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Marvel Comics has been having a tough time lately. Readers and critics met last year's Civil War 2 - a magnificent crossover event (and a spiritual connection to this year's great Marvel film) - with disinterest and mockery. Two years of declining print comics sales culminated in a February in which only an ongoing superhero title managed to sell more than 50,000 copies.\* Three crossover events designed to pump up excitement came and went with little fanfare, while leading up to 2017's blockbuster crossover Secret Empire - in which a fascist Captain America undermines and conquers the United States - triggered such a negative response that the company later posted a statement pleading with readers to buy the whole thing before judging it. On March 30, a battered Marvel decided to try to get to the bottom of the problem of a dealer's summit -- and immediately stuck his foot in his mouth. What we heard was that people didn't want more diversity, David Gabriel, the company's senior vice president for sales and marketing, told an interviewer at the summit. They didn't want female characters out there. That's what we heard, whether we believe it or not... We saw the sales of any character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, which was not a core Marvel character, people turned their noses up towards. Despite an attempt by Gabriel to walk back the quote, the comments kicked off another firestorm of criticism of the affected Marvel for shifting the blame for poor sales to different characters - especially since, contrary to the company's claims, sales data showed that minority-led books actually did relatively well compared to books with white male characters. At first glance, the dustup was an industrial cliché: The relative lack of various creators - and characters - has been a bone of contention for years at both DC and Marvel. But in the wake of Marvel's rocky first quarter - and with the controversial secret empire now in full swing - it's clear that the publisher's problems go deeper than a poorly timed story or PR fumbles. The crowd is drifting away. New fans feel ignored. Despite films dominating the cultural landscape and regularly removing millions of dollars, the entire edifice of corporate superhero comics represented by both publishers has quietly crumbled for years, in part because of Marvel's own business practices. Marvel may not seem to actually sell comics, diverse or non- and the company has only itself to blame.\* \*\* The comic book industry these days is much reduced from its heyday. From the 1970s, corporate comic book publishers moved away from selling through newsstands and grocery stores, turning instead to the direct market, which allowed buyers to buy books straight from publishers. This both driven the growth of specialty comics stores and led to the corporate monopoly held by Diamond Comics Distributors, the middleman between retailers and publishers. In the 1990s, an edition of the popular The Amazing Spider-Man that sold around 70,000 would be considered a failure. The collapse of the comic book speculation bubble in the mid-1990s - a bubble driven in part by Marvel's own encouragement of the speculator boom and the flooding of the market - amounted to a blow to the market it never quite recovered from. These days, what counts as a successful superhero book is all that can sell a regular 40-60,000 copies. Most sell quite a lot less. As it happens, speculation is an inherent feature of the direct market. Unlike in traditional publishing, cartoons sold to retailers through the direct market cannot be returned for refund. So retailers need to pre-order comics months in advance, knowing that if they order too many, they will be stuck with overstock. Marvel and DC largely judge sales based on these pre-orders, and a low number of original pre-orders can cause a publisher to cancel a series before a customer ever gets the chance to buy the first issue. It's an incentive for publishers to squeeze out as much product as they think the market will carry, and a narrow window of feedback. Because of the pre-order system, books that can reach new audiences - such as those with minority characters - have a huge disadvantage right out of the gate. As a result, books like David F. Walker and Ramon Villalobos's Nighthawk or Kate Leth and Britney Williams's Patsy Walker, AKA Hellcat!, and even spinoffs of popular series like Ta-Nehisi Coates's Black Panther, which rarely last long before they are canceled. Reading Marvel, in other words, becomes very pricey, very quickly. The uncertainty in the direct market is something all comic book companies must navigate, and sales gimmicks such as collectible variant covers and special, higher priced issues are common. Major publishers like DC and Image enthusiastically participate in these gimmicks. But Marvel is pursuing them on a level that shames other publishers. Their primary trick is the consistent (and