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The Best Designed Magazine I Ever Saw

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By Robin Benson / Editor, Past Print

What's the best designed magazine you ever saw? Oh, that's easy you might say. OK, a few clarifications. I don't mean a title that has several knock-out spreads in the middle but one that works for the reader (that's who you do it for after all) from the cover to the last page. One that has a contents page that spells out the goodies on offer, and maybe a reader could find something immediately and turn to that page

A magazine that has thought about the editorial design on those half pages front and back that have ads next to them, chosen a typeface with a readable point size for the text, and a display face that puts across the message easily, and combined with photos and graphics pulls the reader into a spread. A magazine where the

design creates a natural flow to the editorial and all those typographic reader aids--bylines, intros, pull quotes, sidebars, captions, page numbers--have been well chosen and work. A design that isn't noticeable by the reader because all the elements blend together issue after issue so that the words and images are the only things that stand out.

I expect your list is a bit shorter now but there are magazines, past and present, that are beautifully designed. The best one I ever saw was **Quality**, published by Time Inc. in 1987. The Editor was **Landon Jones**; the Assistant Managing Editor and art director of magazine development at Time Inc. was **Mary K. Baumann**; **Nora Sheehan** was the Art Director, and **Michele McNally** (now photography director at *The New York Times*) was the Picture Editor. Sheehan recently told me that the magazine was produced by an in-house magazine group at Time Inc. and the first issue, of about 100,000 copies, was mailed to a select upmarket readership. Everyone at Time Inc. liked it but the subscription returns probably weren't enough to justify its continuance.

Below is the first (and only) issue, dated Winter 1987. I thought it worked from the cover onwards.



What could be a better start to the magazine than than this stylish Contents page?

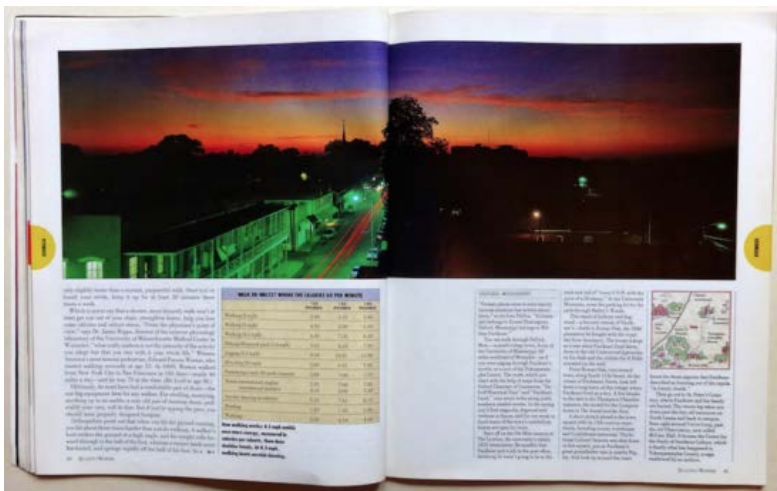


There are seven product pages near the front that have a controlled busyness. This is the second spread, with an eye-line depth across the top of the page that is kept constant wherever it's used, cutouts, angled photos, different line lengths, keyline boxes on the square-ups and thick rules under the headlines.





The format for the single pages facing ads. The eye-line space across the top of the page is repeated on all the department pages. These pages use Bodoni Bold for the stand first. Each uses a six line drop cap and each of these single pages has a same size slug but different colors on the top right, with the department heading in white.



These two spreads (of three in the magazine) perhaps sum up the feel of *Quality*. The headline face throughout the magazine is Didi, very appropriate considering the editorial and it contrasts well with Futura Light caps used for all the intros on the feature pages. Excellent landscape photos across these spreads with two different line lengths for the copy. A chart and two soft graphic maps work well. The empty column on the right-hand pages doesn't look out of it at all.





A change of pace with a dark fashion spread; the feature runs over the next two spreads.



I thought it a clever idea to put the heading and intro on the right, white out of black. The photo has a bit of reader involvement because the products aren't named in a caption...guess what they are or turn to page 94 where there is a drawing of the photo and the answers. The white text column nicely turns over to a white spread with a strip of cutouts across the bottom.





The perfect spread with the two size headline, intro, text, angled photos and huge bleed photo. SIMON is text block wide with the top serif on the N in the margin.



The first of two text spreads near the back. The eye-line space is repeated as in the department pages. The spread is text heavy but the graphics and six line drop caps create visual interest here and on the following spread. The thick and thin horizontal and vertical column rules also help to lock the elements together across the spread.

This was the only issue of *Quality*. For whatever reason the first issue mailing didn't convince Time Inc. that the magazine had a publishing future. I've always thought it was a classy job (except for the rather unnecessary colored half circles that bled on the edges of the feature pages).

You can see the complete Winter 1987 issue of *Quality* on the Past Print website.

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