

Kentucky Living Precis

The cooperative electrical magazine is a publishing conundrum. It delivers a huge audience of geographically contiguous readers, but fails to provide a consistent demographic profile that advertisers find desirable. The publication's editorial scope is often based on regional cultural stories and familiar tropes of rural life, yet the mission of the cooperative is delivering its members reliable and low-cost electricity. The publication is difficult to evaluate from a business perspective when it is subsidized by member fees that are part of the dues package. If the magazine is not a mandatory part of the cooperative benefits, then the real subscription choice is made by cooperative partners, not end-users.

Printing costs, the rising prices for paper and the increasing costs for postage combine to create prodigious fixed production costs. The solution to these rising costs is often reduction of budget elements that can be controlled, but which undermine further the value of the product. Smaller staffs, virtual offices, outsourcing and reduced art and editorial budgets seem to be the only solutions, because in most cases, the production specifications of the publications, in paper weight, quality and issue size and page count are already diminished as much as possible. Most publications have already derived the value of digital publishing workflows in reduction of costs and time.

Modern communications technologies, increased costs of conventional publishing and distribution, and a more sophisticated consumer has made the general interest cooperative publication archetype less successful at serving the interests of the cooperative. Demographics skew older and rural, but these people or baby boomers and sophisticated consumers of information too. Finally, does the environmental impact of the resources and energy used to deliver the conventional publication stand as a rebuke to the earnest energy-reduction mantras of the cooperative mission?

A contemporary rethinking of *Kentucky 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 profile for the individual cooperative members in the branding of the publication;
- 3) Optimizing the business model of the publication through alternative distribution, expanded profile and promotion and a more varied and promotable editorial calendar that stimulates reader and advertiser interest.

What does this mean for the current version of *KL*? Obviously, it means a new design, with new font families new grids and new branding. But it also means evaluating the editorial issue map to determine what new content can be added, what current content can be reconcieved 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 types, all with a goal of making the magazine feel like a necessary resource and a must-read.

Here is the an action plan for a revamped *KL*:

- 1) Make 64pp plus cover the standard minimum size of the book.
- 2) Go to 10 times a year schedule combining January/February and July/August. The rationale for this is that the publication can reduce its postage cost significantly, spread the paper and printing costs through to the other issues to help achieve the first point, and use the remaining savings to augment editorial and art budgets.
- 3) Plan three “special issues” of franchise content that will appear in June, October and February. The special issues will have expanded coverage of a topic that has a strong advertiser correspondence.

4) Create a more strongly branded book through more poignant editorial concepts for departments and the creation of true FOB and BOB sections. The Front-of-Book Section will be regional cultural content, and the Back-of-Book section will be energy technology, conservation and education, environmental sustainability and cooperative initiatives. Much of this content is already in the current editorial lineup, so it is more a question of repositioning, re-concepting and augmenting than making a whole new book.

5) Help differentiate and brand the magazine by a stronger focus on being time-sensitive and resource rich, with the creation of materials that can serve the readership as definitive content that can be “pulled out” and used as reference. These elements can pertain to both Front- and Back-of-Book content.

6) Create a stronger tie to the cooperative members by integrating them into the cover in a less-tacked-on design. There are several approaches to this, from simply creating a more integrated positioning of content for the black plate change, to using a fifth unit for the changes and a PMS color, to going all out and creating covers that can be customized more completely with different cutlines and nameplate variations by doing complete plate changes for the different covers instead of just the black plate.

Trying to compete with for-profit magazines, web sites and other media demands the creation of content that has a clear concept and an obvious tie-in to mission elements. In addition, keeping in focus the goal for the revamped magazine as a whole—higher profile for the content, stronger tie to time frame and better opportunities for advertisers—requires a cover-to-cover assessment:

1) Raising the profile for departments involves a more interesting twist on current departments. For example, instead of the current cooking department, it could grow into an interview with a chef of a popular restaurant and his (or her) recipe for a specialty of the house. Finding higher profile writers with a Kentucky connection for all of the resource departments is an easy way to raise the caché of a department, but finding a unique concept is even better. Finding a way to have the department have a seasonal theme improves the concept further still.

2) Planning a calendar, building in advertising-oriented content for several

pages—whether it's an advertorial or specially-themed editorial section that has complementary advertising content—is a good way to stimulate sales and bring extra revenue to the book without compromising the editorial integrity of the regular issue map. This has been a popular approach most consumer magazines have taken to enhance flagging ad sales in recent years.

3) Creating franchise content that has evergreen potential, interest beyond the readership to the general media, and annual repeatability builds reader loyalty, generates anticipation and provides a hook for multiple ad buys. Contests, best-of lists, category overviews with expert picks, tips 'n tricks, reader recommendations, annual overviews are all potential franchise elements that can be grown into the identity of the publication.

4) Reinforcing cooperative member contribution to the general editorial well through solicitation of content at the member level, or by general solicitation to consumers in the regional variations, will stimulate local interest and help retention of the subscription base. For example, finding destinations for Traveling Kentucky that are suggested by a member coop and making certain that the gamut of members is covered and they are recognized in the copy keeps people interested, since everybody likes to see their local favorites featured.

Viewed as a whole, the entire process seems daunting, but taking it a step at a time makes the redesign easier: defining mission elements and focus; creating an issue map with new editorial constructs; and choosing design elements that are complementary with the readership and the content. Mostly, it begins as an exercise in imagining what *KL* should be, and then working through the current content to keep what works, then adding new stuff to add even more credibility and interest in the publication.