

## Alabama Living Precis

The initial proposal for *Alabama Living* contained many provocative ideas designed to encourage local and statewide staff to think creatively about the structure of their issues. There are some things in the original proposal, such as redesigning the grid, the fonts and the statewide structure to create a more engaging book, that are covered later in this document; our initial impression in these areas is still the same, so this precis will cover them more specifically.

### Dealing with local custom pages

The most urgent aspect of your book is doing something different than the 16 page wrap that customizes the magazine for each local cooperative. Your current book runs a 16-page local form with a 16-page and an 8-page statewide form in the center. This is very efficient, but limiting in solving what we see as two important elements of the redesign: 1) **having a heavier cover**, or at least a heavier weight for the outside form—because PDFs and websites have no equivalent tactile advantage, and a better, heavier-weight stock is always an indicator of an improved magazine; and 2) **we think that not having the statewide section start until page 9 is a bad idea**. It diminishes the statewide content too much, and puts an **odd content mix in the front of the book where there should be far more reader engagement**.

There are several approaches to dealing with this. All of them cost more money, so establishing an ROI for them is problematical. This is a critical issue to decide right from the start because it affects so much else that we will do for the redesign. Here are the choices and some evaluation of them:

1) **Add a cover**. This means another custom form, of which probably only the cover

will change, since the other three covers would be reserved for statewide ads. But there is the possibility of easy regional splits for ads in this approach, which could have a sales benefit. But it *is* more printing and more paper, and means a 44-page issue unless you want to eliminate the 8-page form and go for a 36-page book, which would be really thin.

**2) Use the 8-page form as the local form, increase the weight to 80lb and run it on the outside** to add a cover-like feel to the book, making more use of the back 4 pages for local material. This approach would give the locals 3 pages of space, plus a customized cover and TOC. Page 3 would be available for a local President letter, and in the back, pages 37-38 could become a local “newsletter.” Although somewhat economical and still maintaining branding, it is much lighter on local content. Many locals might even welcome less effort each issue. **You could offer an extra 4-page form at cost** if they want more space in the book, perhaps for their annual meeting/report issue. And, you might find a 32-page statewide form a more economical printing option.

**3) Break the local 16-page form into two 8s, and insert the 8-page statewide form between them, leaving the stock the same.** This maintains the amount of local content, but lets us insert statewide content on pages 5-8. So, the cover and TOC would be customizable, page 4 could be a President letter, and pages 9-12 could be local content added as departments. The break in the back of the book would be used for a local feature story and dovetail with the back of the statewide features. While this doesn't solve the cover weight issue, it at least provides a more integrated mix of content. **Perhaps a compromise would be to upgrade the paper weight for the entire book by 10lb, which would help improve the feel somewhat.** And, of course, this would be a great part adding a cover form—giving you 20 custom pages.

**4) Leave the forms as they are now, but commit 3 pages in the front of the local form to statewide content, and change 4 pages in the back of the book that are currently used for statewide ads and editorial to local content.** This would put a local section on pages 34-37 that could get special branding. In this case too, upgrading the paper weight by 10lb for the entire book could help. This option—perhaps the least desirable editorially—requires no production changes, unless you choose a better stock.

Our recommendation is option 1 combined with either 3 or 4 if the locals really want the space they are accustomed to, but we think that 2 is a good solution by itself if the local can get by with two fewer pages of local content than they currently use, and are willing to forego the local feature position.

### Creating rhythm with structure

Currently *Alabama Living* has very little structural sense. It is difficult to tell a department from a feature. But the current department navigation is so subtle, and with the way the content is designed, it doesn't really matter. The overall impression is a book of short feature-like elements that, except perhaps for the food page, all have similar word counts and presentation. We think content should be more templated to fit specific pages, vary in presentation and length, and encourage readers to understand the mission of the book by giving them thematic content delivered in recurring motifs.

Many co-op magazines find this to be the biggest hurdle in creating a new magazine design, but it is well worth the effort. For editors, the department approach provides a rigorous template of theme-and-variation that demands more attention to word count and story concept. This sometimes seems too constricting for editors and designers... editors want to publish whatever they want at what length they want, and designers often chafe at using a department template that limits layout and font choices.

But this is the difference between a contemporary professional magazine that engages modern readers weaned on television and mollified by short Web content and an institutional newsletter.

