

**A YEAR ON *THE BLOCK*:
A NEW MAGAZINE FOR THE SUBURBS — AND
THE CITY**

by

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Abstract

This project report focuses on the first year of publication of *The Block* magazine, from April 2006 to April 2007. It examines how an idea played out as a real magazine. The report considers the magazine's primary areas of circulation, the suburbs, and analyzes them in terms of culture, growth, and potential magazine audiences. *The Block's* competition, original editorial content, advertising, production, and circulation are discussed in depth. Additionally, the report examines the genesis of a new edition of *The Block* for Vancouver. A concluding section outlines changes that were made to *The Block* after the first one-year period.

This report records the evolution of a new magazine. It serves as a case study, and as such, does not offer a guide to how a magazine should evolve, but allows readers to observe the particular way one magazine adapted to its new role in the magazine-publishing market.

Keywords: magazines; startup magazines; city magazines; regional magazines; multi-edition magazines; suburban market

Subject Terms: Canadian periodicals -- Publishing -- British Columbia -- Vancouver -- Case studies; Suburbs -- Canada; Publishing -- Case studies.

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Introduction

A city magazine for the suburbs — it sounds like a contradiction, but it is the very real identity of *The Block* magazine. Not only that, but *The Block* is also a city magazine for the city centre, making the choice to compete in the already-crowded Vancouver market. *The Block's* struggle to define itself as a suburban magazine, and then its risky leap into the Vancouver market, is the subject of this report.

The Block is a privately owned multi-edition magazine, headquartered in Vancouver proper and distributed throughout various municipalities in the Lower Mainland. Essentially, *The Block* operates as a city magazine for the suburbs of Coquitlam/Port Coquitlam/Port Moody (the Tri-Cities), White Rock/Surrey, and the North Shore (North Vancouver and West Vancouver), as well as the city of Vancouver itself. Conceived in early 2006 and launched in April of the same year, it jumped into the market at a time when the suburbs were almost completely lacking in regional¹ magazines, but well-served by community papers; a time when Vancouver, meanwhile, was glutted with magazines, from established publications like *Vancouver* to advertiser vehicles like *Vancouver View*. Being the first magazine in these suburban markets, as well as being a start-up magazine, did not come without its struggles. *The Block* wrestled with defining itself editorially while catering to so many different markets, dealt with

¹ Here and throughout, the word “regional” defines magazines targeted towards a well-defined geographic area.

suburban advertisers unfamiliar with magazine advertising, had difficulties in achieving affordable but effective circulation, and grappled with staffing issues. Meanwhile, *The Block* tried to compete against already-established city magazines in metro Vancouver. Though somewhat tumultuous, this first year of existence helped *The Block* evolve into its present state. That is not to suggest that *The Block* has solved all its problems; rather, in adapting to pressures, it has made itself more likely to succeed in future.

The first part of this report offers a brief background on the magazine's genesis. The second part of the report investigates the suburbs in terms of demographics, culture, and potential as a magazine market. It makes reference to widespread North American population trends, as well as trends within Greater Vancouver. Additionally, it considers the success of some suburban areas in the United States as magazine markets. Finally, it makes mention of the suburbs' personality in light of marketing research, and compares that to the personality of cities.

The third part of this report considers *The Block's* competition in Greater Vancouver. This competition comes in two forms: magazines (primarily in Vancouver proper) and community papers (primarily in the suburbs). Both are examined in terms of editorial content, advertising, and circulation.

The fourth part examines *The Block* in depth, through its various departments: editorial, production, advertising, and circulation. Particular issues related to *The Block's* small staff, multi-edition nature, and suburban circulation are highlighted. The last part of this section describes the Vancouver edition of

the magazine. It makes mention of the way in which *The Block* team adapted to tailoring the content of a suburban city magazine to the inner city.

Finally, the fifth part, the conclusion, examines the myriad changes brought to the magazine after its first year of operation.

This report endeavours to document the struggle of a new magazine to define itself, and to succeed. However, since *The Block* is so new, and still adapting, it is inevitable that *The Block* being published as you read this is very different from *The Block* described by this paper. It is also unclear whether *The Block* has evolved quickly enough to thrive, and survive. Time will inevitably answer that question, but in the meantime, *The Block* still strives to be one magazine and many magazines, and to keep everyone happy.

Chapter 1: History

The Block quietly launched in April of 2006 as a response to trends in both the Canadian and American magazine-publishing industries. The tale of its creation is not entirely straightforward, however. *The Block* was born from a small homes and shelter magazine in South Surrey called *InsideOut*. *InsideOut* was created with little focus on editorial content, flimsy production values and content frequently written by advertisers. The owners of *InsideOut*, however, had ambitions to distribute the magazine to other suburban regions beyond South Surrey. *InsideOut*'s owners realized that the team creating the publication was not well-equipped to handle a magazine of the scale and quality that they aspired to publish, and so they recruited Dean Pothitos (formerly of *Alive*) to take the helm as publisher. Pothitos and the *InsideOut* investors got together to form Forwardthink Media, the independent company that was to publish *The Block*.

Pothitos was compelled by the success of *Chatelaine*, the most financially successful magazine in Canada, with more than 4 million readers. Equally inspiring to him was the success of American lifestyle magazines such as *Oprah*, *Real Simple*, and *Martha Stewart Living*. He thought that combining something like *Chatelaine*, which covers beauty, fashion, health, food, and décor (Chatelaine, 2007) aimed at a highly educated audience which is primarily aged 35 to 54 (Chatelaine, 2007), with a slick shelter/lifestyle publication, would be a

recipe for success. How could combining one successful genre with another equally successful genre go wrong?

After coming to that conclusion, he studied the magazine-publishing scene in Vancouver. Living in a desirable area in central Vancouver, he received countless free city magazines, many of which he never got a chance to really read. The gap in this market, he saw, was in the suburbs, where the Forwardthink team wanted to pursue their magazine venture: these areas weren't bombarded with controlled-circulation glossies the way downtown Vancouver was and is. Nonetheless, these free magazines he was receiving, mostly city magazines, had the kind of local content that appealed to him as a resident, as well as to the local advertisers that supported the magazine. Thus was the idea of *The Block* born: a lifestyle/shelter magazine with a strong community focus, aimed at the suburbs: effectively, a city magazine for the suburbs.

And so, Pothitos approached the other Forwardthink investors with his idea, and relocated from Surrey to Yaletown. This move to base a suburban magazine in the city centre might not seem logical. However, Pothitos's aim was to cover several of the suburbs, with contributors from each area. Since Vancouver lies roughly in the centre of all of the suburbs, it was the easiest, most accessible spot for a headquarters. In early 2006, he assembled a team. Some staff members were recruited through personal connections, and others through postings on job boards. By February, *The Block* was staffed; by April, the first magazine was on the street.

It is important to consider that as a start-up magazine, *The Block* experienced more volatility over its first year of publication than most established magazines do over the course of a year. And that makes sense: the pressure to create an identity that is satisfying to both readers and advertisers, coordinate an entirely new staff, and achieve profitability all at the same time is an obvious catalyst for evolution and change. However, despite that evolution, *The Block* of April 2007 is still an obvious progression from its original incarnation.

Chapter 2: The Suburban Market

The word “suburb” immediately elicits suggestions of secondary status. After all, it begins with the suffix “sub” designating a subset, a lower, less important division. At the same time, the word tends to evoke a kind of serial-sitcom, a 1950s-style nostalgic image of buttoned-up, sheltered domesticity; a place to raise a family, but hardly a bastion of culture (Palen, 1995). The kind of atmosphere where everyone is in bed at 10 p.m., a culture to which one would hardly expect to dedicate a magazine.

However, in modern North America, the suburbs are no longer secondary to the city centre. When one considers Vancouver’s growing suburban population, marketing research, and successful American suburban magazines, it is obvious that the suburbs have come into their own, in terms of their population, their importance, their culture and their capacity to sustain their own magazines.

When one looks at Greater Vancouver’s demographics, one sees that they reveal much about the city’s personality. Typically, central city populations make up only a third of metropolitan areas (Palen, 1995); in Vancouver’s case, its central population is less than a third, with a population of 588,000 and the greater metropolitan area with a population of 2.18 million (BC Stats, 2006). It’s easy for urban dwellers to believe that they live in the “big city,” the hub of population, culture, and everything else, but it really couldn’t be more untrue.