harmful) strategy of relaunching books with #1 problems or titles. In 2013, for example, author Al Ewing began working with mighty avengers, focusing on a team of community-oriented superheroes led by Luke Cage and Jessica Jones. Fourteen problems later, Marvel relaunched it with a new #1 like Captain America and mighty avengers, then canceled it nine problems in. Marvel both relaunched a year later - again with new #1s - as Ultimates 2 and US Avengers. Does that sound complicated? It gets worse: The Mighty Avengers was the third series to use the title; 2015 Ultimates was Both are not related to previous series. Such a publishing scheme is complicated even for a committed fan; for a new reader, it is almost impenetrable. Marvel's argument for this approach has usually been that new #1 problems both increase sales and draw in new readers. It's true that a #1 problem tends to sell pretty well on the direct market, but since retailers order inflated amounts of vision unseen, there is an artificial bump at best, and sales fall sharply afterwards. In fact, according to an exhaustive and entertaining analysis by author and game designer Colin Spacetwinks, this constant churn erodes poor readership. G. Willow Wilson's excellent Ms. Marvel, a series featuring a young Muslim heroine from Jersey City, debuted with a circulation of about 50,000 before holding on to 32,000; The relaunched version a year later began at around 79,000 before falling sharply to a current circulation of around 20,000. Marvel's constant relaunch ... has been detrimental to direct market sales in general, Spacetwinks writes, as well as harmful to building new, long-term readers. With each relaunch, it becomes easier to jump off a title. Another source of instability lies in the way corporate superhero cartoonists have largely moved away from long periods of creative teams. Artists are now regularly swapped around titles to meet increased production requirements, which devalues their work in the eyes of fans and rarely allows a title to build a consistent identity. (Imagine a TV show using a new cast and crew a few episodes for a sense of how disturbing this is.) Marvel and DC are both guilty of this, but none of them seem to have understood how harmful it actually is to the books themselves - and Marvel has pursued the practice anymore. Marvel's editor-in-chief Axel Alonso told an interviewer at March's retail summit that he didn't know if artists [moved] the needle anymore when it came to sales. The fact that Marvel has trained audiences to regard these artists as disposable does not seem to have crossed his mind; Nor can the possibility that buyers - like some potential comic book fans I know - can be turned off by increasingly rotating art teams. Marvel's unexpected success stories are largely built on the relentless efforts of creators themselves. Marvel's instinct with readers who stick around, meanwhile, has been to push them for all they're worth. Marvel comics tend to be priced at around \$3.99 to \$4.99 for 22 pages, and many series send new issues twice a month. (Digital editions are usually priced about the same.) Marvel releases around 75 ongoing series, along with miniseries and specials. (DC, by comparison, made a concerted effort for the past few years to publish around 50 ongoing series and also had trouble getting them to stick.) April saw five Avengers title books. Then Then are the crossover events - four so far this year - that interrupt the stories in ongoing series and require readers to buy several other books to understand what is happening. Reading Marvel, in other words, becomes very pricey, very fast, and the resulting flood of product exhaust retailers and ends up driving customers away.\* \*\* Marvel marketing and PR must carry a hefty portion of the blame as well. The company usually places the onus for minority books survival on the readership, rather than promoting its product effectively. Tom Brevoort, editor-in-chief of Marvel, publicly urged readers to buy editions of novelist Chelsea Cain's cancelled (and very witty) Mockingbird after the author was subjected to coordinated sexist harassment. The problem, however, is that the decision to cancel Mockingbird was necessarily made months in advance, due to pre-order sales to retailers on the direct market. The book itself launched with only a few announcements on comics fan websites; no real attempt to reach out to a new audience was made. Marvel's unexpected success stories, like Kelly Sue DeConnick's Captain Marvel, are largely built on the tireless efforts of the creators themselves. (In DeConnick's case, she paid for postcards, dog tags and fliers for fan engagement out of her own pocket, for a character she did not own or have a real expectation of royalties from.) It could be argued that Marvel needs to make sense about which books it spends money promoting, and that good word of mouth can make the difference for free. Again, the declining sales figures for Marvel's books