

Six Packs & Sex Lives

Thoughts on *Experience Life* and the quirks that make it appealing to more than 2 million readers. No gimmicks, no hype, no kidding.

By Pilar Gerasimo, Editor in Chief



It's gratifying (and a little surprising) to me how frequently readers comment on what an exceptional health-and-fitness magazine *Experience Life* is. This may stem from the fact that it is not just a health-and-fitness magazine — and also that, for a magazine, it has both atypical and extraordinary motivations.

As a rule, magazines are designed to sell ads. To sell ads, you have to build circulation. To build circulation, you have to sell copies, and so most magazines resort to what they know sells — namely hype, gimmicks, unrealistic promises, and celebs or supermodels who've been computer enhanced to look more perfect than even *they* can manage to look in real life.

Health-and-fitness magazines, unfortunately, are often among the worst offenders. If your “wish self” wants to get killer abs in five minutes, to effortlessly lose 10 pounds, and to instantly have a great sex life, and if a magazine cover promises to tell you how to do that, your wish self will probably convince you to buy it — repeatedly. Magazine publishers know this. As a result, many fitness-oriented publications are designed to appeal to people's sense of fantasy, and they often don't deliver much beyond that.

Initially, a magazine like this may inspire you to go on some kind of diet or fitness kick. But will it change your life in the long run? Probably not. In fact, it may just wind up making you feel worse about yourself. And who needs that?

Experience Life is a different kind of magazine for several reasons:

1. First, *Experience Life* is not about gimmicks and hype. It's about creating healthy bodies through a realistic, sustainable, healthy way of life. Our whole purpose is to help people fulfill the healthy commitments they have made to themselves and to help them lead more satisfying, rewarding lives. The magazine is there to support, educate and inspire readers toward accomplishing their goals, not to trick them into some superficial quick-fix fantasy that's more likely to distract them than move them forward.

Also, where most fitness magazines exclusively address the physical body — its appearance and performance

— *Experience Life* focuses on the whole person in the context of his or her larger life. It honors the very real relationship between people's physical health and fitness and their entire life experiences, including their internal, mental-emotional landscape, and also the external environment and social context in which they live.

So we look at the impacts of everything from clutter to chronic illness, from toxins to time poverty, from green spaces to grumpiness, from body-image to brain chemistry. If it affects health, happiness and quality of life, we cover it.

In reality, most of the challenges people typically have with chronic health-and-fitness problems (including, but not limited to, excess weight) are the result of unconscious, self-destructive habits and patterns — or they're the result of social and environmental factors that tend to make unhealthy choices far easier (and potentially more appealing) than healthy ones.

So we look at how the cycle of overwork, overspending and mental stress contributes to poor health. We look at how good, everyday nutritional choices require the presence of a safe, sustainable and healthy food supply. We suggest ways that an overly busy person can still make space for self-care and personal sanity. We point out both the opportunities and the death traps presented by contemporary society, including the overlapping influences of media, consumer culture, economics and ecological change.

The way we see it, there's nothing wrong with quick fixes when they actually work. But it's unlikely that an article on “flat abs in three days” will give you flat abs — in three days or ever, particularly if you can't make time to eat well, exercise and get enough sleep.

In fact, reading a hundred articles on flat abs won't give you flat abs. Only an ongoing commitment to your health and fitness will do that. And that commitment is either sustained or destroyed by your internal resources and attitudes, and by your awareness of how outside influences affect your choices. ➔



Experience Life connects those dots to create a picture that's both clear and compelling, even if telling these stories doesn't help us sell a lot of ads or make for the most scintillating cover blurbs. We don't do a lot of supermodel covers — even though they sell like crazy — because we prefer to focus on accomplished, admirable, interesting people with whom we and our readers have more in common. We've featured moms, activists, adventurers, chefs, physically challenged athletes, 50-plus models, life coaches, Olympians, authors and other folks who inspire our readers to think bigger about what a healthy way of life is all about.

We write a lot about natural, whole foods — even though most advertising dollars are spent promoting processed foods. We tell the truth about ingredients and chemical additives we think are bad news — even if certain advertisers would rather we didn't. And we don't take ads for plastic surgery, diet pills or diet sodas — because we think they send the wrong message about what really works.

The true underpinnings of health and happiness — things like self-knowledge and self-esteem, clear priorities, conscious choices, and a willingness to buck unhealthy trends — are not things you can accomplish overnight or buy at the store. They're things that require insight, inspiration, awareness, discernment and ongoing support.

So that's what *Experience Life* serves up, issue after issue, year after year. And somehow, even without the gimmicks and hype, it never gets old.

