

TITLE

Is *The Atlantic* Doomed?

SUMMARY

The Atlantic magazine was an old and stodgy institution. Its circulation was stagnant. Its website was invisible. It was struggling to attract contemporary advertisers, and like so many other magazines, it was hemorrhaging money.

But rather than trying to convince people that *The Atlantic* wasn't as dull as they feared, we set our ambitions much higher: to become the source of mental stimulation so many craved; to lead a grassroots movement to bring deep, nuanced-thinking back in vogue; to incite people to Think. Again.

It's an idea that took the form of neon signs and heated debates, of lively blogs and signs stuck in muffins at bakeries. Ultimately, it's an idea that has generated a 13% increase in circulation and a 93% increase in digital revenue. It's an idea that has attracted 51 new advertisers, online and off; but perhaps more importantly, it ignited a conversation that has thousands of people thinking again.

BRAND: A VENERABLE INSTITUTION

For 151 years, *The Atlantic* has been America's most important magazine. It spearheaded abolition, introduced the world to Mark Twain, and warned us about the sub-prime collapse. It boasts America's most influential readership.

Unfortunately, prestige wasn't translating into commercial success. Its circulation was stagnant, stuck for years at 400,000. Its website was unknown. It was struggling to attract contemporary advertisers. It was losing money.

Our client wanted to let prospective readers know just how good *The Atlantic* is. They're proud of their long-form articles by award-winning journalists that delve into the day's issues. Their brief was simple: *The Atlantic has the World's Best Journalism.*

CHALLENGE: "A HARD SLOG"

Our research confirmed that prospective readers (rich, educated professionals) respected *The Atlantic*. They knew it was "great" journalism, but that wasn't enough. They still didn't want to read it.

Research revealed the problem. We asked respondents how they *felt* when they read certain magazines. It was an odd question for people who fancied themselves intellectuals ("If I want to 'feel,' I read fiction."), but, with the help of a projection exercise, we quickly got to the truth:

The Economist makes me feel powerful, global, ready to impress my boss.

The New Yorker makes me feel cultured, hip, ready for any dinner party.

The Atlantic, by contrast, would make me feel...tired.

The very virtue that made our client proud – nuanced long-form journalism – reinforced readers' worst fears: *The Atlantic* would feel, "like homework...a hard slog."

Increasing respect for *The Atlantic*, therefore, was useless; we set ourselves a more difficult task: to persuade people it would *feel* good.

THE INSPIRATION: FRESHMAN YEAR

We went into focus groups with an arsenal of propositions describing how stimulating *The Atlantic's* content was.

"Intellectual Espresso" was our favorite, and respondents nodded along. They were willing to make the leap that "great journalism" could feel exciting. When pressed, however, we realized it was an intellectual leap: they still had no interest in signing-up for the slog.

After the second group, however, we noticed a strange phenomenon. Respondents lingered longer than usual. They actually thanked us for the opportunity to discuss the subjects we covered.

This wasn't the normal enthusiasm that comes from well-run groups. No, these people had spent two hours experiencing something they hadn't for a long time: thinking – real, cortex-churning – thinking.

The focus groups themselves seemed to be more powerful than any stimulus we presented during them.

So we began our next few groups with a simple question: do you miss college? Hands shot up. Stories followed – about philosophy classes, heated political debates and inspiring economics teachers.

This is where our brief – and eventual tagline – originated. Nobody wanted to go back to homework – but the thrill of a great class or a late-night debate was extremely appealing. They missed thinking. They missed taking on complicated subjects, learning and debating, but between the kids and the economy, the thinking part of their brains wasn't getting the attention it craved.

And so, our rallying cry:

Think. Again.

Those periods matter. We didn't just want people to "think again" about *The Atlantic* – no, we were after something far more ambitious. We wanted people to think, to use their minds. We wanted to start a movement to bring deep, nuanced-thinking back in vogue. A movement that positioned *The Atlantic* as the source of mental stimulation so many hungered for. A movement that would get people to "Think. Again." Literally.

THE CREATIVE KEY: QUESTIONS

In preparing our brief, we plumbed the magazine's archives, looking for content that genuinely stimulated thinking. As we sorted through our favorites, we recognized a pattern: most of our chosen article's headlines were questions:

“Should women settle?”

“Which religion will win?”

“Is the doughnut doomed?”

And when the editors shared the cover for an upcoming issue, we knew we were onto something powerful. Right there, in bold type, was a question that demanded an opinion: Is Google Making Us Stupid?