Our cities are largely suburban, no longer operating like core hubs with spokes, but more as multinucleated arrangements (Palen, 1995). Activities formerly relegated to the inner city, such as head offices, theatres, densification, and even crime are now to be found in the suburbs. The economic activities of the suburbs have been a significant factor in the changing suburban landscape. Nowadays, many suburban centres function like downtowns, allowing residents to both live and work in their own suburban area without needing to head into the city. This geographical relocation of business and commerce is hardly an anomalous example; today, the job market has reached the point where more than 50 percent of all job sectors within a metropolitan area are located in areas considered to be the suburbs (Muller, 1997). This economic activity is strongly related to accelerated suburban growth and densification. In Vancouver's case, the City of Vancouver's population has only been growing between 0.6 and 0.8 percent per year since 2003, meaning an increase of 10,000 people (BC Stats, 2006), while the suburbs have experienced much more dramatic growth. A particularly visible example is Surrey, which has experienced about 2 percent growth every year since 2003, for an increase of more than 20,000 people. Surrey has brand-new office buildings, cultural centres, and a thriving local economy — all the trappings of what was previously considered the domain of inner cities. And yet, Canadians haven't recognized the fact that, in terms of society and culture, the suburbs are dominant (Palen, 1995). Population figures reveal a little-acknowledged fact: for Canadians, living in suburbs is the norm (Harris, 2004). And yet, in spite of their social dominance, their growth, their

culture, and their wealth, the Canadian media, particularly controlled-circulation magazines, purposefully ignores the suburbs, in general.

In Vancouver, most controlled-circulation city and lifestyle magazines are delivered to residents of the city of Vancouver, and the North Shore. This includes magazines like *Vancouver*, *Western Living*, *Western Living Condo*, *VLM*, and *Vancouver View*. In spite of their growth, their cultural importance, and, significantly, their independence, the suburbs still don't receive the same targeted attention as city centres. The suburbs are left with only their community newspapers for content with a local slant.

One of the ironies here is the reasons why magazines, particularly city magazines, exist. Magazines, by nature, are a marriage between business and culture. Readers desire the information and community provided by their magazines, while advertisers want to sell their products to those same readers. In cities, the large populations deliver a built-in audience for just about any topic. Cities also provide the type of readers that advertisers covet — educated, career-driven, relatively wealthy, and with a high disposable income. What advertisers and publishers in Greater Vancouver seem to be missing, however, is that those keywords are more and more applicable to the suburbs, as well.

Interestingly, the United States has been a little faster in picking up on the suburban trend than Canada. In the United States, smaller markets have become more attractive for regional publishers. *Folio* explains this phenomenon by the fact that “smaller markets are gaining in population and affluence as upscale consumers flee big cities, creating opportunities for new publications” (Kinsman,

2005, para. 6). An additional advantage of these upscale former city-dwellers is that they are used to having a city magazine, and are usually willing to support it (Kinsman, 2005). In other words, they're used to reading city magazines and, when presented with a new one, will likely read it, thus creating the readership necessary to acquire advertisers, and ultimately survive. This particular article points to the successes of magazines as disparate as *Berkshire Living*, the tagline of which is "The Good Life in the Country" (Berkshire Living, 2007) and which is distributed to the Berkshires, a rural area in the Eastern U.S. with much tourism from Connecticut and Massachusetts, and *Coronado Lifestyle*, a magazine distributed to Coronado Island, a suburb of San Diego. One interviewee, an editor-in-chief at Cactus Media Group, quips that "Any city with more than 100,000 people can support a magazine" (Kinsman, 2005, para. 6). Observations are also made about the fact that some cities are simply too diverse to support a single-city magazine — San Francisco is the primary example. One editorial voice is inadequate to speak to such a varied audience. The key appears to be cornering a well-defined market with desirable demographics, rather than simply making choices based on city size.

One tool used by magazine marketers to pinpoint desirable demographics is the PSYTE classification system, which segments Canadians into "lifestyle clusters" based on "select geodemographic metrics, location, and indicators of consumer and lifestyle behaviour" (Tetrad, 2007). The theory here is that similar types of people tend to cluster in specific geographic locations — i.e., different neighbourhoods have different personalities. Importantly, when lifestyle

behaviour is taken into account, the PSYTE clusters start to reveal psychographics — that is to say, the mood and interests of consumers.

The PSYTE divides consumers by urban or suburban status, as well as by income. Interestingly, descriptions of the highest earners in both the urban and suburban categories show that they share more commonalities than differences.

For example, the “Suburban Affluence” cluster is described this way:

“Suburbanites with a flair for fine living, Suburban Affluence represents both old and new wealth. Because wealth accumulates through life stages, this cluster exhibits an older skew with many empty nests. Their average household income of \$166,000 represents significant potential spending power as well as their investment in suburban communities. Suburban Affluence indexes high on managerial and technical employment, married with children, and households with income above \$100,000.” In contrast, the “Canadian Elite” cluster is described in this manner: “The highest income Canadian neighbourhoods represent an elite set. At once urban and urbane, the Canadian Elite (only 0.7 percent of total national households) concentrate in the country's largest metropolitan areas. Their average income of a quarter million dollars per household speaks volumes. With 92 percent husband-wife families they also represent wealth created by family stability. Canadian Elite index high on managerial, professional, technical, health care and financial services employment; university education with degree; and household composition married with children.” The two clusters represent similar jobs, similar relationship statuses, and similar interests in culture. The urban set has a higher household income; however, that is offset by the fact that they live in areas with

much higher property values and living expenses. These kinds of similarities continue through the rest of the PSYTE clusters, particularly when it comes to older, established, wealthy individuals — the exact type that magazine advertisers love to target. When it comes to the basic elements that magazine marketers look for, such as high expendable income, an interest in culture, and a desirable age bracket, the suburbs and the city are not shockingly different.

Demographics aside, it's also wise to consider psychographics. There is a good reason why suburbanites are similar to urbanites; they're the same people with somewhat different priorities when it comes to lifestyle. Suburbanites didn't choose to move to a small town, or the country; they chose to live within reach of the city. They chose the suburbs for reasons such as space, safety, and affordability, but they wanted to retain the advantages of the city, including amenities and, importantly, culture (Palen, 1995). At the same time, despite all the similarities between urbanites and suburbanites, their differences cannot be ignored. Yes, suburbanites are wealthy, intelligent consumers of goods, and a largely ignored market for magazines. But they do live in different environments, and these environments influence their day-to-day lives. These differences, in many ways, are not subtle. Living amongst large yards, rolling hills, relatively calm streets, and large chain stores that must be driven to, is a far cry from cramped condominiums, glittering highrises, busy streets, and tiny boutiques. Living in the suburbs does not make people unreceptive to a city magazine, but that city magazine should reflect the area in which they live, and take into account their psychographics. Since psychographics are such an indicator of personality, the most important element for accommodating their nuances

should be a magazine's editorial content. Editorial content strives to create a relationship with an audience, to reflect its lifestyle and celebrate it, and in return hope that the audience continues reading the magazine. Thus, the editorial content must have a similar personality as the reader: in this case, a profoundly suburban personality.

When one takes a look at the population breakdown of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) based on PSYTE clusters, one begins to see patterns. Within the GVRD, the most populous PSYTE clusters are (in order from largest to smallest): Town and Country, composing 15 percent of households, Pacific Fusion, composing 10 percent of households, Family Crossroads, Service Crew, and Asian Heights, all coming in at about 8 percent of the population each (Financial Post, 2007). The largest cluster, Town and Country, is an upper-middle-class Exurban cluster. Family Crossroads is a middle-class Suburban cluster, while Asian Heights is an affluent Suburban cluster. Meanwhile, Service Crew, the only Urban cluster in the bunch, is lower-middle class. Statistics like this are very revealing about where large, cohesive demographic clusters with favourable incomes are located in Greater Vancouver, specifically, many of the most populous clusters are located *outside* of the urban core. Service Crew, being lower-middle class, is not obviously favourable as a magazine market (when it comes to what advertisers typically look for). The most populous Urban cluster with favourable demographics is Sushi and Shiraz, coming in with just under 8 percent of households. This cluster is middle class, but very young (indexing very high on those under the age of 25), which calls into question, somewhat, the wisdom of most city magazines aiming for the wealthy and middle-aged. These

clusters, while illustrating that Greater Vancouver is far more suburban than it may initially seem, also point out the many different psychographic profiles to be found in a small area. All of these little markets are potential magazine audiences. But it is dubious that one magazine can serve all their diverse interests. The more complicated question is whether a magazine like *The Block*, which has only slightly different editorial identities in different editions, can please everyone.

Chapter 3: The Competition

One of the first things a publisher considers prior to launching a magazine is the potential competition. If there are no other magazines covering a particular niche or area, it may be that audiences are easier to woo and success is more likely. However, it is equally possible that competitors are wary of the audience, or that strong competition may be coming from some other media outlet.

As a multi-edition magazine with a widespread circulation, *The Block* faces many different competitors. In order to pinpoint *The Block's* competition, it is useful to categorize the magazine. A controlled-circulation glossy magazine with lifestyle elements and strong feature writing targeted specifically to well-defined suburban and urban areas, *The Block* is best defined as a city magazine. One study of city magazines identified three characteristics by which city magazines can be defined: 1. A primary, over-arching focus on the city it comes from; 2. A blend of service journalism and feature writing; 3. A format of enduring quality (O'Grady, 2003). *The Block* certainly falls within all of those categories; each edition is targeted heavily towards its region, includes both service journalism and features, and comes in a package both attractive and durable.

