

JOSHUA M. TAWNEY • CYNTHIA J. TAWNEY • SHORT VERSION

[Read. Fire. Aim.]

Twelve pages. The seven decisions that determine whether there is an issue four.

SEVEN MOVES • ONE AFTERNOON • BEFORE A WORD IS WRITTEN



HEALTHY ELK
the ELK'S STUDENTS
the ELK'S COOKBOOK
the ELK REFLECTS
the ELK'S JOURNAL
the HUMANITIES CORNER
the ELK'S GARDEN

AROUND THE ELK
READERS SUBMISSION

Trail
Mix



Source Sans Pro

QWERTYUIOP
ASDFGHJKL
ZXCVBNM

qwertyuiop
asdfghjkl
zxcvbnm

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[This is the method, not the theory.]

Elk River Living was built quickly. The decision was made in 2018 — two years after a flood devastated the town my mother grew up in — and the first issue was in the valley before the enthusiasm had time to cool. Eight years later it still arrives every month.

Two things made that speed survivable. The first was structure, produced rapidly and settled before issue one: two colors, two typefaces, a template, and the recurring segments. The second was revenue — Cyndi worked the road business by business, asking each of them to appear in a magazine that did not yet exist. *The first issue was sold before it was designed.*

The pace was never the risk. Deliberation was. The structure was decided fast, the revenue was secured fast, and the interval between them — where most publications spend a year — was skipped.

What followed was eight years of correction, and the long version of this guide is the result. This version is the record of what was actually done. It is tested, and it remains the approach I would recommend to almost nobody — with one exception: a reader already in motion. Seven moves follow. Each is a decision rather than a task, and every one of them can be made before a word is written.

The run is still delivered by hand, business to business, with photographs taken alongside the owners and a visit that lasts longer than the delivery requires. It is the least efficient part of the operation and the most durable.

WHO DID WHAT

CYNDI TAWNEY

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Journalism, WVU. Worked the road business by business and sold the first issue before it was designed.

JOSH TAWNEY

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Architecture, Cornell. The system — colors, type, template, segments — settled in days rather than months.

KEN TAWNEY

OPERATIONS

Law. Entity, contracts and accounting established correctly in the first month, by someone who had done it professionally.

KATHERYNE POPP

LAYOUT & DESIGN

Little Secret Design Co. Shares the same intent for the region, and made coordination a discipline rather than a negotiation.

Nobody’s first issue is the one that fails.

Ask anyone who stopped. They will tell you about issue four.

None of the five opposite is a failure of talent, and none of them is quite a failure of money. They are structural. Each one is decidable before a word is written, which is the only reason a list like this is worth printing — and the reason the seven moves that follow are decisions rather than tasks.

Not on this list: the logo. The typeface. The paper stock. The website. The name that has been changed four times this week. *None of those has ever closed a publication.* They are, however, where speed is most often spent — which is the reason this version exists at all.

- 01

The second issue was harder than the first, and nobody had planned the third.

MOVE 02
- 02

Everyone had an equal say, so nothing shipped.

MOVE 03
- 03

They said monthly. They meant monthly in June.

MOVE 01
- 04

The hours were real and the estimate was not.

MOVE 06
- 05

It slowly became an advertiser’s newsletter and the town could tell.

MOVE 07

EACH FAILURE NAMES THE MOVE THAT PREVENTS IT.

Pick the cadence you could hit in February.

Monthly is ambitious. Quarterly is sustainable. Annual is a book.

Match the format to your worst month, not your best week. A publication that ships consistently on a modest schedule earns far more trust than one that burns bright and disappears — and consistency is the only editorial virtue your reader can actually see.

Most readers of this version will choose monthly. Working alone, choose quarterly and be early rather than late.

WHAT WE DID

Monthly, from 2018, produced by a small standing team and a network of contributors. It is the heaviest commitment in the operation. Move 02 is the reason it has been sustainable at all.

OUR CADENCE

THE ONE YOU COULD HIT IN A BAD MONTH

FIRST ISSUE OUT

A REAL DATE, NOT A SEASON

Write the date before you turn the page. A cadence with no date attached is a wish, and wishes are what issue four is made of.

Build the engine before the first issue.

If you take one thing from either version of this book, take this.

