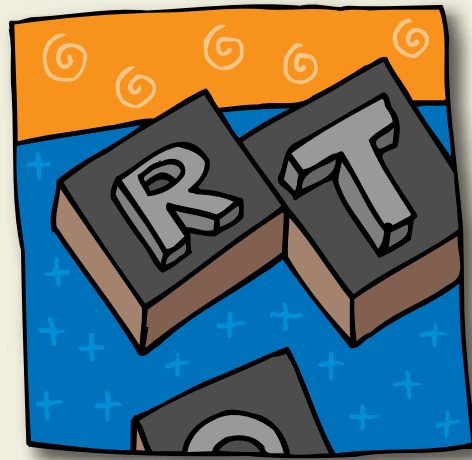


NEWS DESIGN ASSOCIATES INC



THOUGHTS ON MAGAZINE DESIGN

*An Interview with Tony Sutton
By Tamara Oberholster*



Tony Sutton is president of News Design Associates, Inc. – <http://www.newsdesign.net> – an international publishing consultancy based in Georgetown, 20 km from Toronto in Canada.

He is a former editor of the South African magazine, *Drum*, and of *Design*, the magazine of the US-based Society for News Design. He is also editor and publisher of the internet magazine *ColdType* – <http://www.coldtype.net>

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He was interviewed by **Tamara Oberholster** for the South African magazine, *Design*, in July 2007.

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Tamara Oberholster: What is the importance of design layout in magazines?

Tony Sutton: Excellent design is on the same level as great writing and editing. The editor's job is to produce stories that will engage the reader; the designer must set the tone for those words by presenting them in a manner that will make the buyer want to read and enjoy them.

Oberholster: In your opinion, are there differences in layout design between trade, custom and consumer magazines? If so, what prompts these variations?

Sutton: Depends what end of the trade press you mean. High end trade and custom magazines, such as the magazines Anglo American used to produce, demand design that is equivalent to that of the best commercial magazines. But as you progress further down the line to newsletter-type publications, there's more need for neatness and economy than eye-smacking and space-consuming

layouts. Simplicity and ease of reading are great virtues, especially when you have a captive audience, but we shouldn't equate those qualities with 'boring' or 'soulless' – I've seen too much money wasted on trade journals that go straight into the customer's rubbish bin.

Oberholster: Are there set design formats that magazines are bound to stick to? Is 'different' ever better?

Sutton: There's no reason magazines should look alike. But, as with almost every other product - cars, toasters, washing machines, whatever - they do because it's easier to copy what someone else has already done than it is to exert your own mind. Having said that, of course, as soon as a designer does something innovative, everyone copies it and then it becomes mainstream. Being different is a wonderful ideal, but some basic elements are essential – two things instantly come to mind: clear navigation and ease



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of reading – think of all the trendy magazines that have died because the text was illegible, or boring.

Oberholster: How does a magazine's target readership influence its layout design?

Sutton: It always helps to know who the magazine is aimed at when working on a new design. Much of the work is instinctive: If I'm doing a computer magazine aimed at young guys I'm likely to be working from a completely different set of graphic and typographic assumptions than if I'm designing a high-end woman's fashion magazine. But the 'different' type of design you mentioned earlier would allow me to trash those assumptions and develop a style that contradicts those basic ideals. That can be dangerous: If it works, I'm a hero; if it fails, I'm unemployable.

Oberholster: What makes a magazine's design layout a success or a failure?

Sutton: Readership. Response. Sales.

Oberholster: What are the current trends in magazine design layout (with regards to type, illustrations, formats, papers, styles etc) and who is setting them? Why do they work?

Sutton: There are no trends, only a remarkably narrow range of design options that move in a small cycle between the ultra modern, which is almost always determined by new

technology, and the classic, which is a natural reaction to the excesses brought about by the over-enthusiastic use of new technology.

Oberholster: Would you say that technology and the Internet have influenced magazine design? If so, how and to what extent?

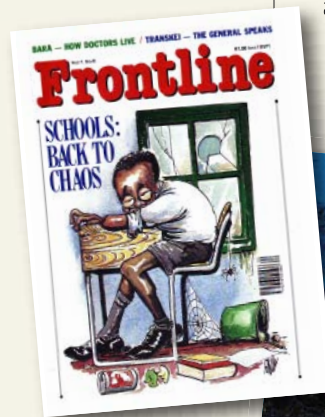
Sutton: Yes. Design is affected by the world as it changes and particularly, of course, by the world of media. That doesn't mean that what works for the internet will automatically transpose to print, but designers are remarkably good at taking and adapting – watering down is perhaps a better phrase – ideas from other media. The latest trend seems to be shortening – dumbing

down – of text on the assumption that people need new eye stimulus every five seconds. Fortunately, that trend will also pass.

Oberholster: What effect (if any) has the advent of new software had on

layout and design?

Sutton: If you'd ever worked with paste-up and scalpels and Denis Beckett, you wouldn't ask that question. He and I spent 10 years producing Frontline magazine in the eighties and I still have nightmares about having to manually re-paste column after column of type because he wanted to add a few more precious phrases to the first paragraph. And the typography of the old days was remarkably grim (ever tried adjusting the



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tracking on an IBM Electronic Composer?), so no one's going to deny that technology hasn't massively improved visual standards and expectations. All we need now is a machine that turn hacks into writers, another that makes designers read the words they're working with, and a spellcheck programme that works.

Oberholster: Do you think South Africa sets its own trends or feeds off international styles?

Sutton: Even in the days of apartheid and sanctions South African publication design was influenced by what was happening in New York and London, so I can think of no reason why that would change. Globalisation is the curse of all local culture: it's a parasite, distilling



national uniqueness into transnational blandness. But we all follow blindly – if art directors had original thoughts

there wouldn't be a market for all

those well-thumbed design annuals that I see on their bookshelves.

And editors don't help – I got a call from a South African client just this week asking where he could see samples of

international covers for his magazine which was being redesigned. Oh dear!

Oberholster: Where do you think design layout is headed? What trends can we expect on magazine pages next?

Sutton: Depends what the next version of InDesign offers . . . or the next design annual . . .

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