The Block's competitors are not simply city magazines, however. Within Vancouver, the biggest competitors are *Vancouver* magazine, *VLM*, *Vancouver View*, and *Western Living*. In suburban Vancouver, *The Block's* competition comes in a far different form. These regions did not have city magazines prior to

the introduction of *The Block*, so the primary functions provided by a city magazine, namely, providing an editorial environment that informs and entertains the local community and reflects its culture, and provides a place for local businesses to target desirable consumers with advertising, are taken care of by local community papers.

1. Magazine Competitors

Most magazines that compete with *The Block* can be categorized as city magazines. *The Block's* competitors tend to aim for similar things editorially, with varying levels of success. *Vancouver* magazine's mandate is to be a guide that "informs, guides, and entertains people who engage with the city. Mixing quality journalism and service-driven pieces, it chronicles and reflects Vancouver's emergence as a dynamic international city" (Vancouver, 2007, para. 1). *Vancouver* is a straight-up city magazine. Features always centre around Vancouver's civic issues and personalities, while service editorial focuses on Vancouver shopping, events, and dining. Importantly, the editorial usually centres around Vancouver proper, which is also where the magazine is distributed. The writing and photography are high-quality, and the magazine frequently wins awards, including a few recent Western Magazine Awards. There's no doubt that *Vancouver* does an excellent job of serving its community as a city magazine but its focus is steadfastly urban.

VLM is a somewhat different story. Editor Bob Mercer describes it as a "general interest city magazine" (2007, p. 11). *VLM* pits itself directly against

Vancouver magazine, with a mix of stories covering politics, local celebrities, local events, and dining. It also includes a fashion spread and recipes, allowing for the inclusion of more photography. It doesn't receive the kinds of accolades that *Vancouver* does, and cannot secure the same big-name writers and photographers that *Vancouver* can. In its struggle to define itself, it periodically relaunches, but never quite seems to shake the identity of being a somewhat lower-rent alternative to *Vancouver*. It also shares with *Vancouver* a similar viewpoint: Vancouver is defined as the central city, with little mention of the suburbs.

Vancouver View, the third city magazine, is probably the least competitive with *The Block*. It looks like a city magazine, and aims itself at a similar demographic as *Vancouver* and *VLM*. However, the editorial often feels a little more like advertorial; service journalism is the staple of *View*, with frequent mentions of advertisers (and sometimes full-page profiles of advertisers). Again, however, it aims for a big-city feel, with images of happy urbanites frolicking downtown and stories about city shopping and culture.

Western Living is not a city magazine, but it is regional: it focuses on the "West," with content targeted at B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. As "Canada's largest regional magazine," it "invites readers to stretch their imaginations about living in the West" from "people, places, homes, gardens, food, and adventure from Winnipeg to Victoria and everywhere in-between" (Western Living, 2007). Departments include travel, gardening, real estate, food, restaurants, and extensive home features. Published by Transcontinental, as

Vancouver is, *Western Living* is an extremely high-quality magazine with sharp writing and beautiful photography. Its editorial is actually very similar to what *The Block* offers, with the omission of the “community” aspects, such as shopping, events, and pointedly regional features. *Western Living* publishes several different editions, as *The Block* does; *Western Living* has an edition for Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary, Winnipeg, and the province of Saskatchewan. The large-scale, “western Canadian” scope of *Western Living*’s content, bringing in elements from all of western Canada (so, for example, a reader in Saskatchewan might read about a particularly remarkable home in Calgary) is what prevents it from being a city magazine. But its regional focus and lifestyle coverage are very similar to what *The Block* aspires to, except for much, much larger regions, and a far bigger circulation. With a focus on home lifestyle, *Western Living* does cater to suburbanites as well as urbanites, but a person living in White Rock would never consider *Western Living* to be their community magazine. That hyper-focused, local slant just isn’t there.

Table 1. The Block and its magazine competitors.

	Focus	Circulation	Distribution Area	Ad Rate (full-page, 4 colour, 1x)	CPM
<i>The Block</i> ¹	“Living well in our West Coast cities”	30,000 (Vancouver), 20,000 (other editions), controlled, bimonthly	Vancouver West, downtown Vancouver, Tri-Cities, North Shore, Surrey/White Rock	\$2795 (Vancouver), \$2150 (other regions)	\$93.17 (Vancouver), \$107.50 (other regions)
<i>Vancouver</i> ²	“... arts, entertainment, shopping, dining, local travel, and reportage on civic issues”	55,000, primarily controlled, monthly (11 issues)	West Vancouver, North Vancouver, Vancouver West, downtown Vancouver	\$5995	\$109
<i>VLM</i> ³	Dining, fashion, lifestyle, civic issues	30,000, primarily controlled, monthly (12 issues)	Vancouver West, downtown Vancouver, North Shore	\$2,835	\$94.50
<i>Vancouver View</i> ⁴	“Living Life to the Fullest”	45,000, primarily controlled, monthly (12 issues)	Vancouver West, downtown Vancouver, North Shore	\$1887.73 (2 inclusions)	\$41.95
<i>Western Living</i> ⁵	Homes & design, food & wine, “The People and Places of The West”	190,500 (total), 55,000 (Vancouver), primarily controlled, monthly (10 issues)	Vancouver, Victoria, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Saskatoon	\$7,055 (Vancouver edition)	\$128.27

Sources: ¹The Block (2007), ²Vancouver (2006), ³Business in Vancouver (2006), ⁴Vancouver View (2006), ⁵Western Living (2006).

2. Newspaper Competitors

While the city magazines hit many of the same marks that *The Block* does for content and style, the local papers aim for the community coverage.

Community papers are very successful media ventures; because suburban culture is distinct, and isn't commonly included in media originating in the city centre, community papers have become very important to suburban readers (Kramer, 1977). Community papers have a readership that is uniquely their own, and give local advertisers a way to target an audience that would be unavailable to them using larger metropolitan media (Kramer, 1977). These community papers have generally high readership; one study suggested that 49 percent of men and 53 percent of women living in the suburbs read their local paper (Kramer, 1977), while another suggests that suburban readers rely on their local papers in a way that urban readers do not, and 18 percent more suburban readers look to their community papers to make buying decisions than the U.S. average (Giman, 1997).

As of April 2007, *The Block's* primary suburban paper competition came from papers distributed by VanNet. The other primary publisher of community papers, Black Press, became *The Block's* distributor at this time; so, whether *The Block* liked it or not, the fact that it arrived tucked inside Black Press papers meant that *The Block* was not so much competing with them as acting as *part of* them. The VanNet papers *The Block* was competing with include the *Coquitlam Now*, *North Shore News*, and *Surrey Now*.

The *Surrey Now* serves as a good example of *The Block's* competition in the suburbs. Its strong tie to community is reflected in its mission statement. The *Now* trumpets that "What began as a small weekly newspaper produced by a handful of editorial, sales and management staff is today a twice-a-week publication with close to 30 skilled employees, most of whom also live in the region and contribute heavily to the local economy" (Surrey Now, 2007, para. 2). The newspaper has a circulation of 116,000, and claims that 85 percent of homeowners read the paper (Surrey Now, 2007). Obviously, statistics like this make the *Now* an attractive advertising vehicle for small local businesses, the same businesses that *The Block* would love to attract as advertisers. These papers have a very strong presence in their respective communities. Local businesses are accustomed to advertising in the papers, and without an established local city magazine in the suburbs, they are not well-versed in the strengths of magazine advertising (such as readers' tendency to hold onto magazines and re-view ads several times over). Compounding that is the fact that advertising in the local paper is significantly cheaper. The *Surrey Now*, as one of the most successful VanNet papers, has the highest ad rate of their stable of papers. For their "Format B" ad, 10.25" wide and 196 lines long, an ad costs \$70.42 per column inch, \$5.03 per line, and another \$380 for colour (VanNet Newspapers [VN], 2007). This translates to \$2087.69 for a full-page ad — cheaper than *The Block's* rate of \$2150 and reaching a much larger number of people. To make this comparison clearer, we will consider CPM, or cost per mille: a ratio commonly used by magazine advertisers to determine the cost of reaching one thousand readers. For the Surrey edition, *The Block's* CPM prior to April 2007 was \$107.50. For a similar

ad in the *Surrey Now*, the CPM is \$18. Numbers like these, plus the strength of the community papers, made it difficult for *The Block* to compete. However, the *Now*, just like any small community newspaper, focuses strongly on the local news of the day. Stories cover local politics, sports, community leaders, and entertainment. As such, the content is far more time-sensitive than what *The Block* presents. These local papers are also limited by their format: they are printed on newsprint, and are flimsy and disposable and clearly not amenable to large photo spreads. Their lack of physical lasting power and beautiful photography means that they just cannot fulfil the same role of the lifestyle guide, offering visual style cues that can be perused and re-read over time. The papers serve their purpose, which is to keep the community informed on a weekly basis, but it's unlikely that homeowners would save copies of the *Now* to place on their coffee tables. Which is, over time, where *The Block* hopes to find itself.