Remaking *Alabama Living* is an exercise in repackaging content into recognizably organized chunks. We want the book to have a 2-4 page grazing section in the front of the book, a series of departments that are clearly themed and grouped into broader sections, and a feature "well" that contains a more in-depth story or two. The balance can be difficult at 40 pages. About two-fifths of your book is advertising, so there are only 24 pages of editorial, and two of those are the cover and TOC. That could mean only one long feature and one shorter feature in each issue. The rest of the editorial would be grazing and departments. Going from a bunch of 2-page, 800-1000 word stories to making a commitment to produce 6-pagers with more depth and stronger packaging can challenge the skills of publishers, editors, designers—and

their budgets. Nevertheless, this should be the direction to pursue. In the case of AL, the best approach, depending on how the local pages are handled, is putting all of the departments ahead of the features, then running Classifieds and Marketplace before ending with either a local section or **simply something interesting on Opposite Cover Three, page 38.**

Ultimately, determining the issue map for your redesign is up to your editorial staff. You already have a nice mix of energy efficiency, issues and application stories, so that is a great place to start dividing content into department categories. You also have the holy trinity of electric co-op magazines—food, garden and outdoors. Finding branded structure for these editorial components is the key to a better-designed and reader-appreciated publication.

Once you have tackled the department line-up, working through feature concepts and packages in your yearly calendar will provide the structure needed to find writers, build the editorial for future issues and create the advertising and promotional incentives to improve your profitability.

### **Design elements**

The major goals for AL are creating a stronger branding in the masthead and navigation elements, choosing an equally readable but more modern set of fonts and font sizes, and creating a grid that allows a greater variety of column widths throughout the book.

The current body copy is too big. Regardless of the average reader's age and their need for large type, the current choice of ITC Garamond at 10 point creates a text block that looks too big and, frankly, childish. That is because the font has a large x-height with short ascenders and descenders. There are many other choices that will be readable and pack much better, allowing larger margins and a more elegant overall appearance. The Gill Sans is a nice alternate font and has plenty of weights and sizes, but there are newer fonts that are better calibrated and whose weights and widths look better together,

Overall, we'd like the overall tone of the book to be contemporary but not "modern," and engaging without being flamboyant. The biggest change in following that design

approach is eliminating most of the ornamental fonts and Photoshopped type effects that currently substitute for actual art in each issue. While we recognize the need to “jazz-up” stories—especially in situations where there isn’t art—manipulating the text isn’t always a good answer because of the way that approach destroys the overall identity and branding of the book.

We want the departments to have clear mission goals embodied in their concept and their names, and that is a strong component in the branding of the book. But it also necessitates following the templates, which call for standard heads, decks and pullquote styles that follow the book branding and not individual story ornamentation. That kind of design is best left to feature stories, and that is why we argue for a bigger in-depth feature story or feature package.

### **Integrating the local content**

Statewide editors are well aware that recipients of the book really perceive the book as coming from the local co-op. While readers are sophisticated enough to see that there *is* statewide content, *Alabama Living* has made a commitment to giving locals a prominent profile in the magazine, so the redesign should augment a more seamless integration of local and statewide content.

Customizing the cover can allow the locals to have a more prominent integration into the nameplate instead of the current bar across the top, which is no doubt a holdover from when simple black plate changes made printing the local names less costly. These days, cost-effective technology allows the creation of fully-integrated covers that feature local names prominently, as well as variations such as skybars, extra cover blurbs, starbursts or other promotional elements. As you already allow, the option for alternate cover images should remain available, but we think they need to be vetted by the statewide art director or publisher to insure the cover variation maintains a high degree of professional impact that at least matches the statewide cover.

Further integrating local material, the TOCs should have local content featured, maybe even reserving a photo position explicitly for the local edition.

Depending on how the editorial line-up is created and the way the custom forms are inserted in the book, it should be easy to develop a local department, and a feature

story that is added near the statewide features, so that the end result is a magazine where the local material is fully integrated into the design and structure of the book.

Juggling these options among all of the locals will take strong management and might prove a difficult commitment for local communication departments, but the end result can be so worthwhile that it should encourage participation. Since there already seems to be enough local content, it really becomes a process of controlling the content template and treatment so that it matches the use against the statewide pages. If there is strong local buy-in to this, it shouldn't be a problem, if our experience with other similar magazines is any indication.

### **Alabama Living line-up**

This line-up is based on a 44-page book using a separate cover form, and the 16-page local form in its current position, but using a more diverse division of custom pages. It is just an example of a line-up. The exact stories and their page counts are up to you, but this will give a stronger sense of what we would like to see.

**COVER.** Switch out for locals would include a stronger integrated co-op branding with the title, room for a skybar or standard burst on the cover and use of a local cover blurb integrated into the statewide content.

