

Pilar Gerasimo identifies with her magazine's "cultural creative" audience. "We are influencers and early adopters that shape the general cultural attitudes," she says.



A Healthy Brand

***Experience Life* has matured beyond its role as membership magazine of Life Time Fitness and established a strong brand in the intensely competitive health and fitness marketplace.**

It was a classic meeting of the minds.

In 1992, Life Time Fitness founder Bahram Akradi set out to create a new standard for health and fitness centers—one that emphasized a healthy way of life, not just a healthy body. “Bahram and his team wanted to break the mold and create a category-redefining example of what a health and fitness center could be,” says Jason Thunstrom, director of corporate communications for Eden Prairie-based Life Time, which now operates 60 centers in 13 states.

Nine years later, local marketing consultant Pilar Gerasimo was asked by Life Time’s custom-publishing vendor to propose a brand-worthy magazine for Life Time Fitness members, one that would replace Life Time’s existing publication, which essentially was a member newsletter. “For the first time in my life, I got this fun opportunity as a creative to sort of ‘blue sky’ it,” recalls Gerasimo, who at the time was editor-in-chief of *ICON*, the magazine of the American Society of Interior Designers. Gerasi-

mo produced a 40-page creative blueprint for what she describes as a “convention-busting magazine,” which would stand apart from the existing array of health and fitness magazines in much the same way Akradi’s centers differed from his competitors—by addressing the needs of the whole person, not only the physical body.

“I knew that the typical Life Time Fitness member tended to be college-educated and successful. These are not just fitness nuts. Of course, there definitely are people in the organization that fall into the peripheral categories of complete fitness enthusiast or elite athlete or bodybuilder, but most of them are regular people with jobs and kids and houses,” Gerasimo says. “So our magazine would promise them something that most of the other magazines out there couldn’t really deliver, which was that we’ll treat you as a whole person. We’ll treat your health and fitness challenges and your goals and desires as part of your bigger life plan. We won’t promise you a bunch of crazy stuff overnight. We won’t insult your intelligence by making hyped-up fantasy miracle-cure promises we can’t keep and that you don’t care about anyway. The fact is, most moms and dads don’t need six-pack abs—they just don’t.”

With her *Experience Life* blueprint in hand, Gerasimo had her initial sit-down with Akradi. From the outset, Gerasimo reports, her convention-busting magazine was a natural fit for his category-redefining business model. “He’s been

by **ANDREW BACSKAI**

a really consistent evangelist for the magazine since I started,” she says.

Today, Gerasimo is editor-in-chief of a rare breed, on many levels—a membership magazine that’s not intended to be a promotional tool; a health and fitness magazine that doesn’t peddle pumped-up pecs and secrets to better sex; and a newsstand magazine that prioritizes its consumers over those consuming its advertising space.

“This is a resource that’s intended to provide trusted information from a trusted source,” says John Reilly, Life Time’s vice president of corporate business. “We have a discerning readership base that’s highly educated and highly engaged, so we’re always trying to be authentic. To treat it any other way, we fear, would hurt the brand as opposed to benefit the brand.”

The Brand Within the Brand

Indeed, *Experience Life* serves the larger Life Time Fitness brand as an educational tool. “That’s really where the magazine fits from our healthy-way-of-life vision and mission,” Reilly says. “The education component of achieving a healthy way of life is about helping members put their goals and objectives into the context of their everyday lives. So the idea was, ‘How can we help our members get even smarter about their health and fitness needs, so they have an even greater experience with Life Time Fitness?’”

“In the health and fitness industry,” Gerasimo explains, “the biggest problem is attrition. People join clubs and they leave clubs relatively quickly. Not only is it expensive but, on a larger level, the health and fitness industry is just so rife with that tendency to say, ‘Do this thing or that thing and all your problems will be solved.’ And everyone knows that it doesn’t work that way.

“Almost everyone I know has had the experience where they tried to lose weight or they tried to get into shape, and they ended up feeling like a failure,” she continues. “And you don’t

want people associating a sense of failure with your business or your industry. So this magazine is really about creating successes for the individual. If we can give them better advice and really inspire them, they will be successful in their goals and in their health and fitness experience, and they’ll stick around.”