All of these factors — great demographics, a lack of direct magazine competition, and evidence from down south that small markets are a prime target for city magazines — suggest that Vancouver's outlying areas are well suited to support a city magazine. It was into this hopefully receptive market that, in April 2006, *The Block* made its debut.

Chapter 4: *The Block*

1. Analysis, by Department

A magazine is more than just words and glossy paper — it is a business venture, the character and health of which are much determined by work that goes on behind the scenes. In order to understand a magazine, it's best to examine it through the filter of different departmental viewpoints; here, we will consider *The Block's* operations, editorial, production, advertising, and circulation.

a) Operations

When it launched, *The Block* differed from many other magazines in both the organization of staff and the editorial structure of the magazine. The editorial content of the magazine was organized to keep costs low, while customized to each particular area. Similarly, staffing choices were made with the aim of keeping costs low, while still maintaining a large staff with connections to each market area. Thus, most staff members were part-time; the only full-time staff were the marketing/circulation manager and the publisher. Additionally, the only staff members working in-office were the marketing/circulation manager, publisher, editorial assistant (and, later, the managing editor), and art director. Each regional editor was allotted seven working days per issue, and the editor-in-chief divided his part-time duties between business aspects of the magazine and

offering guidance to the regional editors. The managing editor (and, originally, the editorial assistant) had the tough job of trying to keep track of all the part-time staff and freelancers. This unconventional approach with few full-time, in-office staff was not without its complications. Regional editors were sometimes difficult to reach, and were unaware of much of the in-office discussion.

Maintaining a coherent editorial vision amongst all parties was complicated by the fact that meetings were bi-monthly, and trying to schedule meetings with people who have other full-time positions is extremely difficult. Inevitably, much of the cleanup work with every edition was left to the in-office staff, whether that involved revamping stories that were received at the last minute, or scrambling to source photographs for features where the supplied art was unsatisfactory. In an office with a full staff, this workload would have been spread over many people, but in *The Block's* case, it was left to three people. Nonetheless, the team continued to get the magazine out on the street, usually on time.

By April 2007, *The Block* had four different editions: *The Block* Surrey/White Rock, *The Block* North Shore, *The Block* Tri-Cities, and *The Block* Vancouver. The two original editions were *The Block* Peninsula (later renamed Surrey/White Rock) and *The Block* North Shore. Both of these editions were launched in April 2006. *The Block* Tri-Cities was launched in June 2006, and *The Block* Vancouver made its first appearance in January of 2007. Every edition had its own editor, who worked out-of-office to generate regional content for the community in which she lived. Meanwhile, *The Block's* central editorial team (Editor-In-Chief Jim Tobler, Managing Editor Susan Falk, and Jennifer Croll, the assistant editor) created a critical mass of core content that appeared in all

editions, with a broad enough scope to appeal to all regions. The regional editors functioned more like contributing editors, in that their involvement with the actual editing and production of the magazine was limited. They were primarily writers, and expected to keep a finger on the pulse of their respective communities. They were key to *The Block's* claim to be in touch with local communities, and to function as a regional magazine while still maintaining central content and a single office.

b) Editorial

The editorial vision of *The Block* has slowly evolved over time. Originally, it was designed as a regional lifestyle magazine, with a heavily female slant. Thus, the content and tone were inspired by magazines like *Chatelaine* and *Vancouver*. The magazine had no concrete editorial mission statement. In the first letter from the editor, Jessica Raya suggested that “From home to health, local to lifestyle, *The Block* team is excited to bring you stories that are smart, stylish, and always relevant to your life” (2006, p. 8). The publisher had a big hand in dictating content, and he wanted an environment that was very advertiser-friendly; thus, there was a lot of service content, recipes, “tips,” expert advice columns, and shopping sections. However, difficulties acquiring advertising, many staff changeovers, and a push-and-pull between the editorial team and the business side of the magazine meant that *The Block* experienced much evolution over its first year. By Issue 2, Jim Tobler, the new editor, stated that “*The Block* is resolute in celebrating the suburban lifestyle in its innumerable manifestations. It

is my hope that you will want to be *Block* readers, and experience your community in a different, dynamic way” (2006, p. 8). The difference is a subtle one, but even in this one statement, it is evident that *The Block* had begun to move from a shelter/service focus to something a little more urbane, perhaps a little more intellectual. Vol. 1, Issue 1 has an air of practicality; Issue 2 feels more aspirational. This subtle shift of focus progressed through most of *The Block*’s first year.

Initially, when *The Block* was present only in the North Shore and Peninsula, content was broken down into six areas, as identified on the Table of Contents. These were Life (including book reviews, stories on technology, travel editorial, financial advice, creative non-fiction with a community feel, and editors’ shopping picks), Style (including a fashion section with a two- to three-page photo spread, and a beauty rundown on cosmetics), Home (including a visually appealing trends page, and usually a feature on design or home products), Health (one or two short features on nutrition and exercise), Food (a regular recipes section, restaurant writeups, and wine recommendations), and the final section, Neighbourhood, which included all the regional content. Neighbourhood included the two major service-oriented shopping sections, What’s In Store (shopping) and Block Watch (newsy items that ranged from store openings to art shows and interesting events). There was also a community calendar with events drawn only from the surrounding area — events in Vancouver were only listed if they were especially remarkable. A feature-length story on some local issue (topics have ranged from the culture surrounding film production in the Tri-Cities to how New Urbanism is enacted on the North Shore)

was the most meaty section of the magazine. The magazine also began and ended with two regional sections, starting with the editor's letter (a split-page affair with a note from Jim Tobler, and an accompanying note from the regional editor) and finishing with the Last Word, usually a short musing on the joys and mysteries of suburban life, generated by the regional editor. All told, about one quarter of the magazine was dedicated to regional content. The cover for every regional edition of the magazine was the same, but bore different cover lines and a tagline denoting what region the magazine was for; in Vancouver, it read "Vancouver's Guide to Modern Living." The other regions followed suit.

At a magazine with such a firm division between core content created by city writers and regional content created by suburban writers, it was important to ensure that there wasn't an obvious schism between the two in terms of substance and attitude. Maintaining the magazine's editorial harmony was one of the biggest jobs for Jim Tobler. He admits, "Coherence has been a challenge. Every region has its own feel. That means the regional editors have to take a lot of responsibility for their regions and their magazines. They have to know their own communities really well. And they have to be savvy about what kind of content appeals to the readers in that region. That uniqueness is important, but nothing in the core content should cause any discord with the feel of it being a regional magazine." Both core writers and regional writers have, at times, needed a push to stay on the same page. For example, one area editor in the Tri-Cities frequently strayed towards features that had a feel-good, public-service feel: stories about charity workers, or people who overcame physical disabilities to become great athletes. This was rather at odds with the core content, which at the same time

was covering a lot of fairly high-end interior design. Similarly, though, the core content didn't always hit the mark. In one case, the cover shot featured a young family frolicking on the beach; however, the young female model (the "mother") had a cartilage piercing on her ear. Needless to say, this image didn't align with the presumably conservative lifestyle values of an older, established, suburban readership.

Over time, since the magazine's launch in April of 2006, its content has evolved. The first editor, Jessica Raya, put together a very different *Block* than the one that exists today. First of all, Issue # 1 appeared in only two different editions: the North Shore and Peninsula. The Peninsula was chosen for the inaugural issue simply because many of the advertisers from *InsideOut*, with connections to the staff who moved to *The Block*, were willing to appear in the pages of the new magazine; the North Shore was chosen because of its proximity to Vancouver, great demographics, and comparative lack of magazines. The major sections were already in place at the time, but the feel of the magazine as a whole was a little less sophisticated than it is now. The entire magazine was edited heavily, to the point that it was all in the same voice. The content was also less sophisticated, with more of a focus on service editorial. The magazine included a slew of how-to features, such as "Road Work: Tips for making that first big run truly fun" and "Staged Beauty: Professional staging could make it shine." There was a large Ask an Expert section, and the final page (titled Last Word) was a short blurb on a local eatery.

After Issue # 1, Raya left the magazine to pursue her writing career. Jim Tobler, who had recently left *NUVO*, stepped in to become Editor-in-Chief of *The Block*. After the transition, he slowly began making small changes to the magazine's content. "I've been trying to bring more voices into the writing mix," he says. Issue # 1 only featured the voices of four writers: Jessica Raya, Style editor Luisa Rino, and Maria Spitale (White Rock) or Kate MacLennan (North Shore). By Issue # 5, the magazine featured writing by more than 10 writers, including staff editors and freelancers. And with that, the magazine has attained a more varied feel, and is arguably a more interesting read.