**P3 TOC.** The TOC would have more customized content for the locals with standard space for a local image and an integrated feature story. Part of the rationale for the new line up is the creation of standardized departments that cover mission elements with theme-and-variation stories. This is different from your current approach of offering several short features listed as departments. The generic Co-op News listing for pages 6-8 should have specific stories listed. Since our new suggested line-up includes a dedicated local section as well as a lengthier feature, the TOC will have a very different look.

**P4 President or CEO letter from the locals.** This single page of content would cover a seasonal or issue-based theme each month and refer readers to other local content elsewhere in the book.

**P5 Local news.** This page would have a collection of short local stories presented in a modular fashion, depending on the content, it could be anything from one to four short pieces and an image.

**P6-9 Statewide Grazing.** This section consists of small stories that cover energy issues and cultural issues including featured monthly events that are currently part of the Alabama Calendar section. The section should be filled with resources and useful “take-away” item that can be culled from NRECA materials and similar sources, as well as data and programs that the co-ops share at the statewide level. Many readers find the grazing pages the most interesting, especially when the contents are themed like mini-departments that readers anticipate. Concepts like lists, reviews, FAQs, Q&A and other distinctive editorial approaches can fill these pages with quick, accessible information that can be about any part of your mission.

**P10 Energy Wise.** Replacing the random short stories that you have been putting upfront with a standard energy use department that covers a relevant issue each month. This fits your current content to a good degree, and eliminating the ornamental headlines and using a more appropriate text face will give you room for a 400-word story with an image. Moreover, P11 could have only partials and the story could spill into the next page.

**P12 Co-Operation.** Statewide story about co-op operations such as tree-trimming, energy-saving initiatives like CFL bulb programs, etc. Unlike the previous department, this is about educating members to the services offered by the co-ops as a group and the details of the work that all of them do.

**P14 Big Picture.** Regulation, politics. TVA or other larger lobbying group efforts on behalf of the co-op members, appeals for participation in programs, etc. This department educates readers on the relationship of the local co-ops to the regional and national issues that affect them.

**P16-18 Alabama At Large.** Event, person profile or destination in co-op region

**P19 Alabama Outdoors.** Hiking, natural beauty, parks & recreation, hunting and fishing, sporting events

**P20 Garden Guru.** Seasonal advice, pests and problems, ornamental and vegetable gardens, public and private gardens to visit

**P22 Chef's Corner.** Feature a recipe with a photo of the cook, and also a recipe from a restaurant chef.

**P24 Recipes.** Add images to the recipes, **cut down on the number** and make them themed (breads, pies, sides, picnics, 4th of July, etc.)

**P25 Listing of Monthly Events** This is a continuation from the highlights presented in the upfront Grazing Section

**PP26-37 Features.** The feature well can be anywhere from 8 to 10 pages, which is enough for one to three stories with nice layouts. This is the place where the design can be more flamboyant with large images, interesting type treatments and the possibility of more depth in storytelling. The section can be a single story or a package of smaller stories organized around a concept. The rhythm and look of the features should be much different than the department pages. The back of the feature section falls in the local form, so allowing for a local feature could be a benefit of the new design, with a statewide filler to be used when locals don't want one. Since the TOC is customizable, it is easy to do this.

#### **PP38-41 MarketPlace and Classifieds**

**PP42 Interesting Opposite-Cover-Three department.** **The snapshot contest is a good concept** if they can be a series of topics that can vary each issue, or finding a columnist to write about Alabama life, or an energy-oriented department highlighting major users and the way they save energy, or home retrofits and renovations that have a chart showing the ROI of the project. Whatever it is, it should be high concept, preferably participatory, and fit onto the single page.

This layout has 14-16 ad pages depending on the size of departments, including Classified and Marketplace. This fits what you have now, with a little room to grow the ads without adding another form.

This is the form layout:

C1-C2 (1-2) / C3-C4 (43-44)	Cover Form/customized
3-10 / 35-42	Outer 16/customized
11-18 / 27-34	Inner 16/statewide
19-26	Center 8/statewide



## Conclusions

The mission of *Alabama Living* is threefold: 1) Educate your members about energy issues as they pertain to cooperative initiatives; 2) Encourage participation and pride in their cooperative operation and, 3) Present lifestyle content that impacts readers' enjoyment and resources in Alabama, emphasizing attractions, products and services that are part of the cooperative's membership.

Readers want to understand how the magazine benefits them, so emphasizing "take-away" content, what is often called "news-you-can-use," is a combination of content idea and execution. The department concepts in this precis demonstrate how content you already generate can be restructured into a more compelling line-up, and create a better rhythm for presenting feature content that can have more impact and impress your readers. The challenge in this redesign is making the most of the opportunities to concentrate on the features, while still giving readers important and interesting content in the departments and grazing sections. Clearly, this is different than the way you currently generate content, but we think in the long run it will be rewarding.