That said, *Experience Life* has muscled out its own solid brand position amongst such heavyweight for-profit newsstand titles as *Shape*, *Fitness*, and *Men’s Health*. The magazine, which is produced 10 times annually—up from quarterly when Gerasimo assumed the editorship—has a circulation of 525,000 readers, roughly half of which are not Life Time Fitness members.

In 2004, Life Time introduced its burgeoning brand within a brand to bookstore newsstands, exceedingly competitive consumer environments in which multiple magazines vie for minimal visibility. For *Experience Life*, its thoughtful headlines and real-people cover images had to tussle with competitors whose reader-attraction strategies typically rely on “sure-fire solutions” and sculpted physiques. Nonetheless, Gerasimo notes, *Experience Life* has posted what she calls an “acceptable sell-through” on the 1,700 newsstands it inhabits nationwide. Not bad for a magazine catering to a broad-based audience.

“How many health and fitness magazines are coed and aimed at no particular age category?” Gerasimo says. “We certainly have a core audience of people in their 30s and 40s, but our overall audience is very broad. And typically, that approach doesn’t do very well on the newsstand—certainly not in the health and fitness category.”

Aligning with LOHAS

In fact, Gerasimo initially and very intentionally steered the *Experience Life* concept away from the traditional health and fitness market and into the direction of the so-called “cultural creatives,” a

fast-expanding subculture identified some 20 years ago by sociologist Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson. According to Ray, author of *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World*, cultural creatives are defined by psychographics, or shared value and personality traits, rather than traditional demographics. Cultural creatives value personal health and development and quality of life. They’re conscientious



{ “We should not **sell ourselves down the river** in the interests of a \$10,000 ad, if it’s going to **put the larger brand proposition in danger.**”



types who are concerned about social justice and the environment. And they’re early adopters—influential consumers who shape the larger culture.

Ray claims that cultural creatives crave “authenticity” from the products and services they consume and are intolerant of gimmicks, hype, superficiality, and misleading and meaningless messages. In the marketplace, the consumer attitudes and behaviors of cul-

tural creatives became characterized as “lifestyles of health and sustainability,” or LOHAS. This consumer group, which is thought to include about one third of the U.S. population, represents nearly a \$230 billion U.S. marketplace for goods and services focused on health, the environment, social justice, personal development, and sustainable living. What’s more, LOHAS consumers are brand loyal and prefer to do business with companies who share their values.

Gerasimo became acquainted with the cultural creative/LOHAS marketplace as she was developing her blueprint for *Experience Life*. “I realized that I am a core LOHAS consumer and a cultural creative, so this total light bulb went on for me, and I recognized that we are so being underserved by the biggest brands in the country,” she says. “And we are such a valuable population, not just because we are good consumers and buy a lot of stuff, but because we are influencers and early adopters that shape the general cultural attitudes. Where we go, other people will follow.”

Plus, by targeting the LOHAS consumers, Gerasimo reasoned, *Experience Life* would be staking out virtually unclaimed territory in the health and fitness-club marketplace. “This was an open and available brand position for us to have. There are other people that are doing the gimmicks and the hype and will always do it better than us. Those guys have their audience,” she says. “I presented an argument to [Life Time executives] that they should differentiate themselves and stand out on the basis of these higher-quality, more discerning attributes. And I said that if we stray from this and we go for the low-hanging fruit, so to speak, we would find ourselves in a very cluttered space from a marketplace standpoint. There just isn’t any room there.”

The Ad-Edit Conflict

Of course, as with any plan, the primary

challenge is sticking to it. Gerasimo concedes that she occasionally feels the push and pull of what she terms “the conventional forces of publishing,” namely advertising. In publishing circles, the relationship between advertising and editorial departments is generally described as one of “healthy tension.” Sales staffs, naturally, want to pump a publication full of advertising revenue with the fewest possible restrictions. Editors, meanwhile, typically strive to ensure that the credibility of the editorial product isn’t compromised by contradictory ad messages, or articles that are clearly motivated by a need to support advertiser aims, not enlightened readers.

