »



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TAKING IT APART AND STARTING AGAIN

SUZANNE PICKS UP the story. "Once we were all assembled the first step was to forensically pick apart the Italian Grazia to define and agree the core elements of the brand. How could we capitalise on its success and create something entirely fitting for the British market? And, who, if anyone was going to be our competition? We knew without question (if we succeeded) that once we hit the market there'd be a stream of imitators. So, how could we de-risk that likelihood and make it hard to copy without ruining the aesthetic?"

"This is where you must leave your ego at the door. Thinking that you know the answers is dangerous, even if you have a strong hunch it's so important to work through a pre-agreed process," she adds.

The early noughties in Great Britain saw the unrelenting rise of the celebrity. 'Cool Britannia' was starting to fade. Wikipedia describes the Cool Britannia years as "The success of Britpop and musical acts such as the Spice Girls, Blur and Oasis led to a renewed feeling of optimism in the United Kingdom following the tumultuous years of the 1970s and 1980s."



As Anna puts it, "In 2003/4 there was a feeling that something new was due, and was coming, we just didn't know what!"

"We also had one big constraint. Whatever the concept we had to be able to turn it around in one week and to a high standard. Commercially it was vital to attract advertisers and the only way to ensure their adverts was to guarantee a high quality, page-turning product.

"With consumer monthlies you're typically planning page spreads in June for the Christmas edition. Time is a luxury that doesn't feel like a luxury until you don't have it.

"From the start our target was very clear. We had to produce a high-quality glossy at the speed of a weekly newspaper supplement.

"Rather than go to press once we had our first edition in the bag, we created one dummy after another until we'd done roughly five full dry runs. Practice. Practice. Adjust. Practice. Tweak. Refine. Practice. It was a strange, unreal time.

"Above all, this pre-launch period was about holding our nerve. Now was not the time to get the wobbles, even though we had few advertisers – yet!" We knew that once the magazine was out there and successful the rest would follow. »



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GET THE LOOK AND FEEL RIGHT

AS ANNA EXPLAINS, now that the team had dissected the Italian brand they had to rebuild a British version. "One look at the UK marketplace meant we could clearly see that yellow was unused and unloved. So, we set out to 'own yellow'. The team needed a second brand colour and bravely chose matt black. Using matt in a glossy product was another unknown move for its time, and for a magazine aimed at young women, unheard of!"

Getting the look and feel right was key to success. Now they turned their attention to playing with angles. This move was designed to make their pages hard to copy. Using angular treatments on photos and in text also gave the magazine an 'edgy' feeling. It wasn't straight up. It wasn't regular. It wasn't traditional. This design motif strongly signalled that it was different. And it also echoed what their readers were looking for and how they felt.

Next came photographs. As Suzanne explains, "Pictures were vitally important. We all loved the reportage aesthetic of Life Magazine and that love helped us decide that we were never going to use just 'any photograph'. In fact, we were looking for pictures. A picture is inherently interesting. It grabs the eye. It's not necessarily beautiful or perfect but it commands attention, sometimes for reasons we can't consciously fathom.

"We briefed photographers and scoured photos for off-moment shots that were interesting or soulful or slightly odd. The marriage of reportage, celebrity street and fashion photography was another brave move, also reflecting the natural imperfections of real life was ahead of its time.

"Within the first four years of launch," says Suzanne, "UK Grazia had won eight design awards. That industry recognition was extremely satisfying. It was testament to our commitment to producing the unexpected - something brand new and totally of its time."



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KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

AS IS OFTEN the case, fashion, art and music are great sources of inspiration. For example, Suzanne and the team agreed they needed to leverage celebrities. This was not part of Italian Grazia's brand at all. They also decided to show real celebrities, with all their emotional fallibilities. In doing so they were ticking two boxes. First, they were making their content relatable for the 20-30-something high street shopper who was their target reader. From research they knew she yearned to look like a glamorous actress but, in truth, she also wanted to relate to them with some of the same problems in life and love.

Second, they knew that every pair of sunglasses, every handbag, every piece of jewellery the celebs were photographed wearing could become a fashion or news story. This approach was brand new. Traditionally, clothes and accessories were carefully curated and displayed on models in painstakingly planned and beautiful spreads. UK Grazia was relying on people like Victoria Beckham being seen out and about wearing something new their readers could all covet and talk about. In fact, cover shots of Victoria were responsible for two of their best-selling issues in 18 months.

A similar affinity with your customer, reader or event attendee is critical. Can they relate? Can they recognise themselves in the language, the colour, the style of your approach? As the months went on the UK Grazia team got to know their readers inside and out. They championed their choices and the lives they already led and, more importantly, the lives they aspired to lead. »




Summary

SO, THERE YOU are. A small slice of UK women's magazine history that all creatives, event planners and brand owners can learn from. 17 years later the hard work of the launch team still bears fruit. Grazia's edgy yellow and black spreads and its striking, slightly offbeat covers remain, and the magazine enjoys a highly targeted demographic of 25-45-year-old women and more AB profile readers than Vogue and Elle.

Its current media kit explains, "Our readers are the centre of everything we do - and we are so much more than just a magazine. Grazia is a community of stylish, funny, ambitious, aspirational, warm, intelligent and successful women, fuelled by passion for knowledge." **Sound familiar?**

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