



# ***Kentucky Living* Critique**

## **Introduction**

*Kentucky Living* is a publication distributed to members of an electrical cooperative. As a cooperative pub, it falls into an publishing niche that has many problematical economic and political issues. The publications tend to have small page counts, little incentive for improvement, a difficult editorial mission, and a low priority in the business structure of the sponsoring organization. On the upside, the demographic of the readership has a definable geographic scope, in many cases the pubs have large circulations, and the advertisers are easy to find.

The practical editorial role of the publication is informing the members of policies, programs and initiatives of the coop. It's secondary mission is education and socialization of the members to facilitate efficiency, cost containment and change that can improve the value for members. Historically, many cooperative publications have taken advantage of their regional membership and large distribution by creating editorial archetypes that mimic newsstand regional publications.

The opportunity to create a revenue stream and extend the mission of the publication by providing members with regional resources that enhanced their connection to community was a compelling model in an earlier era when rural isolation made the role of utility cooperatives much more complex than simply providing a commodity. However, in today's world of integrated communications, is the historic mission of such publications still valid?

Many cooperatives, including—obviously—*Kentucky Living's*, feel that it is. But the publishing world has become more competitive and other media, from the Internet to satellite HDTV, now distracts the attention of a typical member. What should the appropriate response of a cooperative publication be today?

I believe the answer involves concentrating on the basic mission of the publication while emphasizing member community. For *Kentucky Living* this is an easy approach to growth. Much of the editorial structure of the publication already fits in the category. For *KL* sharpening the editorial mission involves focusing on a tight issue map composed of clear editorial concepts.

The mission of the publication ought to be evident in the structure and feature content. The general nature of the features, while interesting, does little to define the publication mission. The department content has some relevance, but the back-of-the-book service sections are also too generic.

The magazine design looks dated, from the choice of body text—ITC Garamond Condensed—to the



department headings, with their cute pictures and rainbow blends. The end result of the current design is a lack of differentiation with the advertising and a generally cluttered look on department openings.

Sidebar designs, and ornamentation within features and departments have no branding. There are very few reader entry points beyond the standard headlines. The branding of the publication, from typographic design to unique content approaches, doesn't extend beyond the standard components.

## Section by Section

**Cover:** The original idea of the inset against the atmospheric surround was an idea that seems to have quickly become old, as current issues simply use a color surround. The editorial component is a simple head against the image, which is sometimes cryptic. There are no other opportunities for putting other content on the cover. The split-run covers need a plate-change element that appears as a black bar across the top, a perhaps overly strong element on the cover. The nameplate has little branding power beyond the rainbow blend, but the blend has an inherent problem against the background in that any strong color image will conflict with some part of the nameplate—guaranteed.

**TOC:** The contents page uses graphic elements not found elsewhere in the magazine, most notably a sans font for the numbers that seems out of place in the pub, and a little too strong on the TOC. There is a good distinction between the features and the departments, although there is no distinction in the departments by trying to group content types. There are three features in each issue, and they are all given equal weight in the TOC. Images and text within the feature area of the TOC are placed randomly to increase the energy, but the page just feels busy with a little too much white space. The light green box that groups the two features in the July issue is unnecessary, considering there are only three features. The Center Section graphic is out of place in the feature area.

**Front Matter:** The grazing section is a good idea that is too short for the rhythm of the publication. It would be nice if the section could be two or three spreads. The section could be a great opportunity for throwing a lot of information at members using lists, graphics, quotes, short pieces and resource pointers that could become a clip 'n' save section of the pub. The other front matter is all over the place in terms of content, but at least there are departments that pertain to the cooperative mission.

**Features:** The feature stories are well-written, but somehow feel slight. The design of the feature stories is uninspired and suffers from a lack of art budget and unimaginative type treatments. The features have few reader entry points, and there are no standard feature components that extend throughout all the articles. The real issue with the features is that the amount of space in the magazine given over to the feature well is actually quite small, out of 52 pages, the features only account for 6-9 pages. There really



isn't enough space to develop a feature well that reflects the traditional rhythm of a consumer regional magazine, or that does justice to the prioritization in the TOC. Certainly, the large opening spread for the feature is more for form than substance. The intrusion of partial space ads into the features further erodes the editorial credibility of a feature well.

**Back of the Book:** Short departments form a traditional service-section in the back of the book. The back has the same design elements as the front of the book, even though it has a very different rhythm. The concept of a service section is a good idea in the publication but the topic choices are perfunctory: health, money, gardening, food. Are there service areas that are more pertinent in the context of the cooperative mission? The “opposite cover 3” department that ends the book is nice.

**Design & Typography:** The principal font used in the book is ITC Garamond Condensed. The font is from the overused ITC Garamond family, and while the condensed version is a more readable family than regular ITC Garamond, it still has a passé feel. Various sans fonts are used throughout the issues, but there is no recognizable design structure for using a sans family.

The grid is a simple three-column format except for Commonwealth, which uses a two-column grid or a wild layout. Obviously, the three-column grid is designed to accommodate the large amount of partial ads that are spread throughout the book, but the simplicity of the grid has drawbacks. Without a more sophisticated grid, layouts become repetitive, and differentiating parts of the book is more difficult.