Find the two or three things your community already knows itself by — the recipes, the river, the school, the trail — and give each one a masthead and a deadline. That is a segment. Three to five of them and the magazine starts producing itself: you become the editor of a machine instead of the author of an emergency.

Each needs a name, a slot in the layout, and a person. **If you cannot name the person, it is not a segment — it is an idea.** Write the idea down anyway and go find them; that call takes ten minutes and it is the highest-value ten minutes in this book.

WHAT WE DID

Some were named before the first issue. The best of the rest grew out of the ones that worked. The Elk’s Garden came out of the popularity of The Elk’s Cookbook, and we found the ideal local gardener to write it every month: Laura Boggess Shafer, who farms with her family near Clendenin. Trail Mix grew alongside the Elk River Trail Foundation’s recreation trail as it was being built — segment and trail have made each other more useful to the town ever since. The Healthy Elk exists because I decided it should; a segment can begin from a conviction rather than a demand. And The Elk’s Journal was never planned as a place for local authors to publish excerpts — it earned that role, and it kept it.

THREE TO FIVE · NAME AND PERSON

SEGMENT

WHO WRITES IT

THREE REAL ONES BEAT SIX ASPIRATIONAL ONES. ADD MORE IN ISSUE FOUR.

Name the person who makes the final call.

Today, in writing, while everyone still likes each other.

Someone decides what goes in and what gets cut. This is not a democratic process. Without a single decider you get committee writing — pleasant to everyone, interesting to no one — and, far worse, you get a publication that cannot ship on a Tuesday because two people are still talking.

It can be said warmly. “**I make the final call, and I will always listen**” is a complete and generous editorial structure. Enshrine it before the first conflict, not during — during is too late, and during is when you will want it most.

WHAT WE DID

Cyndi. She is editor-in-chief; the system is mine and the editorial decision is hers. That division is what permits the pace. At the end of the day it is understood that Cyndi has the final word at Elk River Living — and that is what makes it work.

THE FINAL CALL BELONGS TO

ONE NAME · NOT A COMMITTEE, NOT “US”

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

CAN BE THE SAME PERSON

WHO IS GOING TO BE ANNOYED BY THIS

TELL THEM NOW, WARMLY, BEFORE IT MATTERS

Do the whole identity in one afternoon.

Two colors. Two fonts. Your name, set with care. That is the entire kit.

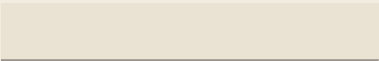
Do not open a color picker — go outside. The two colors are already in the place: the water, the brick, the hills in November, the paint on the feed store. Name them after where you found them and the whole team will defend them. One serif you can read at nine point, one face for the masthead. The name, well set, *is* the logo.

This is the page where your instinct is better than my advice. Five decisions, one afternoon, every one of them reversible — and it is the exact thing you were about to spend six weeks on. Spend the six weeks on Move 02 instead.

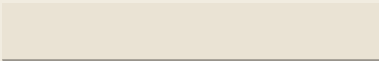
WHAT WE DID

Five colors and two typefaces — Source Serif Pro and Source Sans Pro — settled at the start and unchanged since. That consistency across every issue is what makes the publication immediately recognizable; deciding it early is what stopped it being relitigated.

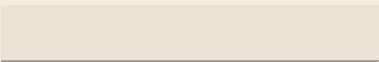
PRIMARY



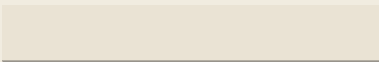
ACCENT



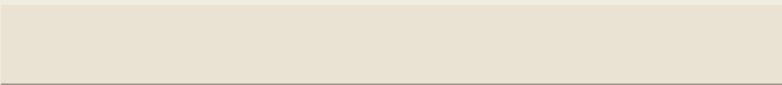
TEXT FONT



DISPLAY FONT



THE NAME



SAY IT ON THE PHONE FIRST · “HI, I’M CALLING FROM _____”

ERL · WHAT OURS ENDED UP BEING



#3E4E59	#F25652	#D9BB93	#F1F0E2	#C2E7F2
Primary	Accent	Tan	Ivory	Blue

Source Serif Pro and Source Sans Pro, and not one hour spent on a logo.

Write the sentence that can say no.

