

BITE!

The New Dog Mag, The Parody, The Spoof, The Reaction!

By Phil Tripp

Many of us have played practical jokes only to see them backfire. I can't ever remember any in my life of being a prankster that have *forefired*, even with some of the hoaxes and pranks I perpetrated in my life as a music industry publicist. The music industry is the best stage for pulling off a satire—look at Spinal Tap, the fake rock star movie—or stunts like the countless promotional schemes that have seen everything from elephants pooping in front of radio stations to third rate singers faking their own kidnapping.

But the pet business is not used to being the butt of a joke. The film 'Best in Show' by the makers of mock rockumentary 'Spinal Tap' made some sectors of the showdog biz uneasy but was a hit with dog owners and non-owners alike. Pet magazines tend to stay on the serious side, especially ones that cater to breeds or general press not wanting to offend any sector of paying readership.

Lisa and I have a habit of finding, fetching and pawing over other pet media whether we're in a local newsagent, overseas at Borders or other bookstores with magazine racks or on the Internet surfing through pet turf. Our Urban Animal is a member of that special pet media breed which consists of free publications from local newsprint dog papers, complimentary cross-pet glossy magazines, and ones that cross over to the Net in both print and online versions.

From our first encounter with Urban Dog in New Orleans (www.urbandogmagazine.com) which spawned the idea for our creation, we've been fascinated to find over 30 free pet magazines. These include Woofertimes in San Francisco (www.woofertimes.com), Fetch The Paper (www.fetchthepaper.com) in the Napa/Sonoma Wine Valleys north of Frisco, The Pet Press down in Los Angeles (www.thepetpress-la.com), OC Dog (www.ocdogs.com) in Orange Country just South of LA, San Diego Pets (www.sandiegopetsmagazine.com), Chicagoland Tails (www.chicagolandtails.com), Dogs Dogs Dogs (www.dogsx3.com) and City Dog (www.citydog.ca) both in Toronto, Down East Dog News (www.downeastdognews.com) in Maine, Animal Print (www.theanimalprint.com) in Rhode Island, Atlanta Dog Life (www.atlantadoglife.com), City & Country Pets (www.ccpets.com) in Dallas and The Pet Gazette (thepetgazette.org) in Nashville to give you a doggie's dozen.

These publications are far less commercial and more community oriented than their commercial counterparts. A sampling of dog magazines alone (putting aside cat, bird, fish, rabbit, critter, ferret, reptile, amphibian and crustacean chronicles) include original literary dog magazine The Bark (www.thebark.com) which is not to be confused with a local mag of copied title; the hugely upmarket glossy Modern Dog (www.moderndog.ca) from Canada; the celebrity-oriented New York Dog (www.thenydog.com), and its sister publication Hollywood Dog (www.thehollywooddog.com); the Vanity Fair of pet mags Animal Fair (www.animalfair.com); dog travel magazine Fido Friendly (www.fidofriendly.com); as well as the straighter dog press of Dog Fancy (www.dogfancy.com) and Dog World (www.dogworld.com).

But on this trip to the mammoth Global Pet Expo trade show, we unearthed an example of a more outrageous extension of dog magazine, Paw Luxuries (www.pawluxuries.com), which almost appears to be a parody of puppy press with its glitzy cover of rock artist Pink and a bull dog, essential luxuries for pampered paws. It promotes a cult following for 'petropolitans' who are after the obscenely posh products rather than utilitarian. As they say:

"Those who can afford to spoil their four-legged friends do, in some cases, to extreme. That explains the trend in designer pet clothing, hand-crafted pet beds, crystal collars and necklaces, fashionable carriers, and hand-made dining pieces. Pets never ask for anything, making it even easier to indulge them in everything."

Paw Luxuries Magazine is at the front of the luxury pet item line. From aromatherapy paw massages to Louie (sic) Vuitton dog carriers and every indulgence in between, there are two types of people those who don't have pets and those who know their pets deserve the best."

To use a well quoted term, it looks like a dog's breakfast served as canine caviar in a lurid mix of colours, photoshopped images and low resolution photos off the web. The writing has a wealth of typos, misspellings and grammaticals and a lack of compelling content. In other words, it's for aspirational dog owners who are inspired only by brands, bling and bags to carry dogs in.



