

500

AN OPERATOR'S PLAYBOOK · EDITION 01

The Substack

First-500

Playbook

A 30-day execution guide for established creators who want their publication to actually function.

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OPERATOR-GRADE SUBSTACK OPS

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Six sections. Thirty days. One working publication.

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BEFORE YOU READ ANOTHER WORD

If your publication isn't moving, *a 30-minute call beats the next 25 pages.*

Most of the established creators reading this came to Substack because their book sales, course launches, or speaking fees needed a content engine that actually compounded. They got a vacant storefront instead.

If that's you, the fastest path to fixing it isn't another playbook. It's a conversation with an operator who's already run this exact problem to ground for clients like you.

We'll audit your publication, diagnose exactly what's costing you subscribers and revenue, and map a 90-day path to the business outcomes you wanted Substack to drive in the first place. No pitch. No pressure. An operator-grade diagnosis of where your publication is leaking growth.

[Claim your free 30-minute consultation →](#)

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PREFACE

Somebody has been telling you to start a Substack for the better part of a year.

Probably longer. You may have already started one. You may have started one twice. You may be sitting at 73 subscribers wondering why a platform that's apparently the future of independent media is treating your publication like a vacant storefront.

This document is for you. Specifically, it's for the version of you that has built credibility somewhere else — a book, a podcast, a LinkedIn audience, a coaching practice — and now wants the Substack arm of that work to actually function. Not at some future date when you "have time." Now.

What you'll have by the end: a working understanding of how Substack actually surfaces work (so you stop publishing into a void), a 7-day Notes rhythm you can start running tomorrow (so engagement compounds instead of dying), a 30-day publishing and outreach plan (so the publication has shape by Day 30), an architecture for the welcome email that actually converts, and a realistic picture of what running all of this actually costs.

None of this is theoretical. These are the systems that move publications from invisible to indispensable, and they're what stands between you and the business outcomes you came to Substack for in the first place.

A note on register. This is operator-to-operator. You don't need basic email-marketing definitions, and I'm not going to insult you with them. You also don't need to be flattered. You need a clear map and the discipline to walk it. The map is in the next 25 pages. The discipline is on you.

Let's begin.

SECTION ONE

01

The Substack Discovery Mechanic

Most established creators assume publishing is the primary growth lever. It isn't. Four surfaces drive discovery on this platform, and three of them have nothing to do with whether you publish today's post.

1.1 · THE FOUR SURFACES

Publishing is the floor of the system, not the engine.

Substack has four distinct discovery surfaces. The mistake most new operators make is treating them as roughly equal and dividing attention proportionally. They aren't equal. In the first 30 days, the priority stack is direct subscriptions and recommendations first, Notes second, search a distant fourth.

01 The Notes feed

Substack's in-app discovery surface. Looks like a social stream; behaves like a discovery engine. Where most new operators waste the first month posting "new piece up!" announcements that nobody clicks and nobody restacks.

02 Recommendations

When another publication recommends yours, you appear in their subscriber-confirmation flow. The single most effective trust-transfer mechanism on the platform — and the surface that compounds most aggressively in the first 500.

03 Search

Substack posts rank in Google and surface in internal search. A slow lever — pays off in months, not weeks. Thirty strong posts with clean SEO hygiene start pulling traffic that requires zero ongoing effort to maintain.

04 Direct subscriptions

People who already know you. The most predictable surface but the most quickly exhausted. The audience you brought with you — not the audience you're going to grow into.

The discovery work is not the publication. The discovery work is everything that happens around the publication.

1.2 · HOW THE NOTES ALGORITHM ACTUALLY WORKS

Notes is not Twitter, even though the surface looks similar.

Twitter rewards engagement velocity — likes and retweets accumulating fast in the first 30 minutes. Substack's Notes algorithm rewards a different signal: **restack-to-view ratio, with a long tail**. A Note that gets 50 restacks over three days will outperform a Note that gets 100 likes in three hours. The platform appears to weight restacks heavily because a restack is a stronger signal of value than a like. Somebody chose to put it in front of their own audience.