## ***Alabama Living* Initial Proposal**

Modern communications technologies, increased costs of conventional publishing and distribution, and a more sophisticated consumer have made the general interest cooperative publication less successful at serving the interests of the cooperative.

Demographics skew older and—of course—rural, but these people are also Baby Boomers and sophisticated consumers of information too. While broadband is still limited in rural areas, more people are connected to high-speed internet access every day. Your readers are not starving for content, and your publication is not their only source for regional news.

But as a conduit for local co-op information, the regionalized issues can contain very local and critical information for members and be a significant value for communicating directly to members, while the statewide pages bring entertainment and more general energy education to readers across the state. The local and statewide pages pose a diametric problem: local editors want their versions to seem to come from them, yet they often lack the resources to produce design and content that match the statewide pages which benefit from the group financial contribution. Making the local and statewide pages more cohesive benefits everyone.

The challenge for *Alabama Living* is to improve the local impact in the statewide book as an enhancement to the entire product, not as a tacked-on or separate element. At the same time, the design, editorial and structure of the statewide pages needs to be greatly improved to compete for reader attention in today's busy information environment.

Simply put, *Alabama Living* needs to be a better looking and more interesting magazine whose increased sophistication is carried over to the local pages. At the same time, the integration of the local pages as a part of the magazine must also be improved.

The structure of the book—local pages, features and then departments in the back can be improved. Today's readers want more interesting departments and

contributors, more reader interaction, and better feature stories. They don't just want short stories, they want interesting packages of related short stories whose totality is greater than the sum of the parts. For a small book like *AL*, more integrated feature packages and more interesting department sections are the way to go.

If these are problems that want to be remedied, a contemporary rethinking of *Alabama Living* needs to address these three issues:

- 1) Editorial structure that defines the cooperative mission more specifically, addresses the needs of a more sophisticated readership, *and* provides more exciting opportunities for advertising;
- 2) A stronger integration for the individual cooperative members to become a part of the branding of the publication;
- 3) Building stronger branding into both the content and structure of the publication.

What does this mean for the current version of *AL*? Obviously, it means a new design, with new font families, new grids and new branding. But it also means revamping the editorial issue map to determine what new content can be added, what current content can be reconceived and what needs to be dropped. The editorial calendar needs to be augmented with content that can be promoted within the cooperative and to other media as well. The development of franchise content should be further augmented by unique applications of standard editorial approaches, all with a goal of making the magazine feel like a necessary resource and a must-read for cooperative members.

### **Action plan to revamp AL**

**1) A NEW ISSUE MAP** that incorporates more departments, more variation in structure, fewer features packaged in a more attractive and important package, and franchise content that has immediate value-added benefit for readers is the most important and difficult first step. This is different than your current editorial structure, so it will require some work to re-imagine the magazine.

**2) REWORK THE LOCAL SECTION TEMPLATES** and change the imposition to integrate the local content more impressively within each issue, while improving the branding and identity of the magazine. The most difficult problem associated with the high level of flexibility afforded the local co-ops is the problem with creating a contemporary, more unified structure for the publication and still allow the high degree of specialization for each co-op. The solution is to make the local section even more integrated into the feature well and front of the book by changing the imposition to deliver the front 16 as two 8s and inserting a sixteen between them. The new result will help the local sections and improve the look of the magazine.

Imagine this new structure: The cover and the TOC, plus the local section Editor or CEO Letter remains in the very front of the book, but after page 4, there are 8 pages of statewide content. This will allow the creation of a real front-of-book section with grazing and a few departments. After page 12, there will be another 4 pages of local content that can be treated as departments plus a feature story in any combination that fills the pages. The statewide features will begin immediately after the local section, providing a seamless integration of the two.

In this new issue map, there will be more department space and fewer and better features. The back of the book will have a few more departments, one of which could be another local one, because the back of the interior local 8pp will fall more toward the center of the book than in the current configuration.

**3) REWORK THE LOCAL PAGES** to use the statewide template for better integration with the new design, while still allowing for local creativity. This isn't some demanding restriction on the way you prepare your content; it merely unifies the look and feel of the entire book so that the local section can impress its members with the entire package. By moving the a lot local content further into the book but still retaining the ability to put custom content on the cover, TOC and Editor/CEO message, the local designs can have a more dramatic feel, with only a few requirements of body text and grid to keep consistency with the statewide pages.

**3) CUSTOMIZE THE COVER AND TOC BETTER** by integrating the co-op name into the nameplate, and adding cutlines for local content onto the cover and TOC.