Lisa and I had a laugh and thought to ourselves, "What would happen if you took the worst of women's magazines and sullied it with the pits of tabloid journalism and made it into a dog mag? What would it look like if Packer and Murdoch partnered it?"

A few Oregon and California pinot noirs later and we had the title—BITE! and a motto, "A Bitchin' Read for Rich Breeds". It would have to appeal to designer dog devotees and those who measure their worth by their wealth—or the illusion of it. The cover dog would have to be a clone. I favoured a Labradoodle but with a crossed eye and a cleft palate—ripe for the cosmetic surgeon's knife. Lisa suggested a Puggle since they are the dog de jour of monetised mongrels.

We had to have an evil media mogul publisher and an airhead heiress Paris Hilton look-and-sound-alike editor. Then the ideas started flowing for articles. Where some of the upmarket mags have pet obituaries and horoscopes, we would have an investor's tip sheet within on pet product stocks trading on

the market as well as a legal column to advise owners on all aspects of civil actions—either bringing them against breeders and groomers or defending them from owners of animals that have been attacked by their crazed pups.

Naturally corrective surgery was a hot topic to combat sagging jowls and beauty tips on covering grey hair or putting in highlights was a must. The brave new world of pet cosmetics was ripe to be mined. And then of course, food fetishes like introducing the BITE! South Bitch Diet. How to lose weight without exercising, electro muscular stimulation, body sculpting... yes, the readership was ripe for the picking. Not to mention laser eye surgery & liposuction.

It would have to emulate the cover of your average No Idea or Womens' Weekly with a large number of numbers like 478 Eye Blush Tips and Techniques to a Sexier Look. Any recipes had to have products only found at food emporiums or David Jones Food Hall as a last resort. We could even have kosher and halal snacks for dogs of Jewish or Muslim diets.

So what started out as a funny conversation grew into something far more dangerous. A spoof... a parody... a satire... a pootake! Little did we realise how serious the consequences would be!

We decided to come up with a concept to titillate and amuse our mates in the pet business and in media. We didn't need any time at all to create a faux cover of a phony magazine. It actually took our own designer only half an hour after procuring a one dollar image from iStock of the Puggle you see on BITE!'s cover. Add the visually lurid and design challenged mishmash of fonts and styles, gloss it up... voila! It looked good enough to sell.

Like any good hoax though, it needed actual characters, a press release and an over-the-top publicist. Bollywood Publisher Raht Bhag was mated with a socialite named Ivana Hump and promoted by K9 PR Svall O. Schwantz. And the release comprised every possible double entendre and pained pun possible as well as a hefty dose of illiterate alliteration. It was a shocker! And it looked great. Who would ever believe it? We sent it out as a bulk email at 7 am on a Thursday to a thousand email addresses.

To make sure it couldn't be traced back to us, we created a spoofed email address named PetMediaPR on another server. We could still get responses but no one could identify us. We gave a working phone number but a private one connected to a fax machine. And finally, we took about a minute to search for a website address with the word Bite that didn't work and found www.biteme.com.au as well as the PR's website that was out of order.

Funny enough, within minutes of its release to a hundred media and almost 900 pet business contacts—we started getting responses. The first was a Queensland advertiser of ours, in the office early, who forwarded it to us.

As we would have expected a few friends forwarded the email with the subject title "New Canine Cash Mag--BITE!--Goes Doggie Style" to us to alert us to a possible competitor. We emailed them back thanking them and noting that newsstand titles were not competitors since we're free. Eerily, a few seemed to believe it was real.

By this time, my mate Brian from Pet Talk Radio called the phone, got the fax whine, then did an Internet WhoIs search of the website addresses and came up blank. He suspected us. So did his partner Kaye Browne who got the press release as Dr Harry's wrangler on 'Better Homes and Gardens'. Media people are too seasoned to fall for such an obvious hoax, but they howled at the release and the cover.

The Pet Industry Association of Australia's Executive Officer forwarded it to me with his scepticism, "Do you think it is for real, none of the links are working and the spiel doesn't sound that inviting. It is almost anti pet and certainly not responsible". He's a smart guy and was clearly sniffing a rat! Or a Raht!

