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September 2008

Spotlight On: *Russian Life* magazine

By Keaty Gross, Magazine PAPER Project Coordinator

Russian Life is a 50-year-old bimonthly magazine covering Russian culture, history, business, society and travel, with an estimated readership of 40,000. Its intent is to offer an objective, insightful trip into the heart of Russian reality. *Russian Life* is privately owned and fiercely independent. The magazine has no affiliation, official or unofficial, with the government of Russia or the United States, nor with any political agency, lobbying group or media conglomerate. As such, *Russian Life* is beholden only to its subscribers.

We interviewed Publisher and Editor Paul Richardson to get the back story on how *Russian Life* became a green leader in the magazine industry.

As a small publication, how did you switch to recycled paper without breaking the bank?

At the time, our printer was Banta Publications, in Greenfield, OH. I told them we wanted to make this move and they offered what they had, which was a 10% PCR stock at about a 15% premium. The quality was quite good and we decided to do it. Soon thereafter, Banta was bought out by Donnelley, which put me on my guard and made me willing to take printing salespersons' calls again – I have always preferred doing business with smaller companies.

Then, out of the blue, I was cold-called by a printing salesperson from [Ovid Bell Press](#). I agreed to let them quote on the magazine and was encouraged by their numbers. They were able to offer a 100% PCR stock for the text at a price essentially the same as what we had been paying at Banta/Donnelley. It was a no brainer.

The paper they use is made in Denmark and shipped to the US, so there are still some sustainability issues on that front. It seems odd that it is more economical to produce and ship 100% PCR paper from Denmark than it is to make it here, closer to where it is used, but there you are.

What non-monetary obstacles did *Russian Life* face during this process, and how did you overcome them?

My main concern was how our readers might react to the stock change. Ours is a magazine of rich pictorial essays and, although we are small, we have a strong reputation for production quality. I was worried that the duller finish of the PCR stock might be off-putting.

On the other hand, I noticed that PCR stock was making inroads elsewhere – I was seeing it in other non-enviro magazines like Mother Jones, so I figured we were not too far out in front on this. Plus, I found that text printed on the PCR

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stock was actually EASIER to read, since it did not have reflective glare.

So I gambled that our readers, interested as they are in international issues, in what goes on in another country, would have a wider perspective. That they would appreciate our attempts to reduce our magazine's footprint, as long as the quality of our product could be sustained.

The gamble seems to have paid off. I have been very happy that we have retained our high production quality, and not a single reader has complained about the transition. Of course, we built up to the move with periodic announcements of our commitment to change.

Was there a specific inspiration behind your decision to "go green", or was this always a goal of the publication?

I have always been concerned that so much of publishing is done without concern for sustainability of the raw materials that make our work possible, and my focus on this issue became more acute about five years ago when I read the works of Derrick Jensen (author of [Listening to the Land](#) and [Language Older than Words](#)). However, until recently there haven't been many green alternatives for small magazine publishers. How do you convince a printer to stock a recycled stock if you are their only customer for this and you are only using about 10 tons per issue?

Are there other aspects of your production that you are hoping to make more sustainable in the future?

OBP has offered us a 100% PCR cover stock. Until now, only a 10% PCR has been available for this. I hope to make this move with our Nov/Dec 08 issue.

We have tried to make similar moves in other areas, getting our wall calendars, maps and books (much less envelopes and renewal forms, etc.) printed on PCR stock, but it is still so hard to find printers who stock anything above 30% at a price we can afford.

Can you tell us a little bit about the motivation behind your use of agricultural instead of petroleum-based inks?

Very much the same as with paper. You know, when I was growing up, my father owned a print shop and I ran a printing press on weekends and in the summers. Then, in the late 1980s, early 1990s, I helped open up the first privately owned printing shop in Russia. So I have a very intimate acquaintance with printing materials and have spent many hours cleaning ink off rollers, off my hands, from under my nails, filling up red iron pails with soiled and flammable rags. I always thought this stuff must be toxic, given what it took to clean it off. I don't know that the newer inks are any easier to clean off your hands, but hopefully they leave less of an imprint on the environment...

Do you have any advice to other publishers in a similar position?

Push your printer to stock PCR stock. They won't do it, and prices won't come down, until there are more people demanding it. It does not have to be that much more expensive than non-recycled stock, and in fact SHOULD be less expensive.