The Block also became a more thoughtful magazine. A large proportion of the content was still service-oriented, but the rather pedestrian Ask an Expert section was dropped. New additions to service content included a travel feature and a wine column. The back page morphed from a quick business profile to a philosophical consideration of life. Also added was the guest column, which featured the creative non-fiction of a noted writer; recently featured was Susan Jubly, who created a thoughtful treatise on the struggles of a gardener ("Making My Garden Grow: A fight with flora"). Other features included "Who Killed the Electric Car? Look around. It's alive and well," and "City Confidential: We know the North Shore is lush and green; the question is if it's in the pink." While the focus on community and lifestyle has been maintained, the articles go a little deeper. Says Tobler, "I want to keep things vibrant and engaging. Every issue is getting smarter and smarter."

The Block, as a suburban city magazine, knows that respect for its readership is important. Part of giving the readership respect has been giving readers material that is a little more challenging; something to provoke their interest after they've figured out where the hottest shopping spots are. In general, this philosophy is similar to that of many city magazines; the reliable hook of sturdy service editorial to pull in readers, and then some longer features on local issues to foster a community and enlighten readers on their surrounding environs. The similarity between content aimed at city dwellers and content aimed at suburban dwellers isn't accidental. When asked what the suburban demographic meant to him, Tobler had this to say: "The suburbs have evolved a lot, in a highly significant way. I look at a suburban audience as equally educated, equally culturally mobile, equally as interested in good food and wine, and equally at home with their sense of place and community as anyone in any major city centre." However, Tobler is cautious with content that is too edgy; regardless of readers' intellectual vigour, they have chosen to live in a place that carries connotations of space, comfort, and safety. *The Block* isn't choosing to push their boundaries, but tends to works within them. Whether that approach is appealing to suburban readers is yet to be evaluated. In future, *The Block* will likely initiate a reader survey to find out.

c) Production

Production at *The Block* has always been a challenge. This has much to do with the fact that *The Block* has four different editions, all of which are sent to

press at the same time. These four editions look very similar: all boast the same cover, with slightly different cover lines and a small tagline under the magazine's name identifying which region the edition is for. Each magazine contains two types of editorial: central, core content that is common to all four regions, and unique, regional content that pertains only to the area that the local edition circulates within. The regional content is not simply dropped into one section of the magazine; it is staggered, to give the entire book a regional feel. In a typical issue of *The Block*, there are 50 pages, with about 38 pages of editorial. Of this, 11 pages are regional content, and the rest are core content repeated in other editions. This leaves about 12 pages of advertising; the type and quantity of advertising represented in each edition is entirely different, and the placement of these ads is edition-specific, not coordinated to fall in the same places for all editions. Because the content and advertising vary between editions, the pagination differs as well. In one edition, the main feature might fall on page 32, but in another edition, it might start on page 28.

The many similarities and sometimes subtle differences between the four magazines made production a labour-intensive process, and the construction of the four editions was far from robotic. In terms of workload, it was far more like putting together four unique magazines than simply replicating one magazine four times. The team accomplishing this formidable task was very small. Originally, the art director, editorial assistant, and the marketing manager put together the entire magazine. In more recent times, that only changed slightly: the new managing editor replaced the editorial assistant.

The challenges of putting together the multiple editions occurred at all stages of the production process, from design, to pre-press proofing, to printing, to final proofs. The design process involved a standard template into which content was dropped. All four issues were included in the same Quark file, with separate tabs. This created a few difficulties; most of these were due to repetition. First of all, sometimes content from different regions was mixed up: for example, North Shore content might have been pasted into the Tri-Cities edition. Sometimes, certain sections were omitted from some regions to accommodate advertising, and that omission mistakenly ended up in more than one edition. Sometimes ads were placed into the wrong edition. With all of these possibilities for mishaps, the pre-press proofing at *The Block* was extremely important, but not without challenges of its own. Proofreaders found that it was easy to miss omissions, as they needed to read nearly identical content from four editions. Changes to core content that were made during proofreading often needed to be copied over all editions. To save time, proofing might begin when one edition had been laid out before others, meaning that multi-edition changes could be difficult to coordinate. The art director often imported text from a word-processing file, so when content was imported for the remaining editions, changes made to the originally laid-out file would be missing. All of these problems led *The Block's* art director to choose one edition as a "Master" edition (first this was the North Shore edition, later it became the Vancouver edition) and to ultimately copy over all core content from that particular issue to all other editions. *The Block* also began to do pre-press proofing on paper, simply because when manually leafing

through a stack of paper, it is much more difficult to miss pages (or, worse, an entire edition) than on a tabbed Quark file.

The challenges of printing the magazine were less severe. *The Block* prints at Mitchell Press, one of the largest printers in Vancouver. Because there were four editions with sizeable circulations, however, the magazine took up a lot of press time, usually about 18 hours. Dana Stevens from Mitchell Press explained that they put a lot of effort into keeping all four editions of the magazine on schedule and organized. “Mix-ups are possible but everyone involved in production is aware that there are four jobs that look similar and all of the skids are marked clearly in the bindery. The signed bluelines and digital mock-ups are labelled and checked at the press to make sure that you don't have the wrong blueline for a different set of plates. As well, each book is assigned its own docket number, which prints on the signature so it can be easily identified in the bindery. Having a clear indication such ‘Vancouver’ written on the front cover helps too.” When the final bluelines arrived at the office for proofing, they were organized into booklets for easy proofing. At this stage, it was easier to keep track of changes; however, sometimes changes that had not been made to all editions were picked up. Also, at this point, when errors were found in central content, it was huge hassle; in any other magazine, one fee would be incurred to make the change, but in *The Block's* case, it was necessary to pay four times to fix one error that had been missed in the central content. It was almost as if the staff at *The Block* had to be four times as fastidious with their proofreading as they would be with a single-edition magazine. But *The Block's* staff is only human, and inevitably, errors happen; thankfully, in the first year, there were no cataclysmic

errors. Oversights were limited to minor typos and the occasional misnumbered page.

d) Advertising

The primary advertising goal of *The Block* was to provide a venue for small, independent businesses to place ads in a magazine with high production values and a large circulation — and a chance to brand themselves by associating their company with a magazine that was aspirational, stylish, and lifestyle-based. This is something that community newspapers in the suburbs just can't provide. In Vancouver, it is a little more murky. The magazine still targeted independent businesses, but relied more on its identity as an extremely fashion-forward, design-savvy publication to woo businesses with a similar outlook.

The Block offered a unique advertising medium, in that it allowed advertisers to pick and choose which regions they would like to target. Larger advertisers with the desire to reach all of the GVRD could choose to advertise in all issues, if they wanted, while small advertisers (for example, a small bakery in Coquitlam that really only needs to reach people in the immediate community) could choose to advertise only in the issue for its particular region. *The Block's* rates were also extremely affordable. A full-page colour advertisement in the Surrey edition, the Tri-Cities edition, or the North Shore edition was \$2150, while a full-page colour advertisement in the Vancouver edition was \$2795 (The Block, 2007). In comparison, a full-page four-colour advertisement in *Vancouver* magazine was \$5995 (Vancouver, 2006).

The editorial content of *The Block* was also a very friendly advertising environment, what with the Block Watch and What's In Store sections covering local news and shopping. Since readers could turn to those pages to keep abreast of the shopping and culture of their local community, advertisers could benefit from extremely targeted readers.

The Block's editorial mandate, with its strong community presence, was created with the idea that small and independent businesses would advertise in the magazine. Overwhelmingly, the magazine did receive the types of advertisers it was aiming for. A flip through any issue of *The Block* reveals ads from local realtors, home décor shops, aesthetics services, optometrists, restaurants, clothing stores, wineries, photography studios, and similar businesses. What *The Block* lacked was larger advertisers: large media buyers did not purchase any ads. A bigger problem was the small quantity of advertising. When *The Block* began, the advertising to editorial ratio stood at about 20/80; by April 2007, the ratio occasionally neared 30/70, but growth has been very slow. In part, these are the struggles of any new magazine. However, *The Block* has also suffered from staffing problems in its advertising department. The advertising representatives all worked from home, part-time, for relatively low wages; this meant that high-calibre reps were hard to come by, and also that the demands of the job combined with the payoff led to a high turnover. Without a steady relationship with local businesses, the new reps had a difficult time making their way. *The Block* dealt with the problem in the only way it could — constantly re-hiring reps and training them as best it could.

Advertising production presented other challenges. Most of *The Block's* advertising came from small businesses, and small businesses frequently do not produce their own ads. Thus, *The Block's* art director was given the task of designing most of the advertising. Frequently, advertising was allowed to come in almost right up to the production deadline, because *The Block* was not in a position to turn away any advertising revenue. This created a very heavy burden for the art director, since right before the production deadline, he would be trying to lay out the magazine's editorial content.

