

Stu Magazine

A goofy concept, a stack of phony press releases and a sure-to-fail business plan: all a lad needs to succeed By Jesse Brown

Hypothesis:

It's getting tough to be a lad. Guys have always been under pressure to acquire wealth and status, but now we also need firm, waxed pecs and abs, an arsenal of sleek digital gadgetry, superhuman sexual skills, a boyishly vulgar sense of humour and a really cool car. At least, that's what we're told we need by *Maxim*, *Gear*, *Toro*, *FHM*, *UMM* and a dozen other "lad mags" on today's newsstands.

Are guys really buying this? Have we all agreed to judge ourselves against an ideal of the glib, model-dating narcissist? Does this so-called "metrosexual" lifestyle actually exist, or is it just some marketer's wet dream? And if men's magazines are about dreams and not reality, what about my dream of doing as little as possible? Am I not also a man? Don't I deserve my own lifestyle magazine?

For the greater good, I will launch *Stu* magazine: "For the Adequate Man." Or at least I will pretend to, and see who goes for it.

Apparatus & Method:

My alias: Stuart Neihardt, longtime shipping tracker, first-time magazine publisher. A slogan: "*Stu* is for you!" But who will care about *Stu*?

I type up a mission statement, create a cover mock-up, and offer tantalizing peeks at upcoming *Stu* features. For example:

Relationships — "No Maintenance": The *Stu* guide to dating the hot girl's less-hot friend

Sex — The Pasha, The Three-Toed Sloth, The Mr. Belvedere and five other low-impact, high-pleasure positions that let you gratify her without breaking a sweat

Celebrity — "Funny, they don't look *Stu*-ish": Tinseltown's closeted regular guys

I run off some copies of this "press kit" and post it on the Web at www.stumagazine.com. I e-mail a press release to a few dozen members of the media and wait to see who'll take the bait.



Observations:

DAY 1

Within a couple of hours, the phone rings. I affect my best nasal drone and begin conversing with William Shields, editor of *Masthead*, the magazine about Canadian magazines.

WILLIAM SHIELDS: Hi, Stu. So, are you really going to publish this magazine?

STUART NEIHARDT: Yeah, sure. I think that magazines in general are too limited. They're all about these fantasy lifestyles.

W.S.: I absolutely agree. Tell me, what kind of an education do you have?

S.N.: Uh, I went to college. To Centennial College.

W.S.: No kidding? Me too! Were you in journalism?

S.N.: [Pause] Uh, no. I wasn't there long, y'know. It didn't really work out for me.

W.S.: I see. So will *Stu* be perfect-bound or saddle-stitched?

S.N.: The first one.

DAY 12

Masthead's Web site announces the upcoming launch of *Stu*. Letters arrive from hopeful writers, illustrators, circulation managers and ad sales reps. *Globe and Mail* columnist Leah McLaren, the self-described "party princess" of fads 'n' fashions, phones for an interview.

LEAH McLAREN: Hi, Stu. Listen, I'll want to meet you in person later, but let's chat first now. So what's the deal with *Stu*?

STU NEIHARDT: Well, I wanted to make a magazine that makes guys feel good. Because if you look at the people on the street, they just don't look much like the people in magazines.

L.M.: Hmm... I know what you mean. I write for a fashion magazine, and sometimes it just seems silly to me. Like when I'm on a bus or something, and I see everyone in spandex or sweatpants, I think, "Gee, no one really cares about fashion, do they?"

S.N.: Nope. Most of us don't. You know, I was surprised to hear from you, to tell you the truth. I guess I always thought you would be more interested in *GQ* guys or *Esquire* guys. Not so much *Stu* guys.

L.M.: Well, I didn't call to ask you out on a date, Stu. Don't get your hopes up.

S.N.: I try not to.

L.M.: One last thing—I need to know that I'll have an exclusive story here.

S.N.: No problem.

