NEEDS OF A SCIENCE EDITOR

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ABSTRACT

None of the classic media sources report in greater depth about this science discipline than monthly astronomy magazines. They may not reach the widest audience, but their readers are 100% interested in astronomy, astrophysics and spaceflight, so the targeting is perfect! This article provides some insight into the production and selection process using examples from ASTRONOMIE HEUTE (AH), the German edition of Sky & Telescope (S&T).

TIME FRAME

As the name says, monthly magazines appear once a month (although there might be double issues, for example, AH currently has two, 1/2 and 7/8 making a total of 10 per year). But that doesn’t mean that once you have sent in a press release or pitched a story for a feature article, that you will see it in the issue on the stand the next month.

The production process, including distribution, of a four colour, glossy magazine such as Astronomie Heute is quite complex, taking more than two weeks from the time the publishing company sends the data to the printer.

And if your contribution is more than "just" a news snippet: Feature articles or stand-alone contributions are usually scheduled more than three months in advance to allow enough time for (a) good writing, (b) intensive editing, (c) pleasing layout/artwork/instructive and aesthetic imagery.

"Hot" topics (like the Deep Impact results) can make it to the reader in less than 6 weeks, but then they are usually written by one of the editors.

MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS

Particularly important for releases destined for the News Section:

a) make sure that there is not only a media contact given, but also a science contact and that they are available to respond to e-mail inquiries within 12 hours during—at least—the ten days following submission. If any of the scientists are of particular interest for a foreign language publication, flag it!

b) Have high-resolution imagery and illustrations available, both captioned and non-captioned. Typical printing resolution is 300 dpi, so the dimensions
of the files should exceed 3 Megapixels. If you want the image used in a feature article, a calendar or a poster, create a version with a minimum of 15 Megapixels!

c) In the press release, provide a working link to the science publication—reprint or preprint. Editors of specialist magazines may be experts in the field and might have questions way beyond your release. Or simply find additional information or aspects more interesting than those focussed on in your summary.
Without these three prerequisites, the story won’t make through to the:

The actual news section typically has 6 to 8 pages, allowing a total of between 12 and 15 pieces (S&T has more pages but longer stories, so their number is roughly the same if not less). In cases of high-impact events, such as: Huygens landing on Titan, Deep Impact hitting Tempel-1, Discovery Return-to-Flight, that number is reduced even further.

The mix of topics is then chosen so as to give a broad spectrum of sub-disciplines: spaceflight (civil/commercial), major space missions update, optical astronomy, non-optical astronomy, astrophysics, high-energy/particle physics, cosmology, planetary science. So it may be that given two high-impact stories that cover the same subject, one will be rejected.

Magazine editors are always interested in stories that they know their readers like. To increase the chances of your story being covered, be aware of the editors’ needs and facilitate their work.