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Young couple take a chance at magazine publishing - and win

By DAVE GAREAU

Magazine ownership and publication is not what most people would call your classic family business, but a young couple who recently moved into a massive sprawling home in Caledon East are doing their best to change that image. They are Rolf and Wendy Priesnitz, two people who in 1976 decided they wanted to start their own magazine about down-to-earth living, and are now running what may become one of the most successful alternative-culture periodicals in the country — "Natural Life" magazine.

Two years ago, Rolf was a master plumber working for the Texaco corporation in Jarvis, Ontario. He was tired of his job then, tired of fitting into a rut in a giant industrial machine, so he begged and borrowed over \$20,000 and went into the publishing business. It was a big gamble then — sinking everything he had into an idea — but now it looks like the risk has paid off.

Wendy is the editor, Rolf is publisher, and now Natural Life is growing by 600-1,500 new subscriptions every month. Their business figures are now somewhere in the area of a \$¼ million a year and, although still a "kitchen table operation", they really are a national magazine.

Historically, the Canadian magazine industry is a nasty world littered with brain children that went belly-up after one issue. The odds are against success right from the start and failure here most often means losing everything.

So, why have these two upstarts succeeded where so many others have failed?

Rolf contends that his publication has worked because "when I first decided to start a magazine, I thought of what I would want to see in a periodical. After that, I just sat down and did it that way. Natural Life will always go the way the readers want it to. We encourage community participation, ideas and stories for



Rolf and Wendy Priesnitz, together with daughters Melanie, left, and Heidi. Their magazine provides access to down-to-earth living, and probably won't become polluted with over-commercialization.

every issue, and the main goal is just to offer information about self-reliant living."

"Most important of all though," explained Rolf last Sunday, "is that we haven't let the finances take control of the magazine. We didn't get involved in this for the sake of advertisers, but for ourselves and our readers."

From talking with Rolf, you get the feeling that the publication would fold before he would let money take control of the whole show. On Sunday, for instance, he emphasized that they are selective about their advertisers and would have no hesitation to tell one to get lost if they didn't like the way the magazine was going.

The reason they can afford this staunch policy towards

commercialization is that, so far, the magazine is almost totally supported by subscriptions. The very first edition had only nine dollars worth of ads, and it wasn't until the sixth edition that this picture changed. Interested readers have been the basis of success for Natural Life, and this is just the way the Priesnitz family wanted it.

Rolf and Wendy have two pre-school daughters, Melanie and Heidi, and together the group spends between six and 24 hours a day on the publication, seven days a week. They now have 16,000

subscribers and their magazine is available from Vancouver to the east coast, plus the United States.

Although neither Rolf nor Wendy had any journalism experience prior to starting this project, Wendy picked up on good editorial judgement right from the start. The very first press run was for 50,000 copies, and these were sent coast-to-coast as a freebie. All issues until now have used a glossy cover as Wendy explains, "this has given us a strong credibility as a magazine".

She has also had the help of heavy readership involvement, as every month she receives piles of quality articles and photos from both experienced professional writers and interested readers who want to make a contribution.

According to Rolf, "subscription lists have provided us with prospective readers, and by starting with a free mailing, we got enough interest to carry us to a second issue. Since then, things have just got better, and I know that, in a few more years, we'll be big enough to require a more sophisticated circulation system."

Despite the growth that is almost sure to come to this magazine, Rolf and Wendy appear to be the kind of people who will do their best to keep it a homespun operation. They are sitting on a magazine that is just now taking off, yet they say they will keep it reined in to retain control.

Growth will be slow but steady, and credit must be given here to an idea and a risk that worked.