Comments on Notes function differently than on Twitter as well. On Twitter, replies often dilute reach. On Substack, a reply from somebody with their own subscriber base creates a small visibility lift, especially if that reply itself gets engagement. This is why the "first comment on your own Note" principle (covered in Section 2) is more useful here than it would be on other platforms.

What does *not* meaningfully drive Notes distribution: post count alone, follower count of the author, time of day in any narrow sense, hashtags. Posting 12 Notes in a day with weak content will reduce your reach, not expand it. The platform is patient with quality and impatient with volume.

The three distribution signals, ranked

<p>STRONG</p> <p>Restacks</p> <p>A reader chose to amplify you to their audience. The signal that compounds.</p>	<p>MODERATE</p> <p>Comments</p> <p>Threaded discussion especially. Engagement that signals depth, not bait.</p>	<p>WEAK</p> <p>Likes</p> <p>Noise the platform tolerates but doesn't reward heavily. Don't optimize here.</p>
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A Note that ends with "what do you think?" is fishing for likes. A Note that contains a sharp, restackable line is fishing for distribution. The second one is what compounds.

1.3 · WHY THE FIRST 500 ARE THE HARDEST

Why "publish and wait" is the slowest possible path.

A common pattern: established creator launches Substack, publishes one post per week, expects audience growth to follow because their podcast, LinkedIn, or book audience is "supposed to come over." Most of them don't. Some do. Not enough to matter.

The act of publishing produces an email and a post page. The email goes to your existing list (which, on day one, is small). The post page sits in the archive. Neither of these triggers any meaningful in-app discovery on Substack. If you're not creating Notes or building recommendation relationships, the only people who see your post are the people who already subscribe — the audience you're trying to grow.

The compounding effect of the first 500

Every subscriber under 500 contributes disproportionately to four things: the publication's perceived legitimacy, the operator's confidence calibration, the algorithm's signal density, and the ratio of paid-to-free conversion (if and when you turn that on).

At 500 free subscribers, the publication has enough mass that recommendation outreach starts converting at higher rates, Notes activity has enough engagement floor to remain visible, and you have enough data to know what's working.

< 500**Fragile**

A single recommendation from a 5,000-subscriber peer can change your trajectory. The leverage of small actions is at its highest in this window.

> 500**Stable**

Growth becomes more predictable, but per-action leverage decreases. The publication is less dependent on any single tactic — and the next 500 will require more inputs than the first.

The implication: don't spread effort thin in the first 30 days hoping for slow steady growth. Compress it. Front-load the recommendation outreach, the Notes activity, the welcome email work. Get to the point where the system has enough density to compound.

DIAGNOSTIC · 30+ DAYS, UNDER 100 SUBSCRIBERS

Read these without flinching.

If you've been publishing for 30 days and have fewer than 100 subscribers, the cause is almost always one of the four patterns below. In our intake calls we typically find two or three of them firing at once. Tick the box if it applies to you.

 FAILURE PATTERN 01

You're publishing into a vacuum.

No Notes activity, no recommendation outreach, no external promotion. The post goes out, the existing list gets the email, that's the entire distribution. The most common failure pattern by a wide margin. The fix is operational, not editorial. You're not failing because the writing is weak.

 FAILURE PATTERN 02

Your positioning is unclear.

Visit your About page. Can a stranger, in 15 seconds, articulate what your publication is about and who it's for? If not, you have a positioning problem masquerading as a growth problem. Fixing it won't suddenly produce subscribers — but it will dramatically improve the conversion rate of any visibility you do create.

 FAILURE PATTERN 03

Your homepage doesn't earn the second click.

A reader finishes a post, returns to the homepage to see what else is here. What do they find? An undifferentiated archive, no start-here pathway, no sense of what this is. Most subscribe-from-homepage events happen on the second or third click, not the first.