As you can imagine, a spoof of this style circulated quickly over the Net and became a momentary 'Urban Myth' I was sure no one would believe it and many didn't. A few, I'm sure, replied to us to keep the joke going. But we also got emails from people and companies wanting to take up the opportunity of a supposed new publication without checking out its bonafides. Some people even wanted to advertise (though I should note here, no one who advertises with us). However one major dog food brand got very excited and turned the email over to their ad agency in hopes of becoming the dominant brand in the magazine. That was a howler!



The first confirmed 'bite' we had from a pet business was an upmarket dog supply shop in a posh suburb. We'll edit out the name and company.

"Hi there

Just received this email this morning! We (****) would love to be involved - think it looks fantastic and reminds us all not to take the whole biz too seriously! Do let me know.

Kind regards
Director"

It was shortly followed by a dog treat maker,

"Hey Trace!

I have got to get a copy of this!! How cool, very cute. Where can I get one??

chat soon

And within minutes or being told it was coming out May 1, they replied,

hello again

I want to get a copy & maybe have a look at Advertising.

Thanks

Then a Melbourne groomer,

"How fabulous! Thanks ever so for letting us know about your new release. Good luck with it I'm sure you will go well.

Could you please send me some information on advertising? We have a *** ** that we would love to advertise in your magazine.

Best wishes

A dog day care facility wrote:

Hello

What a fantastic magazine! I can hardly wait, I found **** so average.

***** would be very interested in any editorial piece you may feel is appropriate for your magazine. Our WEBCAM is watched by our high flying clients who travel aboard logging in from NY, London, Tokyo, Singapore, or wherever there business may take them.

Attached is some pictures for your reference and our latest press release

I am contactable 7 to 7 five days a week.

And within minutes, another pitch,

Hi, We are a small business offering (**pet jewelry) would be interested in fashion shoots, accessorising your pet, hot product listings etc. Our website is *****

We have also written a article/case study on living with lymphoma. Not sure if this is the type of thing your after but would be interested in discussing further. There was limited conventional treatment with good outcomes for pooches with lymphoma (a common dog ailment).

Let us know what you think..

That touched us and made us feel a little guilty.

But we were amazed when we got an email from the publisher of two of America's leading luxury dog magazines.

From: ****

Subject: Re: New Canine Cash Mag--BITE!--Goes Doggie Style

To: petmedia@tpg.com.au

Hi,

Would love to talk to you about this..sounds very cool.

We didn't know if he wanted to form a strategic alliance with us or just interview us.

As it turned out, when we called some of our media mates in the US to whom we had sent the spoof email and cover image, three got back in touch.

Cameron Woo of The Bark (whom we had visited in San Francisco) responded to my voice mail:

Phil,

You had us going for a moment ... good spoof! I hope that the rest of your American trip went well. It was nice to meet both you and Lisa and chat.

We're pleased to have some kindred spirits down under ... keep up the good work!

Cameron

One of the two others I spoke to admitted they had been totally sucked in believing that our kind of sensationalist media Down Under were ahead of the game and had created a shocking new title. The other said it took about five minutes of studying the release after seeing the cover before a sense of disbelief overwhelmed her.

We even fooled B&T Magazine - the Media, Marketing & Advertising Weekly - which not only interviewed Svall O. but ran a back cover article promoting the mag startup. This caused two more ad agencies to request media kits - Starcom and McCann Universal. We howled!!

You be the judge. Here's the cover and press release.



But the story isn't over yet. Mark, our designer, did such a terrific job with the cover and the reaction to the concept was so staggering that we knew we had come up with a million dollar idea. Much like the spoof travel books 'Phaic Tan' and 'Molvania' and parodies of magazines like 'Playboy', we had accidentally dreamed up a concept that had... well... legs. Pawfect.

So by the end of the day, we started on a 12 page sample book of a fake dog magazine called BITE! with a pitch proposal to mainstream publishers to pick up for the Christmas trade and licensing into overseas territories. By the time you read this story, we hope to have a bidding war started between Random House, McGraw Hill, Bookwise, Simon & Schuster, Ballantine Books, etc... and by the time of the next issue of Urban Animal, we hope to have completed all the text and images of the ultimate dog satire.

Press Release For Immediate Release April 20, 2006
Australia's Newest Upmarket Dog Magazine To Be Unleashed With BITE!
Bombay Publisher And New York Heiress Editor Give The Dogs a Boner!

