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**BLUE
SKY**
INNOVATION

How Desiree Rogers led sweeping changes at Ebony, Jet



Desiree Rogers is pictured along Michigan Avenue in Chicago on July 16, 2013. (Brian Cassella / Chicago)

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By Kate MacArthur, Special to Blue Sky
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If innovation is the antidote to the expected, you could call Desiree Rogers a one-woman status quo killer. As director, she revived the Illinois Lottery. Later she won a controversial rate hike as president of Peoples Energy Corp. As the Obama administration's first social secretary, she promoted the presidency like a brand before she resigned following a State Dinner gatecrasher incident. Today, as CEO of Johnson Publishing Co., which owns the Ebony and Jet magazine brands and Fashion Fair Cosmetics, she has ushered in the magazines' first top-to-bottom redesign in 70 years, as well as an ambitious digital makeover. She shares how she gets buy-in for taking big risks.

Q. What were the biggest challenges in renovating Ebony and Jet?

A. One of the first things we did was we looked at our key skill sets. We began to look at opportunities for outsourcing things that we are not experts on. We outsourced circulation, printing and the purchasing of paper and managing that whole process. That allows synergies on paper costs, ink, postage, all of these other things that we would not have been able to do with only two magazines. But those are hard decisions because you're eliminating departments.

One caution is you need to think twice about outsourcing in the areas that are customer-facing. We used more sales brokers in 2013 than we're going to use in 2014. It might be a little more difficult for them to represent and explain the brand, and in many cases, they are working for many multiples of magazines. They're not living it 24/7 every day as our own dedicated staff might be.

Q. What was the most risky financial decision to get buy-in, and how did you get it?

A. One of the most difficult things as we're stabilizing the base business is to be at a place where we can think about big ideas and opportunities for growth as we go out for growth capital. Certainly we made a large investment in Ebony.com. At the beginning, was it risky? Yeah, because no one would know how it

would perform. I felt strongly that we had to find the resources to create an incredible, pre-eminent, beautiful, well-done, top-of-the-line Ebony.com. How were we going to get that done with everyone focused on getting the print side of the business moving forward?

So we made everyone stakeholders. We had multiple meetings where we brought the publisher to the editor to whatever digital staff we had into the process to really think and talk about what this might mean to the overall brand. We put Cheryl McKissack in as the consultant to run this, as well as people in New York. (Cheryl Mayberry McKissack is a research, marketing and digital consultant who joined the company as chief operating officer in January 2013.)

And the team did a magnificent job. Now Ebony.com is sitting at over 1 million unique visitors a month. Right now it looks smart, but back then it looked a little scary. Three months ago Jetmag.com was doing 70,000, and now it's doing over 200,000. That's not without a lot of hard work on Cheryl's team.

Q. What have you learned from this process?

A. Transitions require patience. You have to be focused. People need to feel that the leader knows directionally where we're going. It's not what was done before, so every day that you can stay on that same path and build that next brick going forward, the more buy-in, the more understanding, the more people will come together and start thinking about ideas to build the next brick together. That's where you get the momentum, and I think in 2014 that's where we are.

Q. What's been the bigger innovation challenge, the White House or Johnson Publishing?

A. Johnson Publishing. The scope of the jobs is very different, although one is obviously more public. The White House was limited scope, running the social office and very few staff and budget. Both have altruistic components. Johnson Publishing is the owner of the most prominent, iconic African-American brands in the world. We touch 70 percent of all African-Americans ages 18 plus in this country. We feel a duty to ensure they live on for the next 70 years.

Q-and-A's are edited for clarity and length.