 FAILURE PATTERN 04

You're posting Notes nobody can use.

"New piece up, would love your support!" isn't a Note. It's an announcement. It produces no restacks, no discoverable comments, no lift. If your Notes feed is mostly announcements, you have what looks like an activity problem but is actually a signal problem.

RECOGNISED TWO OR THREE OF THESE?

The fit call is exactly this diagnosis, run on your actual publication.

Bring your URL. We'll go through it together — failure pattern by failure pattern — and map the fix.

[Book your 30-minute diagnosis →](#)

SECTION TWO

02

The Notes 7-Day Starter Rhythm

Notes is the surface most creators use worst. Its job is not social media activity — it's to create more entry points to your work. Five categories, one week, a rhythm you can run tomorrow.

2.1 · THE FIVE CATEGORIES

The Notes that compound, the ones that don't.

There are many ways to slice Notes content. These five produce the most consistent results in early-stage publications. Each example is real shape, not generic copy — find the closest niche to yours.

No. 01

Hooks

A short, sharp claim that creates immediate tension. The reader either agrees and amplifies, or disagrees and argues. Either response produces engagement.

BUSINESS *"Most B2B brands aren't 'positioning differently' from their competitors. They're using the same five adjectives in a different order."*

WRITING *"If your draft sounds like ChatGPT after one revision, your problem isn't the AI. It's that your unedited writing already sounded like that."*

PARENTING *"Boredom is not a problem to be solved. It's the precondition for every interesting thing your child has ever made."*

No. 02

Observations

Names something the reader has noticed but hasn't articulated. The pleasure is recognition, not provocation. High restack rates — they let the reader say "yes, exactly" to their own audience.

BUSINESS *"The phrase 'circle back' is most often deployed when the speaker has no intention of circling back."*

WRITING *"A book is finished when the writer has run out of money or the writer has run out of patience. Rarely both at the same time."*

No. 03

Questions

Not a fishing-for-engagement question. A question that surfaces something the reader has been thinking about but hasn't put into words. The bar is high. Most "questions" on Notes are weak attempts at engagement bait.

BUSINESS *"What's the meeting in your week that, if it disappeared, would meaningfully change your output?"*

WRITING *"What's the one piece of writing advice you've been given that you've quietly stopped following?"*

2.1 · THE FIVE CATEGORIES (CONTINUED)

No. 04

Micro-essays

A Note with a complete arc — setup, tension, conclusion — in 200–400 words. Harder to write, but converts better than the other four for one reason: it demonstrates the kind of thinking the reader will get if they subscribe. A strong Micro-essay is a Substack publication's best advertisement for itself.

STRUCTURE *Contrarian observation about a common rule → 100 words showing where it breaks → 100 words offering the better frame → closing sentence that reframes the whole question.*

No. 05

Amplifications

A quote-restack of someone else's Note where you add a sharp, useful layer. The lowest-effort category to produce, but the highest-skill in terms of judgment. Most amplifications are weak because the commentary is "great point!" or "this." A strong amplification adds tension or extension — "This is true, AND here's where it breaks." The most underused Note type by new creators.

The engagement-before-publication principle

Spend 30–45 minutes engaging with other creators' work *before* you post your own Note for the day. Reply to 10–15 Notes per day. Restack 3–5. Don't comment on every Note you see — comment on the ones where you have something genuine to add. "Great point" produces nothing. A specific, useful, or sharp comment produces follow-throughs.

The first-comment principle

When you post a Note, the first comment is real estate you control. Use it. Wait 5–15 minutes (so it doesn't look pre-written), then post a comment that extends the idea — a follow-up, counterpoint, or related observation. This doubles the surface area of your Note's discoverability and gives readers more reason to engage.

If you do nothing else from this section, treat the Amplification as a daily move. The original author already did the heavy lifting.

2.2 · THE 7-DAY STARTER SCHEDULE

Designed to be executed without further interpretation.