In reality, however, the ad-edit tension is often unhealthy, and the relationship is lopsided in favor of advertising. “Trustworthiness was the one element that I saw missing from a lot of magazines,” Gerasimo says. “They had different masters to please, which were all their advertisers. They’d create all this supportive editorial for protein powers and diets and things and, as a result, they weren’t really serving their reader, which is an editor’s job.”

Experience Life, conversely, differs from conventional magazines in that it isn’t totally dependent on advertising dollars. The magazine continues to be subsidized, in part, by the Life Time marketing budget. Gerasimo credits this hybrid model, along with strong and sustained support from Akradi and other Life Time executives, for enabling her and the *Experience Life* sales team to maintain that increasingly elusive healthy tension.

Consider, for example, the September/October 2003 issue of the magazine, which included a short article titled “Saying No to Soda,” which discussed why drinking too much soda is unhealthy. Also in that issue: a full-page ad for Diet Coke. No doubt, Coca-Cola is a powerhouse brand, which also happened to have a longstanding business and sponsorship relationship

with Life Time Fitness. “Alienating Coca-Cola was not a comfortable notion,” says Gerasimo, who nonetheless lobbied to omit any of Coke’s soda ads from future issues.

“The problem is that if I’m writing on page 3 that a certain thing could be bad for their health, and an ad contradicting that appears later, readers will see us as disingenuous,” she explains. “And not only is the whole proposal of the magazine as authentic and credible and trustworthy down the tubes, but that negative impression transfers to the larger brand. Consumers see you as being willing to sell them out to make a buck. We should not sell ourselves down the river in the interests of a \$10,000 ad, if it’s going to put the larger brand proposition in danger.”

Ultimately, publisher and advertiser settled on a tentative agreement in which the magazine accepts ads for Coca-Cola’s other beverages, including Dasani bottled water, sport drinks, and juices. “I think it does a good thing for that company and for our readers,” Gerasimo says.

Sometimes the conflicting ad and edit messages are more subtle. And the magazine’s LOHAS readers, true to their discerning, authenticity-craving form, routinely identify snafus and voice their displeasure. For example, an appearance by an advertisement for a morning-after hangover remedy inspired letters from unhappy readers. The author of one letter noted that the ad was “incongruous” with the magazine’s slogan of “Healthy. Happy. For Real.” Another letter-writer described herself as being “extremely disappointed” that the magazine would accept an ad that offered a quick fix for an unhealthy indulgence.

“It’s inspiring and terrifying at the same time,” Gerasimo says of the degree to which the magazine’s readers have become brand loyalists and hold the editorial staff accountable for the quality and continuity of the finished

product. “But I’m continually impressed by the extent to which our consumers are right there with us, and often saying, “Thank you for meeting me here, because I want you to be here.””

Not Standing Pat

Like most healthy brands, *Experience Life* continues to diversify. In 2005, Gerasimo adapted *Experience Life* to the radio with “Get a Whole Life,” a one-hour show that’s broadcast Saturday afternoons on FM 107. Gerasimo hosts the show, which covers quality of life issues—everything from health and fitness, to relationships, money matters, and social and cultural topics.

Moving forward, Gerasimo says she plans to create more opportunities “to take what’s succeeded within the pages

of *Experience Life* and appreciated by its readers and make it available off the page as an experience itself, along the lines of education, resources, and online coaching.”

Gerasimo has developed a six-week group-coaching program called Whole Life Coaching. Experienced life coaches at a handful of local Life Time Fitness centers, as well as at the company’s Tempe, Arizona, facility, already have conducted prototypes of the program. The feedback from participants has been encouraging, she reports: “We got back just beautiful, wonderful evaluations from people saying that it really changed their lives and reorganized them and helped them figure out what was standing in the way of their ideal life, their ideal self.”

Gerasimo hopes that the fledgling

program will be just the first of several educational and support offerings available at Life Time Fitness centers across the country. “It’s the feeder course of what I’d envision being a whole experience-oriented division [of Life Time Fitness],” she says. “I think people need more than just reading an article, they need more than just seeing an ad. They need support and a community around them of people who also are challenged by the same things and trying to make changes.

“The content is kind of spilling out of the magazine into these other formats,” Gerasimo adds, “which makes it feel like it’s coming alive.” **TCB**

Andrew Bacskai is a freelance writer living in St. Paul.