

Putting Ebony in its proper place

Written by William Reed

Tuesday, 24 February 2009 18:22

A Black American icon, the Chicago-based Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) is struggling to survive in the modern media landscape. Editorial reorganizations are occurring at Ebony and JET magazines. The question is: Will the changes have any impact among African Americans and their modern-day mindsets?

Sacred cow as it is among aging African Americans, JPC's flagship magazine, Ebony has circulation numbers that are anemic and advertising revenue has fallen. The Company's Chair and CEO says that she is "deeply committed to maintaining our presence and long-standing legacy in the African American community". Linda Johnson Rice says the changes are to ensure the 67-year-old company's "long-term success" in the tumultuous publishing industry.

The company Rice's dad started in 1945 is the world's largest African American-owned and-operated publishing company. When Rice took over as Chair and CEO in 2003, the company had businesses in cosmetics, radio broadcast, television production and fashion targeted to an African American consumer audience. JPC's Ebony and Jet are household names across Black America and among the company's premier brands, along with the Fashion Fair Cosmetics line.

When 27-year-old businessman John H. Johnson launched Ebony Magazine Black GIs who had helped "make the world safe for democracy" were returning to civilian life and ready to

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challenge racial discrimination at home. Johnson founded Ebony "to project another dimension of the Black personality to the world. We wanted to give Blacks a new sense of somebodiness and sense of self-respect. We wanted to tell them who they were and what they could do." That strategy took Ebony to the top among African American audiences for 60 consecutive years and made the Johnsons Black America's richest family.

Over the years, Ebony always addressed African American issues, personalities, and interests in positive and self-affirming ways. Ebony cover pages graced coffee tables of Black households from coast-to-coast. A classic is the August 2008 Ebony special eight-cover edition that featured the "25 Coolest Brothers of All Time". That line up included Jay-Z, Obama, Prince, Samuel L. Jackson, Denzel Washington, Marvin Gaye, Muhammad Ali and Billy Dee Williams.

The Ebony Fashion Fair was started in 1956 to support worthy causes among African American organizations. Over 4,000 Fashion Fair events have been sponsored by nearly 200 non-profit civic groups, sororities and fraternities. The JPC has been at the forefront highlighting Black achievements. Ebony hosted an "Ebony Presents Hollywood in Harlem." Oscar party and started the Pathfinder Awards to honor John H. Johnson, with the awards being presented during halftime at the Super Bowl.

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Contemporary 30-something Black Americans may not grasp the symbolism of Ebony. John H. Johnson (1918 – 2005) was a teenager when his family moved from Arkansas City to Chicago in 1933. After working for Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Co., the 24-year-old Johnson began to publish Negro Digest as a weekly publication using a format similar to that of Reader's Digest. It became Ebony in 1945. By the 1950s the large-format glossy magazine's circulation had climbed to 500,000. It reached one million in the 1970s. Jet, was introduced in 1951 and Ebony's Fashion Fair became a traveling show in 1958 and raised \$48 million for scholarships and charities. In the 1970s Johnson Publishing moved into the cosmetics business and was ranked as the nation's second-largest African American-owned company. In the 1990s JPC had added more cosmetic lines, radio and television production, greeting cards and a book division publishing African American authors to the business and employed 2,600 people.

JPC is "reorganizing" because Ebony's revenues are down 18.8 percent and JET is down 40.9 percent. Now more than ever, JPC products and publications deserve more support among contemporary African Americans. JPC deserves to get its mojo back. Ebony is unique in its primary purpose of promoting the welfare of the Black race. In spite of post-racial attitudes among African Americans under 40, Ebony is still relevant. It's a good read toward knowing what is going on in America concerning Blacks and their welfare. Instead of seeking identities in mainstream media Blacks should be renewing subscriptions and displaying Ebony, JET and local black newspaper publications like days of old.

(William Reed – www.BlackPressInternational.com)