2. Second, we aren't trying to sell anybody on the magazine. Although we certainly do sell the magazine, both on newsstands and by subscription, the magazine was never designed to take the magazine aisle by storm. That's why we don't look or sound like most of the other magazines in our category. It's why, even though we've been publishing continuously since 2001 and have earned a whole wall full of editorial and design awards, we have a surprisingly low profile. It's why I often end up describing *Experience Life* as “the best healthy-living magazine you've never heard of.”

Experience Life looks relatively normal at first glance: It's a beautifully produced, glossy magazine aimed at a mainstream audience. But we have a somewhat different business model than most magazines, and that gives us some important freedoms. (For a deeper understanding of the complex, constraining and sometimes diabolical forces shaping conventional magazines, see Gloria Steinem's wonderful essay, “Sex, Lies and Advertising,” featured in her book

Moving Beyond Words [Simon and Schuster, 1994] and also widely available online. We included the essay as an appendix to our creative blueprint when we founded *Experience Life* in 2001.)

Our magazine is published by Life Time Fitness (NYSE:LTM), a healthy-way-of-life company for which publishing is neither a core business nor a key revenue center. The company's primary business revolves around building and operating more than 70 premier, family-oriented health-club facilities throughout the country (locations and company information at www.lifetimefitness.com). Life Time Fitness helps underwrite *Experience Life* as part of the company's education-based mission and comprehensive “feel good inside” brand promise, offering the magazine at a low, subsidized cost to Life Time Fitness members (who represent at least half of our 600,000 circulation) both as a value-added benefit of membership and as a member-retention tool.

As publisher, Life Time Fitness maintains an almost unprecedented hands-off policy regarding the magazine's content, and empowers the magazine's staff to operate with full editorial independence: There's no hard-sell marketing hype for the company, no planted content or “membership magazine” drivel, no pressure to appease advertiser interests or to supply “complementary” editorial. If a Life Time Fitness business unit wants to place an ad, they place a bona fide ad, just like any other advertiser.

Life Time Fitness has a vested interest in earning its member-readers' trust and in helping them achieve their health-and-fitness goals for real (when people don't feel like they're achieving good results at their health clubs, they tend to leave), so Life Time Fitness gives us free rein to serve up sensible, reliable, usable information and advice that really works. Rather than try to turn the magazine into a thinly disguised marketing device, the company gives us both liberty and encouragement to plan, edit and produce the magazine according to our own very high editorial standards, and in accordance with the standards of the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME).

The business proposition is simple: We produce a convention-busting magazine differentiated by its depth, quality and authenticity — a magazine that represents our parent company's commitment to quality and its “feel good inside” brand values — and Life Time Fitness encourages us to keep on giving folks the most credible, forward-thinking and unbiased content we can muster.

As a result, we find ourselves in an enviable position: The combination of *Experience Life*'s deep, reliable reader base and our unconventional hybrid publishing model allows →



the magazine to earn its keep without having to face the sell-out temptations and pressures most other magazines endure.

We have a large, loyal and engaged-enough reader base that we can appeal to national advertisers without selling our soul (our best advertisers see our depth and authenticity as a distinct benefit), and we don't have to resort to sensational newsstand-sales tactics to keep our circulation growing (it's already as large or larger than several other well-respected national titles). Best of all, we're able to publish extraordinarily deep, thoughtful, well-researched articles on topics that other magazines shy away from or gloss over.

Of course, we'd love to see the magazine reach several more million people (the more lives we can change for the better, the happier we'll be), and we'd love to welcome more advertisers into our book, but not at the expense of our service-driven mission — or our integrity.

Within a few years, we anticipate having a circulation of more than a million (our MRI-estimated reach, which includes passalong readers, is already at 2.5 million). In the meantime, we're fine with letting people stumble upon *Experience Life* at a friend's house (where a lot of our readers keep their back issues for many months); at the newsstand (where we're typically buried behind a zillion "lose the flab!" and "instant-bikini-body" covers); in waiting rooms (where many of our current subscribers admit they originally made away with a copy because they couldn't put it down); or online (where, at www.experiencelifemag.com, we offer our current issue and archived content dating back to 2001, plus videos, podcasts, blogs forums and lots of Web-only features).

We're even happier to have people learn about us through family and friends (nearly two out of three of our readers regularly pass articles along to others, and we also have a free e-newsletter that folks can forward to their pals).

And so we continue to grow — gradually, organically — with our editorial mission clearly in mind, and our integrity intact. Just the way we like it.

3. Third, *Experience Life* is a very balanced publication. We are, at heart, a practical magazine, not a fanatical or fitness-obsessed one. *Experience Life* is written for people who have made (or are about to make) a demonstrated commitment to their own health and fitness, but who may also have all sorts of other important things — like a career and family — going on in their lives.