As we debated it, we realized we weren't thinking about briefs anymore. We were just thinking. It was fun. It was stimulating. It was *The Atlantic*. And it was the answer to how we were going to inspire thought.

When we reported our finding to their editor, his eyes lit up. He had thought he had been delivering opinions; he realized he was doing something far more exciting: asking questions.

“Think. Again.” alongside 14 questions taken directly from the magazine was our creative brief.

COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

While we were confident our brief could deliver work that would get people to think, we were worried about our budgets. It's difficult to start a movement with only \$400k for production and \$2m in media.

Beyond getting people thinking, we had some daunting business challenges. Specifically, in addition to increasing circulation, *The Atlantic* wanted to stretch beyond its usual roster of conservative corporate advertisers and bring in modern brands that would help reposition it as a vital and dynamic magazine.

And so, we made a daring decision to focus on just one place: New York City, where we believed we'd be able to reach a good chunk of both our readership and advertisers.

In addition, we established a few principles to keep us true to the spirit of the movement:

1. Be in the Public Square

As our focus groups demonstrated, part of the thrill of thinking is social – sharing and debating ideas – and so, we wanted our work to have a social component. This was more than a decision to use “interactive media.” We asked the creatives for work that would literally insert itself into public conversations.

2. Wake up the Zombies!

We also knew the power of “Think. Again.” was most dramatic when deployed against those who had shut off their brains – and so, we urged the creatives to think about ideas that would “Wake up the Zombies.” Let’s reach people when they’re most intellectually-asleep: commuting, shopping, etc.

3. Out-Plan the Planners

Our research with media planners exposed they were desperate to compose the most innovative plans possible. Their clients charged them to think “new media” – and they needed partners that could help them execute smart, integrated programs. In that context, a page in *The Atlantic* and a banner on their site felt old media.

To prove that *The Atlantic* was a great partner for modern brands (a partner that could combine print, digital and events with a bona fide idea), we needed to show that we understood how modern media could work. And so yet another challenge was born: execute a media plan that would make media planners jealous.

EXECUTION: ILLUMINATE DARKNESS

Our creative teams had a difficult challenge: start a movement that would get people to turn their brains on – and do it in the public square with media choices that would dazzle cynical media planners.

They devised a simple, but ingenious solution, turning 14 *Atlantic* questions into giant, darkness-shattering, neon signs. We placed them all around the city, and at night, as passer-bys looked and wondered, we interviewed them. We then turned their personal, profound, and often hilarious responses into a series of videos which we housed on an experiential site (www.theatlantic.com/thinkagain) that became a hub for rich debate.

It was outdoor that became an event that became video that became a website.

We also photographed them for print (*fig.a*).



fig.a

We didn't stop there. We interrupted monotonous shopping with ambient OOH that replaced price tags with questions like, "Is war a sport?" (*fig.b*). We pursued a wild posting campaign that added intrigue to the commute.



fig.b



fig.c

Finally, rather than inviting advertisers to a NYC power-restaurant to launch the idea, we put together an art exhibit featuring the neon questions and screenings of the street-interviews (fig.c).

Most importantly, "Think. Again." has become the mantra for *The Atlantic*. It's the brief their editor now gives to every one of his writers.

The cover of the November 2008 issue of *The Atlantic* is a testament to how strongly *The Atlantic* has embraced this idea. In addition to writing it in 32-point font across the top, the cover is packed with "Think. Again." questions (fig.d).



fig. d

RESULTS

At a time when other magazines are shutting down and online growth has slowed, *The Atlantic* is experiencing awesome success. Since the launch of "Think. Again.":

The Atlantic's ratebase (number of readers) has swelled from 400,000 to 450,000 – a 13% increase.
3.1 million unique visitors are viewing *theatlantic.com* each month – a 27% increase over the previous year.

And from a revenue standpoint, during Q4 2008, when advertising levels were highest, the *theatlantic.com's* revenue increased 197% (YTD 2009, it's up 93%).

Since the work broke, *The Atlantic* has attracted 28 new print and 23 new digital advertisers, including marquee brands like Apple, Audi, HBO, Kindle, and Orbitz.

Most importantly, *The Atlantic* has inspired thousands of people to "Think. Again." The proof is summed up in a posted response to the question 'Is the doughnut doomed?' that reads, "Only if it has a black hole at its center."