As time went on, things changed. Freelance designers were hired to produce some ads, taking part of the burden off of the art director. Different reps were hired, some more successful than others. However, one of the challenges that *The Block* will continue to face is increasing advertising to the point of profitability.

e) Circulation

i. Target Market

The Block's target market was identified in its 2007 media kit this way: “*The Block* readership is affluent, educated homeowners, who may not have the time to distil the vast amount of information available to them, and who appreciate *The Block's* insights, information and perspective. *The Block* readers are self-aware, interested and interactive with the world. Their main focus is family, home and career” (The Block, 2007). More specifically, readers were defined as upper-middle-class homeowners with a high disposable income, with a

slant towards females — the assumption was that at least 60 percent of the readership was female. Distribution areas were picked with this ideal in mind. Later, the target market was honed somewhat, to upper-middle class individuals with a taste for living well, i.e., an interest in culture, arts, fashion, and design. Obviously, this type of focused readership is difficult to attain via controlled circulation, the magazine's primary form of distribution. Further, the shift in the target market was reflected in the editorial content. It was a necessary spin to set the magazine apart from other, more broadly targeted magazines, such as *Vancouver*.

ii. Distribution

The Block, with a total circulation of 90,000 in April 2007 (The Block, 2007), was the magazine with the highest circulation in Greater Vancouver. To compare, *Vancouver* magazine had a circulation of 55,000 (Vancouver, 2006), *Western Living* had a circulation of 55,000 in Greater Vancouver (Western Living, 2006), *VLM* had a circulation of 30,000 (Business in Vancouver, 2006), and *Vancouver View* had a circulation of 45,000 (Vancouver View, 2006). *The Block's* circulation is currently unaudited, but is slated to undergo an audit in future. It is primarily distributed via controlled circulation, and as of April 2007 was distributed straight to the doors of homes in four regions in the Lower Mainland. *The Block's* circulation is always changing, as new regional editions of the magazine are periodically added. The magazine is considering adding another area to the circulation by 2008; it is likely that when this happens, the total

circulation will remain constant, and circulation in each area will be adjusted to accommodate the new territory.

The areas that *The Block* is distributed to were as follows: the North Shore (20,000 copies), the Tri-Cities (20,000 copies), Surrey/White Rock (20,000 copies), and Vancouver (30,000 copies) (The Block, 2007). A description of each area follows. Demographic information is derived from BC Stats, with the exception of the average *Block* income, which is derived from Black Press's own reader information.

The North Shore

The North Shore comprises both the cities of North Vancouver and West Vancouver, which lie across Burrard Inlet from the City of Vancouver. The population of North Vancouver is 49,248, spread over 11.95 km². The average income in this area for 2006 was \$53,023. The population of West Vancouver is 43,290, spread over 87.43 km². The average income in this area was \$118,421 (BC Stats, 2006). The areas to which *The Block* was distributed on the North Shore had an average household income of \$90,675 (The Block, 2007). The North Shore is known for having a mix of outdoor activities and commerce, as well as being very close to the city of Vancouver.

The Tri-Cities

The Tri-Cities comprises the cities of Port Coquitlam, Coquitlam, and Port Moody. This area lies about 30 km east of Vancouver, with the suburb of Burnaby falling in the space in between. Coquitlam itself has a population of 119,319, spread out over 121.68 km²; Port Coquitlam a population of 55,712, spread over 28.79 km²; and Port Moody a population of 30,120, spread over 25.62 km². The average incomes for these areas, respectively, were \$44,858, \$44,243, and \$50,254 (BC Stats, 2006). The relatively low population density of the area says a lot about its character. The Tri-Cities is known for its very outdoorsy lifestyle and laid-back atmosphere. Most retail activity in this area tends to take place in large shopping centres or big-box stores. Of the areas that *The Block* distributes to, this one is the most stereotypically suburban, with subdivisions, shopping malls, and a lot of space to spread out in.

The parts of the Tri-Cities to which *The Block* was distributed to in its first year had an average income of \$102,296 (The Block, 2007).

Surrey/White Rock

Surrey and White Rock are two separate cities about 38 km southeast of Vancouver, right at the U.S. border. Richmond and Langley lie between Surrey and Vancouver. Surrey has a population of 402,150, spread out over 317.4 km², while White Rock has a population of 19,545, spread over 5.28 km². The areas, respectively, have average incomes of \$41,875 and \$49,177 (BC Stats, 2006). The areas to which *The Block* was distributing in Surrey and White Rock had an

average household income of \$90,675 (The Block, 2007). Surrey and White Rock are known for rather different qualities. White Rock is an upper-income bedroom community on the beach with an upscale, villagey atmosphere, lots of high-end shopping, and vibrant restaurants. Surrey, however, takes up a lot of space and has a large population. Some parts of Surrey, such as Whalley, have lower-income residents and high rates of crime. South Surrey is more affluent, and the residents of this area tend to associate themselves more with White Rock. On the whole, Surrey and White Rock are the largest suburbs to which *The Block* distributes, as well as the fastest-growing suburb, and the one with the most urban qualities.

Vancouver

In the middle of all these suburbs lies Vancouver. The city has a population of 587,891, spread over 114.67 km², and an average income of \$51,080 (BC Stats, 2006). Homes *The Block* distributed to had an average income of \$110,757 (The Block, 2007). Vancouver likes to think that it has it all — a thriving city centre, outdoor activities, fine dining, and a vibrant culture.

To cover all four of these areas is a massive endeavour: 90,000 homes spread out over hundreds of kilometres is no easy task. And so *The Block* decided to delegate that task to others. *The Block* was circulated through local community newspapers; this method was chosen mainly for its cost. Insertion into local papers was the cheapest method of controlled circulation that the magazine could

utilize. In the Lower Mainland there are two major publishers of community newspapers: the Black Press, and VanNet. Black Press publishes 17 newspapers in the Lower Mainland, including the *Peace Arch News*, the *Tri-City News*, the *Surrey Leader*, the *North Shore Outlook*, and the *Westender*. (Black Press, 2007). VanNet publishes 12 newspapers in the Lower Mainland, including the *Coquitlam Now*, the *Surrey Now*, the *North Shore News*, and the *Vancouver Courier* (VN, 2007).

Originally, when *The Block* only had one edition (Surrey), *The Block* wanted to use the Black Press papers as their circulation vehicle. Black Press was reluctant to circulate *The Block* within the *Surrey Now*, since they saw the two magazines as directly competing for the same local advertisers. They remained unconvinced, and ultimately refused to work with *The Block*. *The Block* then negotiated a deal to use the VanNet papers as their circulation vehicle. At first, they used the *Surrey Now* and *North Shore News*. After *The Block* launched other regional editions and expanded to other territories, it was also distributed in the *Coquitlam Now* and the *Vancouver Courier*. Delivery in VanNet papers cost *The Block* 10 cents per copy.

The arrangement with VanNet wasn't ideal for *The Block*. The magazine was inserted inside the newspaper, meaning that if the household recycled the newspaper without opening it, they might not even know there was a magazine inside. An additional problem was the carriers themselves. VanNet employed carriers who were quite young; *The Block* fielded several telephone calls from the parents of paper-carriers who were delivering the magazine. Anecdotally, the

parents informed the circulation manager that their children were paid half a cent for each magazine they delivered, meaning that the incentive to get the paper to the door wasn't a strong one. Suspecting that the magazines may not be reaching the customers' doors, one of the magazine's sales representatives visited a local recycling depot, and found piles of the magazine that had been dumped. *The Block* complained to VanNet, but in the end, there was no way to guarantee that the magazines were actually arriving at their destinations.

Hoping to improve circulation, in April of 2007 *The Block's* circulation manager went back to Black Press to attempt to renegotiate. Since the distribution deal was much larger than the one that had originally been proposed, and would thus bring in much more revenue, Black Press was willing to set aside their worry about *The Block* as an advertising competitor. *The Block* had to compromise a little in the agreement, as well. Because of competition between different networks of community newspapers, frequently one paper is seen as the "dominant" paper, while another is seen as the "weaker" paper. For VanNet, the *North Shore News* was the dominant paper for the North Shore. However, the *Surrey Now* was the weaker paper in Surrey. Thus, inclusion in the more dominant paper in the North Shore was sacrificed for inclusion in the dominant paper in Surrey, and for a bigger circulation deal.

The Block's April issue was the first one to be distributed with the Black Press, in the *Tri-City News*, the *North Shore Outlook*, and both the *Peach Arch News* and *Surrey/North Delta Leader*. The only exception was the Vancouver edition, which as of April 2007 was still distributed with the *Vancouver Courier*,

a VanNet paper. In Vancouver, Black Press's only paper is the *Westender*, an alternative weekly. The *Westender* wouldn't have been a good fit for *The Block* in terms of distribution method (it is available in metal drop-boxes throughout the city), content (entertainment and lifestyle with an alternative slant), and demographics, so the magazine remained with the *Courier*.

