

Montpelier Publisher Finds His Niche In Russian Market

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Correspondent

Russian Information Services won't provide flight times to Moscow or prepare your visa, but for a first-hand glimpse into Russia, it's one of Americans' first choices.

Founded in 1990 and located on the second floor of City Center, Russian Information Services publishes business and travel guides and twice yearly prepares and distributes Access Russia, Central Europe and Points Between, a catalog with more than 300 books and information products. Last year RIS purchased the magazine Russian Life, produced in Russia and distributed in North America.

Paul Richardson of Montpelier, president of RIS and publisher of Russian Life, calls the magazine an "exciting project" and a "huge responsibility."

"This is the largest circulation magazine on Russia published in the United States," said Richardson. "For many people, it's their monthly dose of Russia."

The magazine, known for decades as Soviet Life, was first published in the late 1950s. In a government-sponsored cultural exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union, a magazine called America Illustrated was distributed in the USSR, and Soviet Life was circulated in the United States.

After the Soviet Union broke up of 1991, Soviet Life became Russian Life in a joint venture between a private U.S. publisher and Novosti, Russia's state information agency. When Russian funding faltered last year, the magazine was offered to Richardson.

Richardson says he and his wife, Stephanie Ratmeyer, and their two out-of-state partners jumped at the opportunity to purchase Russian Life.

"From a marketing standpoint it really closed the circle for us because it's the consumer level we'd never had before. We'd always targeted people who have already defined their area of interest in Russia," he said.

Russian Life is produced with a handful of U.S. magazines in mind.

"We very much hold up Vermont Life or Arizona Highways or some of these other really nice regional magazines as our goal," Richardson said. "That's what we really want it to be."

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"We want to keep it objective, which it hasn't been for 38 years. That's a major selling point, but we also want it to be a beautiful magazine."

The process is daunting. A full-time staff in Moscow consists of a Russian editor, a Russian doing layout, a British editor and an American manager. A growing group of freelance writers and photographers contributes to each issue.

Disks arrive from Moscow with the magazine's contents — articles on topics such as travel, holidays, history, business, sports and the arts.

"We send files back and forth over electronic mail to do the editing on articles because we do a little polishing here," Richardson said.

When the issue is ready, it goes



Photo by Dorothy Barrett

Paul Richardson and his wife, Stephanie Ratmeyer, take a break in their Montpelier offices. The couple publishes Russian Life and run Russian Information Services from City Center.

to Leahy Press in Montpelier.

"We do all our printing in Vermont," said Richardson. "We've found it to be as competitive as anywhere."

Richardson is optimistic about the magazine's future, although circulation is off from its peak somewhat.

"It's only got 16,000 subscribers

now, but Soviet Life in its heyday had 60,000, so we very much think we can be 40,000 to 50,000," Richardson said.

Many RIS publications are aimed at people who want to do business in Russia. Richardson himself is the author of "Russia Survival Guide: Business and Travel." He lived in Russia for two years, working for a Canadian-owned printing company. While doing business over there isn't easy, there are attractions, he said.

"There aren't many places in the world where you can go now and invest in or buy into basic industries that already have a part of the market. ... You can get into basic (Russian) industries that are pretty recession-proof," Richardson said.

While the make-a-quick-buck mentality will not work in Russia, according to Richardson, endurance and a commitment may yield results.

"People who go over there and say 'OK, I'm in this for the long haul and I'm going to make an investment in the market and train people in my business, build up market share, build up distribution,' probably half to three-quarters are being successful," he said.

Richardson's magazine, however, is largely for people who have an intellectual or travel interest in Russia, not a business concern.

"I think there's also just the mystique of Russia. It's been this off-limits kind of place and there's always been this mystery," he said.

"If you go there and meet Russians, they're very friendly and warm people. People get infatuated with this love of Russia; it's kind of inexplicable. You just go back and back and back."