



This editor describes his advocacy role atop his health magazine's masthead, and offers a prognosis for the brand's future

By David Hirschman – April 1, 2009



Roy Johnson's mother wanted him to be a lawyer, but it wasn't in the cards: From the start, he was passionate about journalism, and he has worked his way through the ranks of a variety of magazines and newspapers over the past 30 years, mostly covering sports and business. Now at the helm of American Media Inc.'s *Men's Fitness*, Johnson is preaching a gospel of diet and exercise to an increasingly obese

nation. Here he talks to mediabistro.com about his magazine's readers, his recent letter to President Obama, and what he thinks of Hearst's plan for a Kindle-like device for magazines.

Name: Roy Johnson

Position: Editor-in-chief, *Men's Fitness*

Hometown: Tulsa, Oklahoma

Birth date: March 19, 1956

Education: B.A. from Stanford University

Resume: Started as a reporter for *Sports Illustrated* in 1978. Moved on to *The New York Times* as a sports reporter covering the New Jersey Nets, and then became a sports columnist at the *Atlanta Constitution*. Returned to *SI* as a senior editor, overseeing college basketball, tennis and golf at various times. Briefly worked at *Money* before moving over to *Fortune* as an editor-at-large. Left *Fortune* to join Vanguard Media as the founding editor of *Savoy*. Returned to *SI* as an assistant managing editor in 2003, but then was laid off at the end of 2005. Joined *Men's Fitness* as a consultant to CEO David Pecker, and then was given the title of editor-in-chief in May 2007.

Marital Status: Married

First section of the Sunday Times: Front section

Favorite TV show: ER

Guilty pleasure: Golf

Tell me a little about how you got started in media.

I started out as editor of my junior high paper, and while I was encouraged to pursue something other than journalism (and majored in political science at Stanford because I was going to be an attorney), I actually ended up in the profession that

was most at my core. When I left college, I was torn between law school and starting to work. Torn, in part, because my mom wanted me to go to law school. And so I applied to some schools, but I said, "Let me get a job, I can always go back to school." I ended up with two job offers out of college. One was to become a local reporter at the *Tulsa Daily World*, where I would have been the first black reporter at the paper. The other offer was to become a reporter at *Sports Illustrated*. That decision literally took seconds to make, and I ended up coming to New York to work for *SI*. My mother was disappointed, but she got over it.

While you have worked at a couple of business magazines, for most of your career you've been writing about sports. *Men's Fitness* is focused much more on service pieces about health and conditioning. How was that transition for you?

It's actually been an easy transition, but it's a natural transition. Having been around people who essentially earn a living with their bodies has proven to be a great resource for keeping our readers ahead of the curve when it comes to fitness and nutrition trends... My background has really helped because I not only had relationships in the sports industry and sports world, but really had an insight into what is required for these guys to perform the way they do.

Do you see the magazine as a venue to help people who are obese, or is it more for guys who are already in shape and seeking to up their game?

Ideally, if a guy wants to get in shape, he can pick us up and find something that helps him get his foot in the door to take that first step toward living a healthy lifestyle. Most of our readers have already embraced it to some degree, and are looking to elevate their game, to get in better shape, to get stronger, to build more stamina, to learn what they should do to enhance their workouts. So with most of the guys who are picking us up, it's not the first time they're going in to the gym. But we have a broad spectrum of readers.

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"We're not a magazine staff, we're a brand staff. Our aim is to create content and distribute it to readers however they want it."

In February, you addressed your editor's letter directly to President Obama. What was behind that?

I thought this was an opportunity, with a new president coming in under the banner of change, to put something that I feel is very important in front of him as he tackles the various challenges that the nation is facing -- certainly there could be no greater challenge than getting America back in shape. I didn't write it lightly because I feel that fitness has an impact on our society, and certainly there are costs related to healthcare when we are not in good condition, and there are costs related to work efficiency, and costs relative toward our own feeling about ourselves... So I encouraged him to look at this and develop an agenda that would get America back on track, including a revival of the President's Council on Physical Fitness with a mandate to begin educating people in the ways they can get in better condition and start eating better; to look at what we are giving our kids in our schools and try and pull some of the trans fats out of cafeterias; and to look at reviving sports programs in our schools.

So you see yourself in an advocacy role as the editor of a fitness magazine?

No question about it. I feel like I and my staff are ambassadors of living a fit and healthy lifestyle, and imparting the benefits of investing in yourself to the reader. I think there's a clear mandate and opportunity to say, 'We're giving you something to help you live a better life.'

Is that a requirement of staffers? Do people on your team have to get in shape?

It certainly helps to be living the life that you speak of. Not everyone here looks like our fitness models, but I think we have a pretty good group of people who not only talk the talk, but also walk the walk -- in their own way.

How does online play into the magazine's plans, and are you doing anything with other platforms?

I tell our staff that we're not a magazine staff, we're a brand staff. And our aim is to create content and distribute it to readers however they want it -- either through the Web site, or through their iPhones, or whatever medium they happen to be using. Ideally, we'd like to be able to have people take us to the gym, either on their iPod as audio or video workouts, or any of those things.

Hearst recently announced that they are planning to come out with a Kindle-like E-reader for magazines. What do you think of the idea, and do you think that the model of Kindle can work for magazines?

I'm intrigued by Kindle. I think for magazines it depends on the content. Just as how the experience of reading *Men's Fitness* is different from getting the same information on the Web, we distribute it both ways because each individual might want the information in a different way at a different time.

I think there will always be users who love that experience of reading a magazine and touching a physical magazine -- and there will be people who immediately migrate to another medium. For those, the content is what drives them, and so the ability to get the content easily is more important than touching the paper. I want to get all of them.

American Media Inc., your parent company, barely avoided bankruptcy a few months ago after restructuring its debt. Has that affected *Men's Fitness* at all, and do you anticipate problems in the future from it?

I don't think there's a media company in existence that hasn't been affected by the turmoil of the economy -- whether there have been layoffs and restructurings or not. Most companies have had some sort of action like that. It's unfortunate and the industry is certainly undergoing seismic change. Some of it may have been necessary, and it's unfortunate when you see your colleagues leave, and see how it sometimes affects the people who remain behind. But we're a resilient industry and we're a resilient company. Morale is getting back to itself again. People still believe in what we do and believe in the products we're creating. And as long as we're doing that and feel like the market is responding, we'll be fine.

David Hirschman is editor of mediabistro.com's Daily Media Newsfeed.