The Block found many advantages in its new relationship with Black Press. First of all, Black Press offered *The Block* a cheaper rate, 7.5 cents per copy for delivery. Second, it claimed to have older carriers; *The Block* could not verify that, of course. Third, each Black Press paper had a list at the front of the paper detailing what inserts were found inside, prompting more accountability for carriers to actually deliver the inserts. Fourth, the Black Press delivered the magazines straight to the carriers, while VanNet required carriers to pick up magazines from a collection point. Since Black Press took more responsibility for making sure the carriers actually had the magazine ready for delivery, *The Block* felt it was more likely that the magazines would make it to readers. Fifth, and perhaps most important, the Black Press placed the magazine on top of the paper, rather than inside. This visibility made a world of difference, since readers were immediately aware upon picking up the newspaper that the magazine was paired with it.

However, this change by no means solved *The Block's* problems. Despite Black Press's assurances, there was no guarantee that carriers were delivering the paper, or that readers were not just simply throwing it out with the paper. Additionally, *The Block* would continue to be associated with these community

papers, appearing side-by-side with flyers for grocery stores. This hardly served to make *The Block* appear like a high-quality read. Nonetheless, *The Block's* publisher was unwilling to budge. Community papers were still the cheapest way to get the magazine to affluent suburban homes. It also spared *The Block* from having to painstakingly define its own circulation areas, or pinpoint its own demographic research.

When it came to demographics, *The Block* was able to use the data gathered by VanNet, and then the Black Press. Demographics were considered, and then specific regions within the newspapers' circulation areas were chosen. The primary criterion when choosing homes, as with most controlled-circulation magazines, was income. The secondary criterion was coverage: *The Block* liked to ensure some kind of spread throughout a geographic area, and would occasionally "sacrifice" a little in terms of average income in order to reach more areas. In general, however, *The Block* target household income hovered between \$90,000 and \$120,000, over all areas.

The vast majority of *The Block's* circulation was through these community newspapers, though there were some additional drop spots; for example, a number of copies of *The Block* were left at clubs such as The Arbutus Club, the Vancouver Lawn and Tennis Club, and Choices and Capers stores. Also, *The Block* did offer subscriptions. Originally, subscriptions sold for \$12/year; this was raised to \$15/year in 2007. However, the number of subscriptions *The Block* actually sold was almost negligible in comparison to the total circulation; the number of subscriptions across all editions, in April 2007, was 37. The circulation

manager did not actively solicit subscriptions, since the magazine lost money on them: it cost \$1.86 to mail each copy, plus the physical cost of the magazine and staff time administer the subscriptions. That said, not many requests were made for subscriptions, which is not surprising, considering that the magazine arrives free at many people's homes.

If *The Block* used Publications Mail, the cost of mailing each magazine would not be nearly as high. However, *The Block's* experiments with Publications Mail proved unsuccessful. In the summer of 2006, *The Block* qualified for NDG sort pricing on mail. Thus, all complimentary copies of the magazine, subscriptions, and copies mailed for other reasons — a few hundred magazines in all — were to be sorted by postal code in-office. This would bring the cost of mailing down to about 75 cents per magazine. But the magazine staff found the sorting instructions confusing. A 44-page document (Canada Post, 2007) outlines how to sort by NDG, with a detailed list of steps that must be followed, or mail is rejected. In short, with the aid of a sorting manual, the magazines must be sorted by postal code, in a way that is not entirely intuitive. Then, the magazines are grouped based on which area they are sent to. Several pages in the manual explain how to group the magazines, and how many magazines are permitted to be in each bundle. *The Block* often found that, based on sorting instructions, there were not enough magazines in each bundle. Next, the magazines were bundled with elastic bands, in the proper order of postal codes. Then, large plastic mailing containers had to be labelled with the appropriate postal facility, based on the largely misunderstood postal code sorting — one mistake here, and an entire container of magazines could be sent to the wrong sorting facility.

Finally, the magazines were placed in the containers, as staff crossed their fingers that they hadn't made any mistakes throughout this process, lest the entire mailing procedure go awry.

In general, *The Block* found the NDG pre-sort to be extraordinarily time consuming and more than a bit perplexing. The circulation manager, who was also responsible for administration, marketing, and ad traffic, had to handle most of the job herself, with a little help from the editorial assistant. The circulation manager ended up spending many hours on the telephone with Canada Post trying to sort things out, and many hours in-office trying to organize and prepare the magazines to Canada Post specifications. In the end, the circulation manager realized that all the extra time she was billing was not worth the savings the magazine was making on mailing, and *The Block* dropped its agreement with Canada Post. In a magazine with more staff, or staff with a lot of sorting experience, sorting mail might have been a more reasonable idea. But for *The Block*, it was more hindrance than help.

Considering all the problems with circulation, it is curious that *The Block* continued to be distributed by the community papers. Circulation is an extremely important aspect of magazine publishing, and *The Block* likely suffered from choosing the most cost-effective way of reaching homes, as opposed to putting more effort into insuring that the magazine was getting to its destinations. After all, if circulation goes awry, then there is no real audience. If an audience cannot be guaranteed, advertisers will not be eager to purchase space in the magazine. And if advertisers won't buy in, a magazine will not be able to survive.

2. Vancouver Edition

After all of the emphasis on *The Block* being a magazine targeted towards the suburbs, in February 2007, the magazine made the choice to launch the fourth edition of *The Block* in Vancouver. This choice was motivated by the publisher's desire to expand the magazine to another territory, and also by *The Block's* desire to gain more exposure. Right off the mark, this may have seemed, to some, like a thematic left-turn given that *The Block* had identified itself as the voice of the suburbs. But for many of the staff members, Vancouver was their home market; covering this area was a more attractive prospect, and so they urged the publisher to consider expanding to this market. Also, one of the ironies of *The Block's* original suburban circulation was that it was nearly invisible to most people working in the magazine industry, in advertising, and in PR, most of whom are centred in the city. Additionally, many of the larger advertisers informed the magazine that, though the suburban market was attractive, they also wished to be able to access Vancouver readers — and if that was the key to getting more advertisers, *The Block* was willing to do it. So it was that a suburban city magazine also gained a big-city edition.

The Block Vancouver chose the same circulation pattern as most of the other city magazines: affluent areas in the western half of the city, as well as affluent pockets of the downtown. As such, *The Block* Vancouver pitted itself directly against all those magazines it had originally avoided competing with by circulating in the suburbs. Suddenly, *Vancouver* magazine, *VLM*, and *Vancouver View* covered the exact same territory. *The Block* held out hope that the uniqueness of its content, as well as the multi-edition advertising options, would

keep it competitive in an already-crowded market. *The Block* thought itself different — it was a little more about lifestyle than *Vancouver* magazine, and certainly avoided the type of serious journalism found in *Vancouver*'s pages. At meetings of the team putting together the Vancouver edition, staff decided that one factor by which they should judge a story idea was whether it could envision something similar in *Vancouver*. If the answer was “yes,” that story idea was probably not a good one for *The Block*.

As has been illustrated in the Suburbs section, the demographic differences between the suburbs and the city are not as dramatic as people tend to think; however, they do exist, and they do have some significance. Most important, perhaps, is the lifestyle espoused by suburbanites in comparison to city-dwellers. Suburbanites have an interest in activities that take advantage of their comparative wealth of space, while urbanites take advantage of the myriad of culture and services at their doorsteps. While both markets are ripe for the picking and a good target for advertising, they have different lives that require different editorial content.

The mix-and-match aspect of *The Block*'s editorial made it relatively easy to slip in city-centred copy. However, most of the central content was still being generated for the suburbs. With the addition of *The Block* Vancouver, some compromises had to be made with the central content. It became a little more urban and a bit more sophisticated — but not too much so, since suburban readers still expected the content to be generated for them. The slightly more sophisticated tone of the central content meant that the regional editors also had

to up the ante; this worked better for some editions than others. Some editions, the Tri-Cities in particular (where people's lifestyles include a lot more outdoor and rugged activities than in Vancouver) were left with a bit of a schism between regional and core content, but there was little that could be done. Some of this was mediated by the art director; at the very least, the magazine could look cohesive, even if it didn't always read that way.

On the whole, however, the Vancouver issue read different from the other issues. It was a little more urban, obviously, and took more chances with content. Whether its presence in the stable of *Block* magazines proves too dissonant with the collective magazine identity is a question to be answered in the future; in the meantime, *The Block* remains a magazine with many identities.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

1. *The Block* after April 2007: Success, Failure, and Change

The first year of operations for *The Block* was rocky. The magazine experienced changes in editorial focus, a number of staff changes, difficulties in acquiring advertisers, and difficulties in reaching its readers. Despite all this, the magazine continued to survive. In some ways, it thrived. *The Block* was visibly more and more sophisticated with each issue. Covers acquired a signature look, with a stylized home scenario artfully arranged; section headers were standardized; and the writing became more diverse, and came from more high-profile people, including writers from the *Georgia Straight*. In recognition of its achievements, *The Block* was nominated for two Western Magazine Awards: Best Photograph—Architectural, Landscape or Still Life; and Best Art Direction—Cover. *The Block* took home the prize for the former. *The Block's* team was buoyed by their successes in creative content, but it was obvious that in order to stay afloat, certain operational elements would need to be adjusted. After April 2007, many major changes were undertaken at *The Block*, the results of many of which are still unclear. A brief discussion of these follows.

