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National Geographic CEO Says Nonprofit's Mission is Bringing the World to Readers

By Chantelle Wallace

As CEO of the National Geographic Society, John Fahey says the mission behind his organization is not necessarily driving circulation rates up but promoting geographic knowledge and conversation of the world's cultural, historic and natural resources.

"Ultimately, we are not in the magazine business," Fahey said at his April 5 VIP Distinguished Speaker Series talk. "We are in the business of bringing the world to people."

Fahey presides at the helm of the 120-year-old nonprofit considered an icon by many. "We resonate around the world because of our guiding philosophy and principles," said the former Time Life, Inc CEO. "We're not simply doing a job, we're inspiring people to care about the planet."

Alexander Graham Bell's Legacy

The National Geographic Society began as a club for an elite group of academics and wealthy patrons interested in travel.

Only when Alexander Graham Bell took over as the magazine's second president in 1898 did it begin its appeal to a broader audience. Fahey calls Bell a "true business maverick" who started one of National Geographic's most famous practices—inserting photography with informative captions.

He also suggested making the stories shorter and less academic, and adding advertising to increase revenue. In addition, Bell invented the much-loathed magazine blow-in card as a marketing tool to increase subscription rates.

"Bell made the magazine more accessible and popular," Fahey said.

Leading a Nonprofit

Today, the National Geographic Society serves nine million global members and maintains its nonprofit status. "Nonprofit means non-taxable—it doesn't mean you don't make a profit," Fahey pointed out. "It also means we can worry less about the profit margin than our competitors."

"We're a billion dollar enterprise, but unlike most charities we don't have to go begging for money."

Since Fahey's tenure with the magazine began in 1998, he's been faced with the challenge of changing aspects of the magazine to reduce costs while still maintaining elements that have come to define it.

For example, under his leadership, the magazine's paper weight has been reduced by 6 percent. This cuts down the price and environmental damage.

Taking a Stance on the Human Genome Project

Despite criticism that the magazine doesn't adhere to the apolitical, objective ideals of journalism, Fahey maintains that National Geographic tries to only take a position on issues backed by strong scientific support, such as global warming, a topic that's received much coverage in the magazine. T

The magazine has also recently been covering the Human Genome Project, which tries to determine the origins and path of human migration. The magazine's strong focus on this issue has caused some to dub the magazine "National Genome-graphic," Fahey said.

Regardless of the subject covered, Fahey stands by the magazine's intent to



John Fahey, CEO of the National Geographic Society, spoke at the VIP Distinguished Speaker Series April 5.

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