suggest that this is not the case. But even if it were, the publisher's word of mouth has lately been abhorrent. The past decade has been a parade of unprecedented embarrassing behavior by Marvel writers and editors in public. The former editor Stephen Wacker has a reputation for picking matches with fans: So does Spider-Man writer Dan Castle. The writer Peter David went on a bizarre anti-Romani rant at the convention (he later apologized); the author Waid mused recently about punching a critic in the face before leaving Twitter. The author of Secret Empire, Nick Spencer, has managed to become a swirl of social media storm all by himself, partly for his fascist Captain America story and partly for his tone-deaf handling of race and general unwillingness to deal with criticism. Sustainability requires not only stiffening the drain on customers, but actively attracting new ones. What's frustrating about all this is that Marvel has recently shown an interest in publishing good, socially conscious books. Ewing's Ultimates and Avengers work is consistently charming and witty; Ryan North and Erica Henderson's unbeatable squirrel girl is an unalloyed delight; G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona's Ms. Marvel deserves all the praise it has and more. Nevertheless, the company's strategy has largely been to launch books in a flooded market - one, again, that they themselves have flooded - and let them sink or swim. Books like The Amazing Spider-Man have enough name recognition that they'll always sell with minimal marketing. Books led by newer, more diverse characters, no matter how good they are, don't have that luxury. Marvel may publish good books, but without full engagement from the company, many of these books are being set up for failure-and allowing Marvel audiences to sink.\* \*\* For all the cultural primacy of Spider-Man or The Avengers, the superhero comics industry is still a sideshow. The media conglomerates that own DC and Marvel both use publishers largely as intellectual farms, exploiting and adapting creators' work for movies, TV shows, licensing and merchandise. That's where the money is. Disney has very little incentive to invest in the future of the comic book industry, or to try to help Marvel Comics reach new audiences, when they make millions on the latest Marvel movie. If the publisher wants to pull out of this decline, it will require a fundamental shift in the way the company thinks about selling comics. The trick is sustainability, not short-term profits, and it requires not only staunching the drain in customers, but actively attracting new ones. It involves figuring out what potential readers want, not what they just want to tolerate. One potential example lies in popular series from Image Comics such as Robert Kirkman and Charlie Adlard's The Walking Dead and Brian K. Vaughn and Fiona Staples's Saga. The former sells quite evenly at around 75,000 units through the direct market, and the latter sells around 50,000.\*\* Collected editions are regulars on graphic bestseller lists. Although the series is long-lasting, they offer a consistent and contained experience, with an author and artist working in synchronised and constant fan engagement. Such books are not constantly relaunched, and they are not burdened by several spinoffs. They are easy to follow in collected editions. They do not offer staggering direct market highs of a new #1, but after years, they have maintained a reliable and fervent following. Marvel and DC can emulate this model by cutting down on the number of series they publish and how often they send them. Both companies may be more sensible in pairing artists and writers for sustained periods, promoting series outside the mainstream channels, and warmly engaging with fans. Instead of just asking people to buy their books, they could instruct new audiences how. And they could listen to what new audiences say they want: diversity not only in racial, religious or sexual terms, but also in terms of what types of stories are told: Is there really any Hurt in publishing a cartoon where Captain America has a romantic cup of coffee with his girlfriend Bucky than one where he is a Nazi? There are signs that Marvel is starting to take readership and retailer concerns partly seriously: The company has promised that the new Legacy initiative will keep crossovers to a minimum, will have fewer relentless relauns, and will maintain focus on various characters. The question is whether the company will be able to resist returning to its old habits. After all, there are only so many times you can relaunch yourself before people wonder if what you have is really worth buying.\* This article has been updated to clarify that only an ongoing Marvel superhero title sold more than 50,000 copies in February 2017. \*\* This article originally failed that The Walking Dead series sells at around 50,000 units. We apologize for the error. Error.

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