

How to make the perfect magazine for teenage girls

By Alison Black

A step-by-step guide from a girl who wants to see *Sassy* back on the shelves

1. **Bring the business world to its knees and prove that feminism can make money.** In 1988, cool Australian chicks Sandra Yates and Anne Summers bought *Sassy* and its “mother” magazine, *Ms.*, “in only the second leveraged buyout in U.S. corporate history to be led by women” (Jesella & Meltzer, 2007, p. 67). And it worked for a while—*Sassy* reached a national circulation of 800,000 super-cool and enlightened readers like myself (Schroeder, 2006).

2. Ohmigod, like, totally talk like this. Sandra’s idea for *Sassy* was to “have young people writing for young people about the things young people care about and in the way young people talk” (Pratt, 1989, p. 11). So, by talking to teens in a cool, confessional, informal way, the entire staff of *Sassy* gained our trust and made us love them. Clever kids.

3. Make yourself a celebrity. I knew the names of almost every single member of the *Sassy* staff because, well, they talked about themselves all the time. Kinda like teenagers. “Knowing” staffers like Jane, Christina, and Margie totally raised their cred in my eyes; I could trust these people, and I would listen to what they said. And people wonder why *Sassy* has achieved cult-like status.

4. Don’t forget about your hillbilly readers. Although *Sassy* was sometimes criticised for being too Manhattan-ey, it featured articles about teens from all over America. The “On the Road” column allowed readers to talk up their hometowns: what they wore, what slang they used, what they listened to, where they hung out, and (usually) how everything sucked in their town. I could relate. Some of the clothes, make-up, and other items were actually

available across North America, so that we, too, could be Manhattan-ey.

5. Get your readers to join in on the fun. Let me count the ways... Every month, a column called “Stuff you wrote” included poetry, random thoughts, and the occasional rant by *Sassy* readers. There were short story contests, photo contests, reader polls, internships, and the yearly “Sassiest Girl in America” contest (there was **no** swimsuit competition). But that’s nothing compared to the reader-produced issue that was published every December. Readers became editors, writers, art directors, fashionistas, health and beauty experts, photographers, and models. Imagine, *Sassy* trusted us that much to let a bunch of its pretentious, super-militant, naïve, and altogether righteous readers take over the playground.

6. Be controversial. Talk about sex and birth control. Write about racism in America. Be political. Diss the New Kids on the Block. Get members of the Christian right to hate you, and make your advertisers pull out their hair. And make your readers love you all the more.

7. Trick your readers into becoming feminists. By having fun with pop culture and girly stuff like make-up, fashion, and cute alterna-boys, *Sassy* could spread its message about strong, empowered females without being so boring about it (*Ms.* can be a little intimidating). “*Sassy* was like a Trojan horse, reaching girls who weren’t necessarily looking for a feminist message” (Jesella & Meltzer, 2007, p. 67).

8. Get people to stop reading your magazine (and start to read something else). Book reviews, fiction, book excerpts, and the famous “Zine of the Month” column showed girls that cool reading didn’t stop with *Sassy*.

9. Get crafty. Show teens how to make a skirt out of ties. Give them recipes for hamantashen. Help them make their own crunchy-granola natural

beauty facemasks. Get The Lemonhead's Evan Dando to show you how to make eggs.

10. Be the first to hit on super-progressive fashion trends, and start some of your own. Remember over-the-knee socks? Lunch-box handbags? "Blossum" hats? Low-rise jeans? Baby-T's? The fab Birkenstock and shortalls combo? Yep, for better or for worse, that was all *Sassy*.

11. Write meaty articles that are longer than a two-page spread (I mean, I had to continue the articles way in the back!!). Write about teenagers on death row, young activists, teenage preachers, neo-Nazis, black racists, teenager strippers, date rape, AIDS, incest, schizophrenia, schools for the Deaf, and the sassiest colleges in America. Phew.

12. Write about how to deal when life sucks. Give advice on PMS, having sex and not having sex, body disasters, gossip, cliques, popularity, stupid boys, great boys, being dumped, being in love, hating your nose, hating yourself, being confident, and learning how to chill. And never write a single article about how to go on a diet and shed those pounds.

13. Write silly articles that are just fun, dang it! How about an article on where the best guys come from? (Apparently, Midwestern guys are the most "humble".) A sampling of the best junk food? A discussion of who is the best guy from "Northern Exposure"? (I was always a fan of Ed.) Paper dolls of the kids from "Beverly Hills, 90210"? A debate on the best John Hughes movies?

14. Get cool people on your side. REM's Michael Stipe, the fun B'52's people, cartoon-goddess Lynda Barry, and "Blossum's" Mayim Balik (yeah, she is cool—I just saw her in "Curb Your Enthusiasm") all loved and supported *Sassy*. Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love did a cover story when they "were blowing off Rolling Stone" (Shroeder, 2007, p. 68). Useless trivia: In REM's "Shiny Happy People" video, that's Jane Pratt, editor of *Sassy*, in the sunflower dress dancing next to Michael Stipe and Kate Pierson.

15. Discover cool people. Actress Chloe Sevigny and director Spike Jonze were old news to me when

they hit it big—I read ALL about them in *Sassy*. I was soooo cutting edge. And then there were the discoveries in the "One to Watch" column: Dave Chappelle when he was just a young'n, pre-"Heathers" Christian Slater, tragic actress-babe Adrienne Shelley, Jamie Foxx, and, yes, Jason Priestly (way before 90210).

16. Put Kurt Cobain (pre-suicide) and Courtney Love on your cover. Get an interview with them even though they were "blowing off Rolling Stone and the New York Times [well, duh]" (Schroeder, 2007, p. 68).

17. Make fun of yourself. Have regular columns called "Cute Band Alert." Talk about your obsessions with Johnny Depp, super red lipstick, and INXS. Print the letters in "Say What" from the readers who hate you, and from the readers who point out your mistakes. When "real" feminists rag on you, love them for their sassiness.

18. Go under almost 7 years after you were born. Because the world doesn't deserve you.

Moms like *Sassy* too!

Article: Happy Birthday to Us (Mar., '89)
Karen Catchpole has written most of our fashion, beauty, health, and, uh, more sensitive features, like "Losing Your Virginity" and "The Truth About Boys' Bodies". And okay, she's gotten, how shall we say, a wide range of responses. "Just when I would begin to feel like everyone hated my stories about sex and thought I was some kind of perverted lunatic, I'd get a call from a reader's mom thanking me for telling her daughter all the things she couldn't," says a mega-relieved Karen.

From the files of "Why the heck didn't I think of that?" Kara Jesella and Marisa Meltzer have turned their love for *Sassy* into the book of the century: *How Sassy Changed My Life*. I am so totally excited! Coming out April 2007.