The major event that precipitated change at *The Block* was the July 2007 departure of then-publisher Dean Pothitos. With him went his firm ideas on how the magazine should be run. The rest of *The Block* team, including the new publisher, Evan Ho, were left to make whatever adjustments they saw as

necessary for the survival of the magazine. Many aspects of *The Block* were successful. However, the magazine was still coming to terms with its many editions, trying to make itself more visible to the community, and trying to become financially viable.

a) Editorial

Some of the first changes came to the editorial part of the magazine. There had been a feeling ever since its launch that the Vancouver edition of the magazine was significantly different in character from all the other editions. With that in mind, the team decided to take the Vancouver edition in a slightly different direction. The audience was re-visioned as somewhat younger; instead of mid-50s homeowners, they were now upwardly mobile 30-to-40-somethings living in the city, with an interest in lifestyle and design. This complemented both the PSYTE profile for Vancouver's large population groups (like the young, hip, and financially free Sushi and Shiraz crowd) and the character of *The Block's* editorial team (with the exception of editor Jim Tobler, all members of the editorial and art departments were in their late 20s to mid-30s).

With this new audience in mind, the staff were free to develop editorial with a fresher tone, and to take more risks. The calendar was eliminated (it was seen as too stodgy and clichéd) and more space was given to the travel feature. Most sections were retained, but some, such as What's In Store/Block Watch were revised. These two sections were merged into one, with the aim to highlight

only the most interesting and relevant shopping and city hot spots, with more space for imagery.

b) Production

In April, prior to his departure, Pothitos decided that in order to cut costs, it was necessary to sacrifice a little in terms of paper stock. Thus, all editions of the magazine were changed from 80-lb to a 70-lb cover stock, with a 43.3-lb inside stock. This was certainly cheaper; however, once Ho took over the reins, he worried that in the Vancouver market, this reduction in paper weight would make *The Block* seem like a less serious competitor.

So, again, the Vancouver edition of the magazine was singled out for changes in production. It was printed on a higher-bulk paper — 80-lb, with a 70-lb interior — in order to stand out as a quality publication next to the competition. However, in the suburban editions, where there was little magazine competition, the lower paper weight was maintained.

Changes to printing were also considered. As opposed to scattering the regional editorial throughout the magazine, *The Block* could place it all in one signature, thus simplifying the printing process. Then all of the central content could be printed at one time and dropped into the appropriate place in each edition. The motivation for this idea, above all else, was cost. As of September 2007, no decision has been made on whether *The Block* will pursue this course of action.

c) Marketing

In its first year of operation, *The Block* had little to no marketing budget. The staff joked about it being a “secret” magazine, and people outside of the magazine remained oblivious to *The Block’s* existence. However, the new publisher placed a priority on marketing, and hired a new staff member to work exclusively on marketing (rather than multitasking with administrative and circulation duties, as the previous marketing manager had to do). Immediately, *The Block* took on a sponsorship position at Portobello West Market, a monthly fashion market in Vancouver. Other, similar plans are, as of September 2007, in the works to increase exposure of the magazine.

d) Circulation

The primary problem with *The Block’s* circulation, when inserted into community papers, had always been that there was no guarantee that people would even know they were receiving the magazine. Countless magazines must have ended up in people’s recycling bins without them being aware of its existence. Additionally, advertising representatives tried to sell ad space to local business based on the fact that *Block* readers were not the same people as community newspaper readers — a logical fallacy, when the magazine was distributed in community papers. Therefore, the new publisher scrapped this method of circulation. From September 2007 on, *The Block* was delivered

directly to people's homes by Canada Post. This method is slightly more expensive than newspaper insertion, but it can assure advertisers that a viable audience is actually receiving and reading the magazine. And, for *The Block* itself, it increases confidence that the hard work of the editorial and art teams is actually being appreciated by readers. To accomplish this, *The Block* initially chose to outsource circulation to Datex; however, as of September 2007, *The Block* has re-applied for its Publications Agreement status with Canada Post, and in future, *The Block* plans to handle all the circulation by itself, initially relying on inside staff to sort the mail. Hopefully, the staff has learned from previous attempts at the NDG sort, and will be able to make the next attempt successful.

The Block also began recruiting subscribers, something it had previously avoided doing. This subscriber drive was closely tied to the marketing campaign; at events like Portobello West (a monthly marketplace in Vancouver featuring local fashion designers), *The Block* set up a booth to attract potential subscribers. An email campaign was also initiated. With the low cost of subscriptions, *The Block* hopes to acquire a bigger subscriber base — which is likely, considering how small it was in the past.

Finally, the total number of homes reached by controlled circulation was reduced, both to mitigate costs and because of the aim to increase subscribers. In Vancouver, controlled circulation was reduced from 30,000 to 25,000, and in all of the other regions, controlled circulation was reduced from 20,000 to 15,000.

e) Advertising

In an effort to acquire more advertisers (and to reflect the changes in circulation), advertising rates were changed. The full-page 4-colour rate for the Vancouver edition was lowered to \$2625 from \$2795, while the full-page 4-colour rate for all other editions was reduced to \$1695 from \$2150.

The timing of all these changes is favourable. The change in circulation and the new marketing ventures make the magazine far more visible than it previously was, exposing it to a much larger readership. Thus, to many people (if not most people), the changes in editorial will not be obvious: this is their first look at the magazine, so they will assume it has always been targeted at young, hip design aficionados. Additionally, it is hopeful that the combination of marketing, circulation changes, and lower rates will woo advertisers.

2. The Future

Since its first issue, *The Block* has had to make many adaptations to a suburban market unaccustomed to controlled-circulation magazines; at the same time, the magazine has struggled to define itself and maintain a coherent identity. During that time, it has come up against a number of problems and opportunities that will help to determine its future success.

The most obvious thing *The Block* lacks is advertisers. It is paramount to *The Block's* survival that more advertisers choose *The Block* and stay with *The Block*, so that the magazine can move towards profitability. Recent, favourable

changes put in place as of September 2007 make this more likely. First, low ad rates make *The Block* more competitive than ever. Second, new management is making major efforts to encourage and retain advertising representatives in the different territories; this renewed sense of camaraderie and loyalty can bring *The Block* a more seasoned and enthusiastic advertising staff. Third, and perhaps most important, are the changes in circulation. Since *The Block* is now delivered directly to homes via Canada Post, there are no more worries about readers receiving the magazine; potential advertisers can be sure of *The Block's* ability to make its way into the hands of customers.

In September 2007, the success of the multi-edition format of the magazine is still unclear, particularly when it comes to the Vancouver edition. The staff at *The Block* has come to see the Vancouver edition as an entirely different beast from the suburban *Blocks*. Recent changes have *The Block* Vancouver on different paper stock, and featuring somewhat different layouts in the Block Watch section. Features are even different; since *The Block* Vancouver has less of an obligation to provide community focus (Vancouver readers are, after all, inundated with other magazines doing exactly that), features for Vancouver are leaning more towards art, design, and lifestyle themes that aren't specifically tied to the community. All of this, of course, raises the question: is this the same magazine? Should the Vancouver edition even be called *The Block*? Having a Vancouver edition has certainly raised the profile of *The Block*, but it hasn't made it any more profitable. The Vancouver edition, with so much competition, lags behind the others in advertising. While the Vancouver edition is the editors' darling — after all, it reflects the lifestyle of many of the core staff —

its future seems more uncertain than the other editions. If advertising does not take off, one possible fate for the Vancouver edition would be to break away from the others (breaking ties, thematically, would give staff the freedom to do whatever the magazine needs to succeed in the Vancouver market). In another possible scenario, *The Block* could throw away all its regional monikers and simply target a magazine to the suburbs — all of them. Advertising would no longer be sprinkled between four different editions, but would all appear in one magazine. However, in doing such a thing, *The Block* would lose its highly focused community outlook. That would likely be a mistake: *The Block* has prided itself on understanding that suburbanites are attached to their suburbs — their specific suburbs. Just as a reader in Vancouver wouldn't want a magazine catering to West Coast cities "in general," a general suburban magazine might not be popular. Which introduces another idea: *The Block* could drop its regional ties entirely, and follow the lead of the Vancouver edition in becoming a cutting-edge design and lifestyle magazine.

One thing is clear, late in 2007: a decision needs to be made about what direction *The Block* will take; a decision that clearly defines *The Block* in its market, creates consistency within the magazine and between editions, and makes the magazine more sellable. *The Block* has a lot of talent, and a lot of potential. It was created as a suburban magazine, and has since spread to the city. Over time, its content has become obviously more sophisticated. It has received accolades, both from readers and from magazine associations. But, as with all magazines, *The Block* has two audiences: readers and advertisers. *The Block's*

future depends on whether it can please advertisers without alienating readers,
and vice versa.

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