

New ASME Guidelines FAQ

April 2015

The ASME Guidelines affirm the importance of editorial integrity and independence to magazine media. Less prescriptive than previous editions, the new guidelines are wider in scope, articulating standards for the conduct of magazine journalists as well as summarizing industry practices intended to protect the value of magazines as an advertising medium.

The guidelines can be summarized in one sentence: Don't deceive the reader.

What is ASME?

The American Society of Magazine Editors is the principal organization for magazine journalists in the United States. The more than 400 members of ASME include the editorial leaders of most major consumer and business magazines published in print and on digital platforms. Founded in 1963, ASME works to defend the First Amendment, protect editorial independence and support the development of journalism. ASME sponsors the National Magazine Awards in association with the Columbia Journalism School.

What are the ASME Guidelines for Editors and Publishers?

First published in 1982, the original purpose of the guidelines was to help editors and publishers manage the publication of special advertising sections, known as advertorials.

The ASME Guidelines now concisely articulate basic principles for the conduct of magazine journalists and summarize industry practices drawn from those principles. The new guidelines are applicable to all magazine media, including mobile, video and experiential. The guidelines also include information about Federal Trade Commission and United States Postal Service regulations relevant to magazine media.

Who wrote the new guidelines?

The ASME Board of Directors decided on goals for the new guidelines. A board committee, including editors from both print and digital media, was charged with writing the new guidelines. The committee members were:

- James Bennet, president and editor in chief, The Atlantic, and ASME vice president, *committee chair*
- Jill Herzig, editor in chief, Dr. Oz THE GOOD LIFE
- Mark Jannot, vice president, content, National Audubon Society, and ASME president
- Norman Pearlstine, executive vice president and chief content officer, Time Inc.
- Dana Points, content director, Meredith Parents Network, and editor in chief, Parents and American Baby
- Michele Promaulayko, editor in chief, Yahoo! Health
- Joshua Topolsky, editor and chief digital content officer, Bloomberg Media
- David Zinzenko, founder and chief executive officer, Galvanized LLC

David Zinczenko wrote the first draft of the new guidelines based on the instructions of the committee. Sid Holt wrote subsequent drafts. The entire committee contributed to the editing of the final draft, which was submitted to the full ASME board for comment.

The new guidelines were unanimously approved by the ASME board and have been endorsed by leading publishers and media buyers.

Why is ASME revising the guidelines?

The guidelines are frequently revised. Since the guidelines were first published in 1982, they have been revised on average every two years. The last complete revision of the guidelines was published in 2011. This is the 15th edition of the guidelines. By reaffirming the integrity of magazine media, the new guidelines are intended to foster reader trust.

The guidelines as previously formulated were inadequate to the challenges of a fast-changing media marketplace—too focused on print and all but silent on other forms of magazine media, which now include mobile, video and experiential as well print magazines and magazine websites. Instead of attempting to anticipate consumer expectations in multiple media and publishing a set of “one size fits all” rules, ASME believes flexible guidelines drawn from the basic principles of magazine journalism will be more useful and more durable.

What are the basic principles behind the guidelines?

The success of magazine media is founded on editorial integrity and independence. The guidelines state that the primary responsibility of the editor is to serve the interests of the reader. The guiding principle is transparency, especially avoiding conflicts of interest.

What are the best practices in the guidelines?

- Disclose conflicts of interest
- Differentiate between advertising and editorial content
- Label advertising that consumers may mistake for editorial content
- Avoid integrating advertising and editorial content
- Avoid product placement that may deceive consumers
- Do not submit editorial content to advertisers for approval
- Disclose e-commerce partnerships

How are the new guidelines different from the old guidelines?

The new guidelines are less prescriptive but wider in scope. The formulation of the guidelines has changed repeatedly since they were first published in 1982, but the values the new guidelines embody are the same today as they were 33 years ago. Any part of the guidelines immaterial to the benchmark “Don’t deceive the reader” was discarded.

The differences between the new guidelines and old include the following:

- The new guidelines focus on basic principles and providing information about federal regulations relevant to magazine media
- The new guidelines no longer differentiate between print and digital media. The new edition integrates print and digital guidelines
- The new guidelines have been expanded to cover all forms of magazine media—including mobile, video and experiential—as well as new forms of marketing such as native advertising
- The new guidelines eliminate sections on rare or obsolete problems, including guidelines on sponsored sections and interruptive advertising. (This is not the first time specific guidelines have been rendered obsolete: At one time, the guidelines required magazines to put their logos on their home pages.) ASME staff can advise ASME members on best practices for problems not covered by the new guidelines

What are the guidelines for native advertising?

Native advertising, like print advertorials, should be identified as advertising in compliance with Federal Trade Commission regulations. ASME recommends that native advertising should be clearly labeled as advertising by the use of terms such as “Sponsor Content” or “Paid Post” and visually distinguished from editorial content. As “native advertising” appears in many forms, ASME members should contact ASME staff for more information about best practices for differentiating native advertising from editorial content.

Why has the guideline against advertising on covers been dropped?

Given the importance of the cover as a brand statement and consumer-marketing tool, editors and publishers have long been to reluctant to put ads on their covers, even though advertising is prominent on the front pages of major newspapers and the home pages of major websites. The new guidelines clearly state that the distinction between advertising and editorial content must be transparent, but ASME believes that individual brands have the right—and bear the responsibility—to determine how to achieve that goal. As long as readers can tell the difference between advertising and editorial content, the editorial integrity of the magazine is not at risk.

Why has the guideline against editors working on advertising been dropped?

The purpose of the guidelines is to ensure transparency in magazine media editorial coverage, not prescribe employment policies to magazine publishers. The guidelines concerning conflicts of interest and differentiating between advertising and editorial content effectively address the most important challenges arising from the practice of editors working on advertising. Advertising created by editors is also subject to the same guidelines as other advertising.

What happens to magazine brands that violate the guidelines?

Magazine media are a self-regulating industry. The standards and practices articulated in the guidelines are used industry-wide and embody values important to editors and publishers.

ASME is not the advertising police—rule breakers are not penalized—but violating the guidelines does have consequences such as these:

- Magazines that violate the guidelines risk alienating readers and, in turn, advertisers. The value of magazine media lies in reader trust. Good journalism is good business

- Magazines and advertisers that attempt to disguise advertising as editorial content risk action by the Federal Trade Commission as well as the National Advertising Division of the Advertising Self-Regulatory Council. The United States Postal Service may also fine publications that fail to label editorial-like advertising
- Editors whose publications have been cited for violating the guidelines are not barred from participating in the National Magazine Awards, but magazines that fail to adhere to the guidelines are routinely disqualified by judges. Judges are especially harsh when the distinction between advertising and editorial content is not clear

Has ASME weakened the guidelines to appease advertisers?

The new guidelines are more powerful than the old guidelines and wider in scope. For the first time, the guidelines include standards for the conduct of magazine journalists. The new guidelines state that adherence to the guidelines is vital to the long-term success of magazine media. The new guidelines apply to all forms of magazine media.

The values embodied in the new guidelines are the same as in every previous edition of the guidelines, especially the importance of editorial integrity and independence.

The new guidelines include the most important best practices of the old guidelines, especially those concerning advertorials. This part of the guidelines is practically unchanged since 1982.

The ASME Guidelines have long been acknowledged as standard setting. The new guidelines continue in that tradition by expressing the core values of magazine journalism, especially the central importance of editorial integrity and reader trust, more forcefully than ever.