The ornamental elements in the design consist almost entirely of department icons. The small illustrations are not iconic at all and have a kind of “folksy” feel. The degrades, which were surprising elements in, say, 1993 have become cliché.

## Recommendations

*Kentucky Living* is an effective magazine that has a good advertising history and a consistent editorial history. While the publication is sorely in need of a visual updating, is there any reason to do something more extravagant with the publication? That all depends on how much enthusiasm exists in the organization to make the publication a more effective voice for the agenda of the cooperative and a vehicle for increasing the satisfaction and cohesiveness of the member community.

**The publication needs a visual tune-up.** New fonts and grids would be a good start for updating the publication. The goal should be creating more white space for the editorial and a simpler branding that makes a distinction between editorial and advertising. Doing away with the department heads in favor of



a simpler branding system would be a good place to start. While the three column grid makes ad insertion easier, a more sophisticated modular grid system of 12 or 15 units can accommodate advertising and inspire more interesting layout.

**There need to be more reader entry points in the editorial.** Stronger use of consistent short decks, stronger headlines and greater use of short sidebar material will create a much-needed brows-ability in the magazine while further making a visual distinction between ad and editorial.

**The cover and contents page need revising.** It's time to drop the image inset idea and make full use of the cover space. The cover should work harder at selling the interior so a reworking of the template should include the ability to put some other coverlines on the page. The nameplate should also be a casualty of eliminating the rainbow blends inside and a change of fonts. A rebranding of the magazine ought to include a bolder, more dramatic nameplate. The contents page should be revised to emphasize the departments more and minimize the prioritization of the features. Making a simpler TOC with breakouts for interesting content, whether it's in the features or departments, will better help sell each issue.

While these changes are necessary just to revitalize the design, I think a more extensive undertaking should consider some editorial revision that would make the magazine a much stronger product:

**Rethink your archetype.** Trying to make your 24 pages of editorial feel like a regional magazine is a losing battle. There are simply too many partial space ads and too few editorial pages to make the rhythm work. Instead, I think a better archetype is the weekly newspaper insert, like Parade magazine. Personality-oriented, more tightly formatted with a stronger mix of columnists and mission-oriented departments, a *KL* modeled after these types of magazines would be a stronger read, have better branding and a better rhythm.

**Eliminate a feature (or two).** It might be better if you only have a single more dramatic feature in each issue. This would enable you to have a strong opening spread that was actually followed by a couple more spreads of interesting story. Certainly, giving a feature two uninterrupted spreads of editorial before it's trashed with space ads would make a dramatic statement about the value of the story. Keeping ads out of the 8 pages of feature well that two stories would encompass would be even better. Use the two or four pages you free up for a longer grazing section in the front.

**Tighten Up the Issue Map.** The value of the magazine to the cooperative and its members would be increased if the mission of the publication more closely reflected the interests of the cooperative: maximizing value and services to members and enhancing the Community of membership. To that end, I think a stronger issue map would have the front of the book contain energy-issue related material and the



back of the book be a stronger-defined service section that has a more prominent regional flavor. The travel stuff then goes in the back, along with the events. The front of the book and back of the book should have unique identities visually and editorially (they almost do now). The back section could be defined in the contents as something like “Kentucky Currents” and the front of the book as “Power to the People” (OK, its too cute). The features, pared to two, should be a better mix of Kentucky pride and cooperative initiative stories.

**Distance yourself from the insert.** As it stands now, the center insert conflicts with your feature section, and also fights with the book as a whole. I don’t know if it’s possible, but asking for a different face trim for the inserts could eliminate this, and make them stand on their own. They already look out of place in the book, so if you ask for inserts that are 11x7, you would emphasize their distinctness, and encourage readers to see the pub as a carrier. Since the inserts are all different, you wouldn’t have to worry about how they look in this arrangement. I would also put ad pages against the center spread to avoid having the insert fight editorial. With a smaller feature well, you can move it to after center of the book.

**Create more single page department ideas.** It would make the editorial much more credible if you created a number of single page departments that stand alone against a page of advertising, whether full-page or a collection of partials. This would allow a design independent of the formulaic grid, and stronger editorial profile. The new department ideas can be strong one-note element, like a single photo, or a member profile, or a 10 best list. The more high-concept department ideas you create that are unique to KL, the more your readers will feel that the magazine provides content that they don’t get elsewhere.

Admittedly, the suggestions will require a lot of retooling of the current design and editorial structure of *Kentucky Living*, but I think the results would be worth it. The current mission of the magazine as a regional celebration of Kentucky is less relevant in a world in which readers have tremendous access to information of all types. A successful growth strategy in a business model where circulation and subscription is not considered a leading indicator is to prioritize what is a valuable goal—to increase ad revenues, to enhance the cooperative members satisfaction, to maximize the value and agenda of the cooperative, or to engage the membership through appealing to ancillary ideas like regional pride. One or even all of these components deserve to be part of *Kentucky Living*. The more the considered mission of the magazine is represented clearly in the template, and the more that the content feels unique to the publication, the better the magazine will be appreciated by both members and management.