DAY 22

I do an identical interview with Rebecca Eckler, Leah McLaren's doppelgänger (and rival) from the *National Post*:

REBECCA ECKLER: But Stu, why would any woman want to date you?

STU NEIHARDT: I think in time that women, especially professional women like yourself, are going to see a lot of value in dating *Stu*-ish men. I mean, who needs some hotshot who's always at work? When you come home, you *know* I'm going to be around—to relax with you, to listen, to cook... Well, at least to order in.

DAY 23

Becky's feature runs before Leah's, leading the *Post's* Arts section. Stumania erupts. Interview requests pour in from media across Canada, including CBC Radio's *As It Happens* (the same folks who fell for my first Experiment, "The Great Sofa Hoax," not so long ago).

CBC'S MARY LOU FINLAY: So, Stu, why do you think the world needs *Stu* magazine?

STU NEIHARDT: Well, men need to say "enough!" For example, I was reading one of these "lad mags," and they had an entire feature about men's nipples. Should I be worried about my nipples? Are they pronounced through my shirt? Do I measure up in that sense? If I have one that's inverted, am I less of a man?

M.L.F.: I don't know. That's something to worry about.

Meanwhile, fearing that Leah McLaren might be a little peeved about Stu's indiscretions, I call to smooth things over.

STU NEIHARDT: Hi, Leah. It's Stu. I just wanted to make sure we're still on for the interview.

LEAH McLAREN: Well, I'll have to talk to my editor. To be honest, I didn't know you were going to be talking to the *Post*... and I certainly didn't know you would be calling Rebecca Eckler directly.

S.N.: Well, I called both of you.

L.M.: No, Stu. I called *you*.

S.N.: Oh, I mean, I e-mailed both of you... Is it really that important whether it's Rebecca or you who gets me first?

L.M.: Yeah, well... It just gets a little old, you know?

S.N.: C'mon, Leah. You girls shouldn't fight. There's

enough Stu to go around. There a Friendly's restaurant in Scarborough. Can I tell my friends it's a date?

DAY 24

Stu basks in the media spotlight. His magazine, which no one has actually seen, has received more ink than most legitimate startup publications. Hot reporter chicks are locked in a vicious cat fight over him. It dawns on me that though he is merely adequate, and only 24 days old, Stu is already more successful than I am. But just as I start to envy the nebbish bastard, he is killed.

An anonymous poster on a media gossip Web site traces Stu's phone number and finds me. He puts two and two together—which any of the pros could have done at any time. He exposes me and the magazine. Antonia Zerbisias, a *Toronto Star* columnist, breaks the story. Antonia calls Becky, Becky calls Leah and Mary Lou. Just like back in the schoolyard, it takes a guy weeks of work to build his popularity, and a few girls with speed-dial mere minutes to tear it down.

The jig is up, so I come clean on CBC Radio. Upon learning that I am not actually a geek, Rebecca Eckler, in a follow-up column, calls me a "weirdo" and a "freak." In secret, she and Leah stop their hair-pulling, and join forces against the late Stuart Neihardt.

I show up for a hastily scheduled *Stu* interview, requested by Leah McLaren. She tells me she's flying to Montreal, the *Stu* headquarters, to do a couple of stories, and wants to meet me at a fancy hotel, instead of at Friendly's. Could it be that she hasn't heard word of the hoax? With nothing to lose, I wait in vain in the lounge for 20 minutes, until the bartender presents me with an adequate bouquet of flowers, addressed "To Stu, from Leah and Rebecca." I'm a little pissed at being stood up, but the *Stu* within me shrugs it off. He's used to it.

Conclusion:

Will people care about the average guy? Of course they will—as long as he knows his place. But Stuart Neihardt and his magazine soared too high, too soon. He was like the nerdy kid befriended by the popular crowd for his willingness to eat worms. By personifying adequacy, he became über-adequate, and therefore not adequate at all, but excellent. He was too beautiful for this world. □