

THE EVOLUTION OF JONES MAGAZINE

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Sometimes ideas come from the least likely places. Ask Tracey Ferguson. She conceived [JONES magazine](#), a high fashion publication aimed at affluent women of color in Houston, during a book club meeting where she and girlfriends gathered to talk lifestyle.

Just like its aspirational audience, JONES is transitioning into a national brand, after only five years in business, thanks to a November 2009 merger with The NorthStar Group. Founded by L.

Londell McMillan, NorthStar is a publishing, marketing and consulting firm that also owns The Source.

Last month, the newly formed JONES venture completed a multi-faceted launch that included a national magazine, where Ferguson continues as editor-in-chief and McMillan serves as publisher, a new website, and reality television show Keeping up with the Joneses, which airs on [Centric](#). The Atlanta Post spoke with Ferguson and McMillan about branding, business expansion, and surviving the magazine industry.

How did you execute the idea for JONES after conceiving it during book club meetings with friends?

Tracey Ferguson: We started out very small. At the time, I had a partner, a college friend of mine, who moved from Miami to Houston to help. We took a year off from work and flew back and forth to New York, took meetings, and attended conferences. We did our research to confirm that we were targeting a viable market. We hired a graphic designer to assemble a prototype so that we could visualize the look and feel of the magazine.

What kind of research did you conduct to confirm that affluent women of color were a viable market?

TF: I had worked at African American advertising agencies and my partner worked at AOL Black Voices, so we had a lot of market research data about buying power. We also used resources like [Target Market News](#) to pull together a profile of our audience and develop a media kit for the demographic we wanted to approach.

At what point did you start planning to take JONES national? And how did you implement that plan?

TF: I always wanted to grow. The original idea was to develop several regional JONES magazines in cities like Atlanta, Chicago, and Dallas so that we could take advantage of the different markets and style points while keeping the editorial germane to the area. Then, in meeting Londell, it became compelling to launch JONES as a national brand.

L. Londell McMillan: I come from the entertainment and media space and identified JONES as a brand with national and international potential. Look at the demographics of the African-American community. We're close to \$900 billion in annual [spending](#). In 2010, we'll be at \$1.2 trillion, and the majority of this market is black women.

We have decided not to make JONES monthly unless the consumers determine that they want to see it that often. We may decide to publish bimonthly or quarterly. That's under discussion.

In terms of distribution, we had a national platform in place. We are in every major state and store such as Barnes & Noble, Borders, Walgreens and CVS. Our rate based started at more than 150,000, which was a conservative number for us. We focused on our core demographic in terms of our distribution quantity. We also have orders in Europe and Middle East, so we expect to be international very soon.

What do you say those who claim that magazines are dying?

LM: We're not just in print medium. That's one of several of our platforms. In fashion and beauty, print is a very important medium. When women are under the dryer in the beauty salon, they want to look at something and put it in their hands. And nowadays, they want to go online to engage with what they've read.

There's never really been a high fashion publication targeted to African American women that's national across multiple platforms and sits on the shelves next to Vogue and Elle. I still get

excited about magazines and am very excited about new media. It's sad to see so many magazines not doing well, but times are evolving and we're evolving with them.

You also launched a new website – www.jonesmag.com – in conjunction with the magazine's national launch. What are your goals for attracting your audience online?

LM: Our primary goal is to provide immediate, accessible, high-quality, information around travel, beauty, fashion, and style. If you're going to be in media today and you're going to sell your product, you have to show measureable success online and offline. It's important that our audience will check in and support the product that we're producing. The website will work in tandem with our social media activities and online marketing campaigns.

We want to engage this JONES woman everywhere that she can be. Currently, the website is in phase one. We have bloggers including Tracey and her cast members from Keeping up with the Joneses, as well as women like fashion icon Beverly Johnson. In phase two, we will have a broader social media community.

TF: I'm excited about the shopping aspect of the website and being able to offer women those specific items that are highlighted in the magazine. Because the magazine was born in a book club, we want to carry on that oral tradition online where women share what we love about fashion, beauty, and travel.

You mentioned social media. What role does new media play in your strategic plan?

LM: It's central. JONES is a guide, so getting our information out is very important. Our new media strategy includes the key components: web, mobile, and social media.

With the merger between JONES and The NorthStar Group finalized, what's the strategy going forward?

LM: This merger was truly a merger of traditional print media and entertainment new media. Our recent launch was 360 degrees, with print, website, and television. The only platform missing is radio and we're looking into some kind of radio engagement.

Our model is business development. We don't have to be the only game in town. We want to partner with different organizations where our brands connect such as with Centric. We're not trying to be all things to all women. We stay in our lane, but we do it across multiple platforms.

What does NorthStar bring to the JONES brand?

LM: JONES still has its core team and the magazine remains under the direction of Tracey on the creative side. Now that it's been integrated into NorthStar, we've more than quadrupled the number of hands involved. We have people in sales, distribution, advertising and creative. One of the benefits of a merger as opposed to staffing up is an increase in resources. But this merger has been equally beneficial to NorthStar because we needed another product that was fresh and exciting.

What are some of the challenges you've faced expanding JONES from a regional platform to a national one?

TF: It's a totally different operation. It's not, "Oh we have a great magazine; we'll just make it bigger." The stakes are higher and so are mistakes. Our scope is bigger. We have people coming at us from everywhere. [Before] we had to approach designers, now we have designers asking us to be covered. We've changed the size of the magazine from that of a digest to being the same size as a Teen Vogue. The paradigm has shifted completely.

LM: You can even notice the differences by just looking at the cover. When it was regional, JONES featured a beautifully simple cover of an upcoming model. Now you see cover lines to let

consumers know what's in the issue. You'll see celebrity models and perhaps celebrities gracing future covers.

How did the deal for Keeping up with the Joneses develop?

TF: I wasn't looking for a show. In 2008, I received a call from an LA-based production company that had a copy of the magazine. We talked about what I do, my struggles, and my family life. Part of me thought it was a joke. They flew out to Houston and spent about four days shooting a reel to promote the show and sell the concept to a network. They went away and we forgot about it. Then two years later, the reel found itself in the hands of BET, who was looking to build a new network with Centric for a smart, fresh, stylish, conscious African-American audience. It was a perfect [fit](#) for where we're going.

Your staff and cast members, Bryce Hairston Kennard and Tamara Brock, seem to be characters on and off television. How do you leverage strengths and balance egos while running a business?

TF: I'm still learning. Over the years, it's been challenging because it's a small business and we work very intimately together especially towards the end of the production cycle when it's time to close the issue. I have a looser management style. I let people move and flow to make their own decisions.

Bryce has been with me for about for years, so we've grown [comfortable](#) with each other. Tamara, is fairly new to the staff, and has a stellar background from another Houston publication. She's a go-getter who's also very demanding. She enjoys her freedom at JONES to run with her ideas. Because of her long history in publishing, she sometimes thinks she's the expert and boss. So we do have our power clashes, but we're amicable and respect each other. The show does a good job of capturing those struggles.

What can viewers expect to learn about managing a magazine business in episodes to come?

TF: To value and reward loyalty. To give people space and rope. To keep your cool. To manage yourself in becoming a business owner. To be a responsible brand.

Felicia Pride is a writer-entrepreneur and author of The Message. Follow her on [Twitter](#).