Most of our readers have already bought into the concept of healthy living for their own reasons (not because

they were won over by some scintillating cover blurb). They may want to lose some weight or get into better shape, or they may want help staying healthy through the stress of work and raising kids, the challenges of getting older, or the rigors of training for an athletic event. What they need now is solid, trustworthy information to direct, develop and inspire their efforts.

So *Experience Life* focuses on three key areas: health/nutrition, fitness/athletics, and a very broad category we call "quality of life." This includes everything from stress management and life balance to personal wisdom, environmental concerns and insights into the culture at large.

Rather than striving for mass appeal and tapping into predictable, superficial desires ("a perfect body in minutes!"), we make a point of connecting with our readers' deeper motivations and sense of purpose. Yes, some people may be interested in working on six-pack abs. Others may care not a whit. But everyone stands to benefit from knowing how his or her body works

and what it needs to be strong and vital. Everyone faces real-life obstacles. And as we overcome those obstacles, most of us naturally get interested in moving on to the next challenge.

So we offer something for everyone, from those just beginning their healthy-living journey to those who are heavy-duty fitness enthusiasts and competitive athletes. We put it all in a whole-life context. We cover many cutting-edge topics (like local and organic eating, nutrigenomics, heart-rate training, inflammation, green living, positive psychology, corporate wellness, and functional medicine) years before other magazines latch onto them. And we also focus on commonsense information — essentials that can be easy to overlook and difficult to discern in the midst of all the diet crazes and fitness fads competing for attention.

Above all, we scan an astonishingly broad horizon for the very best, most practical information we can find in order to help people create lives that bring them not just health and fitness, but also vitality and meaning — lives that sync with our motto: "Healthy. Happy. For Real." ➔



4. Fourth, *Experience Life* respects its readers. We believe our readers are intelligent, busy people, and that they appreciate knowing what works and what doesn't.

They don't need a lot of confusing or oversimplified fluff and sensationalism. They don't need the same-old recycled "bikini-licious" sound bites. They do need practical, straightforward advice on creating an effective health-and-fitness regimen that's right for them. They want realistic help overcoming real-life challenges and setbacks. They want high-quality research and writing that respects their intelligence. They want smart, credible, well-researched information on living better. That's what *Experience Life* delivers.

There is a huge connection between an individual's physical health and vitality and his or her attitudes, outlook and enthusiasm for life. And there's an equally huge connection between our daily habits and choices and the bigger context in which we live: the time pressures, the socioeconomic pressures, the media messages, our access to healthy food, our opportunities for physical activity and our connections with our community.

So we're willing to tackle complex topics, even if they take some extra words (or pages) to cover properly. We're willing to dig deep into potentially confusing and controversial issues, to present our findings in clear language, to take a position when it's called for, and still allow readers to make up their own minds. And in every issue we supply lots of links, references and suggested resources that empower our readers to go even deeper, if they wish.

5. Fifth, *Experience Life* aims high. If people pick up the magazine and read it, our goal is to have them wind up in a somewhat different and better place than where they began. It might be that they learn some practical nutrition or fitness tip. Perhaps they gain some personal insight or inspiration. Maybe they experience some huge, life-changing "aha!" Or maybe they just come up with something healthy to cook for dinner.

If any of those things happen during a given reading, that's great. But it's even more important to us that, over time, someone who reads *Experience Life* comes away with a lasting, meaningful impression of how he or she can create the body and the life of his or her choosing — by making

the commitment and then accessing the resources needed to carry out his or her highest choices on both a daily and lifelong basis.

We think there are enough magazines out there telling people about the latest celebrity diets, and enough magazines reducing healthy-living advice to 30-word sidebars and product promotions. We believe our audience is interested in a deeper, more complete understanding. And while they might certainly like to have flat abs and a super-hot sex life, they also want (and deserve) a great deal more.

Boiled down, *Experience Life's* mission is to help readers enjoy better bodies by empowering them to lead better lives. As an editor, I think that's an honorable objective. As a person, I think it's also an important objective for this moment in history. We need strong bodies, hearts and minds to address the challenges facing our communities, our society and our planet. We owe it to our selves and our families to be fully present and focused, resilient and engaged.

Of course, there are plenty of less altruistic and equally motivating reasons to want to be in great shape — not the least of which are simple vanity and fun. I like that *Experience Life* respects and supports all of these priorities. Whether you're training for a triathlon, trying to keep up with your toddler, hoping to age gracefully or determined to get (and stay) in the very best shape of your life, *Experience Life* is a magazine that can help you do all that and thoroughly enjoy the journey.

And if, during the course of this process, both your abs and your sex life should happen to dramatically transform for the better (and it's quite likely they will) — well, so much the better.

Check out a selection of articles from current and past issues of *Experience Life*, sign up for our free e-newsletter, read reader reviews, preview our digital edition, and access our handy newsstand locator at www.experienlifelife.com. ©