In an industry already packed with more pet magazines than the cages of a designer dog puppy mill (with prices to match!), a high-society set of dancing dog media mini-moguls have mated to unleash yet another new title aimed at the wallets of pet lifestyle readers. BITE! Magazine debuts May 1 on newsstands (in its own special boner shaped rack), in gyms, beauty parlors, couture shops, jewelry stores, cosmetic surgery offices, luxury car dealers, day spas and with special placement, personally served at the tables of selected, leading luxe cafes and restaurants. But BITE! is not just baying for bucks in Paddo, Mosman, Toorak, Ascot, Manuka, Crawley, Sandy Bay and Kingston-on Murray. It's 'A Bitchin' Read for Rich Breeds'. And the creators have the pedigrees (or papers) to prove it!

Publisher Raht Bhag marked his territory in media with a range of Bollywood celebrity magazines, and his fortune with a call centre trade publication and directory. "Just as there is the need for more than 40 puppy pram brands-which we road-test for readers-and an incredible array of lavishly expensive pet products that they'll never need-which we feature with glowing advertorial across from actual ads and outlets that advertise with us- we know BITE! will feed on the new designer dog devotees and those driven to acquiring fashion status through pet toys and treats." Bhag barks. "Our website-which will be shortly snapping at <http://www.biteme.com.au> -- will be augmented with yapping phone marketing campaigns targeted at prime demographics of yummy-mummies."

As Editor Ivana Hump (a registered New York Heiress and Certified Canine Aficionado) pants, "We chose a Puggle for the cover as it represents all that is great about fashionable cross breeds. They're cute, small and highly sort after since that actor from Brokeback Mountain got one." Hump continues, "We have a totally fresh approach from all the other magazines in the market." Part of this freshness stems from Hump having never really been an editor before, but she does it doggie-style. "Yes, it's true, wonderful, really, as my husband is the publisher and I haven't really had any writing experience before. It just shows marrying the right person can really score you a plum gig. I've really had to overcome my dyslexia and it's great for our interns to get all the work experience I heap on them. Really!" Hump's hound de jour--the de rigeur Frankenoodle-also writes for BITE!

As can be seen by the unique style of BITE!'s debut cover (attached as a jpeg-hi res image available), it is unlike any other pet magazine cloned from American counterparts. "We're proud to pander to unnecessary barkie bling and ridiculous canine clothing; unafraid to promote branded mongrel designer dog fashion breeds; happy to lead in the fight for cosmetic procedures for sagging jowls or other hound improvements; and we will not be cowed by those who yell at us when we don't pick up poo!" Hump howls. "Our first in a long line of celebrity interviews is an exclusive with that rarely quoted rocker, Jimmy Barnes, who comes out as a proud Schnauzer owner, declaring, 'They're not just for sissies!' Which shows we're going after the pink dog dollar too."

Bhag proudly points to the wealth of advertisers that contributed to the first issue. "We have a lot of A-list friends and suppliers, people who willingly gave services to the magazine and who we have woven into the fine texture of our premiere edition like choice Chinese toy fabric." And being for sale at such prime outlets other than just newsstands, Bhag anticipates a pile of potential profits from those who not only want to walk the walkie, but be seen with the mag in their faux Vuitton bag or Jeep puppy stroller. When asked to reveal the cover price, Bhag wagged, "It's on the cover. If you have to ask how much it costs, you can't afford it!" "But Dahling! You must!" Hump ends.

For interviews/images/imitations and inventive initiatives contact PR interfacer Svall O. Schwantz at K9Media via petmedia@tpg.com.au PR website is at www.K9Media.net.au (no connection to the US company K9 Media or their website www.K9Media.net). Paw-sonal phone (02) 9557 8894

Lisa was a little concerned though. She figured we would struggle to find 365 Excuses Not to Pick Up Poo. "Easy" I said. "Number one, 'Eeyew!'; 2, 'I forgot my bag!'; 3, 'It's not mine!'; 4, 'It's to squishy!'; 5, 'I'll do a poo in lieu later.' And on they go.

I also told her my secret. You, readers, would feed us hundreds and for the ten best that are emailed to petmedia@tpg.com.au or mailed to Poo Excuse, 20 Hordern Street, Newtown NSW 2042 we'll give you a signed copy of the book when published for everyone we use.

And if you have any great ideas for phony articles, spreads or other content, pass them along too. We won't share the royalties with you but we promise to credit you if we steal your idea or your title.