One or two sentences. Specific enough to turn something down.

It must be specific enough that someone could read it and know what kind of story does *not* belong in your publication. If you cannot say no to anything with it, you have not written a mission statement — you have written a press release.

Ten minutes, out loud, then cut everything that is not load-bearing. You will rewrite it in year two anyway; what matters today is having something to test the fourth pitch against, so you are not deciding on mood.

WHAT WE DID

“Celebrate the people, places and businesses of the region — a mirror to reflect its character and culture.” It names the subject, names the tone, and is specific enough to decline a story. That is the whole test.

We exist to

for

so that

WHAT THIS LETS YOU TURN DOWN

IF YOU CANNOT FILL THIS IN, THE SENTENCE IS TOO POLITE

Count the hours. Then add forty percent.

The missing line item is never printing. It is you.

Most budgets have a line for print and a line for hosting and stop there. The item that actually decides whether a publication survives is the one nobody writes down: the editing, the chasing, the subscriptions, the email, the proof that comes back wrong.

The forty percent is not pessimism. It is the file that will not export, the contributor who needs one more week, and the two hours you will spend looking for a photograph you know you have. **If the number still works, proceed and stop deliberating.** If it does not: cut pages, lengthen the cadence, or find one more person. Those are the only three levers and all three are fine.

WHAT WE DID

The magazine is free in the valley; \$50 a year mails it to people who left for work. Much of the run is delivered by hand. Distribution has always been the line paid in labor rather than money — identify which line yours will be.

LINE	YOUR NUMBER
Print	
PAGES · STOCK · QUANTITY	
Delivery	
DROPS · POSTAGE · YOUR CAR	
Design	
YOURS, AT AN HONEST RATE	
Your time	
EDITING · CHASING · EVERYTHING ELSE	
HOURS, HONESTLY	× 1.4
	THE REAL NUMBER

Draw the line before you need it.

One sentence. Ninety seconds. Impossible to write mid-argument.

ERL runs no politics and no religion. Your town may need a different line — but it needs *a* line, and it needs it written down while nothing is at stake. Ours is a choice about inclusion, not avoidance: the magazine should be the one place in town where everyone is simply a neighbor.

And the businesses in your pages are not revenue with a logo. They are co-authors of the same project — a town worth reading about. Most of ours had never bought an ad in their lives — so we designed their ads for them, free, revisions and all, and handed them the files, at rates the valley could actually carry. Cover them as a beat, not as an advertiser. **The economics follow the sincerity, not the reverse**, and every publisher who has tried it the other way round can tell you exactly how that went.

WHAT WE DID

Every sponsor is listed in every issue with their contact and location information. Readers have told us it works as their local business guide — where they look to find a service provided by someone in their own area. The spread opens with the ask, stated plainly: “Please give our sponsors the opportunity to have your business. They care a great deal about you and the Elk River community!”

WE DO NOT RUN

We do not run...

WRITE IT BEFORE THE FIRST CONFLICT, NOT DURING

THREE BUSINESSES TO VISIT THIS MONTH

NOT TO SELL THEM ANYTHING. GO ONCE BEFORE YOU EVER ASK.

Issue N^o1.

COPY IT UP FROM THE SEVEN PAGES BEHIND YOU. FIVE OF THESE SIX FILLED IN AND YOU HAVE A PUBLICATION – THE SIXTH WILL ARRIVE ON ITS OWN.

THE PUBLICATION

PAGE 007

THE FINAL CALL BELONGS TO

PAGE 006

CADENCE · AND THE DATE

PAGE 004

WE EXIST TO

PAGE 008

SEGMENTS 01 · 02 · 03

PAGE 005

HOURS PER ISSUE × 1.4

PAGE 009



[Start simple. Start honest. Start now.]

The energy was never in question. This directs it at the seven decisions that determine whether there is an issue four.

USE & PERMISSIONS · VERSION 4 · 2026

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WHEN IT WORKS

Come back for the long version. It is the same seven moves with the eight years of reasons attached, and it will make more sense once you have an issue in your hands. If you stall, come back sooner.

[joshuatawney.com/studies/
how-to-start-a-small-town-publication](https://joshuatawney.com/studies/how-to-start-a-small-town-publication)

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