Aggressive on volume by design — to build a baseline of activity and surface what works for your voice. Weeks 2–4 settle into a more sustainable pattern. Screenshot this page.

DAY	DAY	DAY	DAY	DAY	DAY	DAY
01	02	03	04	05	06	07
HOOK	OBS + AMP	MICRO-ESSAY	HOOK + Q	OBS + AMP	ENGAGE ONLY	MICRO-ESSAY
Sharpest claim you can make in your niche. Post in the morning slot (6:45–8:15 AM ET).	Observation in the morning.	The hardest Note of the week.	One Hook in the morning.	Same structure as Day 2.	No Notes today.	Like Day 3 but on a different angle.
30 min engaging with peers' Notes after posting.	Amplification in the afternoon, on a peer-tier creator's Note.	Spend 30 min drafting it. Post in the morning slot.	One Question — only if it has teeth. If not, post a second Hook instead.	Different content. Different creator for the amplification.	45 min on the Notes feed engaging with peer and aspirational creators.	Use the week's signal — which Notes earned most engagement — to inform the topic.
Add one extension comment to your own Note within 15 min.	Choose a Note you can genuinely extend — not one you'd just agree with.	No second Note today. Let it carry the day's signal.			Restack 5–7 Notes that genuinely deserve amplification.	

REACH WINDOWS · ET

06:45 – 08:15
11:30 – 13:00
19:30 – 21:30

DAILY TARGET

2–3 Notes /day
(Below 2: insufficient surface area.
Above 3: volume over signal.)

AVOID

All Notes in a single batch.
They compete with each other for the same impressions.

FEELING TIRED READING THAT?

This is exactly the kind of work an operator absorbs first.

See if a 30-minute fit call makes sense →

SECTION THREE

03

The Recommendation Engine

If you do nothing else from this playbook, do recommendations. The single highest-leverage growth lever available to a new publication — and almost no new operators run it properly.

3.1 · THE MECHANIC

Why recommendations convert at multiples higher than any other channel.

When someone recommends your publication, your title, description, and a small image appear in their subscriber-onboarding flow — the screen a new subscriber sees right after they confirm a subscription to the recommending publication. Most subscribers add at least one or two recommended publications during this flow. Some add five or more.

The audience is already in subscribe-mode. They've just demonstrated active willingness to subscribe to a Substack. The friction of subscribing to your publication, in that moment, is roughly two clicks. Compare that to a Notes-feed cold reader, who has to find your Note, click through to your publication, decide to subscribe, and complete the subscription flow.

How to identify the right publications

01 Audience overlap

Not "is in the same general space." *Actually plausibly cares.* Fastest assessment: read three of the publication's recent posts and three comments on each. If you can imagine those commenters subscribing to your publication, the overlap is real.

02 Size match

Target publications that are 1.5× – 5× your current subscriber count. Smaller produces little volume. Larger is unlikely to reciprocate at your stage — the trade is too lopsided for them.

03 Content adjacency, not identity

You want publications whose readers would benefit from also reading you. The strongest recommendation networks are built on adjacency — publications in the same neighbourhood without being on the same block.

If you do nothing else from this playbook, do recommendations.

3.2 · THE OUTREACH TEMPLATES

Three emails. 25–40% conversion when voice-matched.

Tested in Postby outreach. Conversion runs 5–10% when sent generically – which is why generic templated outreach is worse than no outreach at all. Read each recipient's recent posts. Reference them specifically.

01 / 03 · INITIAL OUTREACH	DAY 0
<p>SUBJECT Quick note from a fellow [niche] writer</p> <p>TO [Name] · [Publication Name]</p> <hr/> <p>Hey [Name],</p> <p>I've been reading [Publication Name] for a few weeks now. Your piece on [specific post title] genuinely shifted how I'm thinking about [specific concept from the post]. The way you framed [specific argument] is something I've been circling around in my own work without naming it as cleanly as you did.</p> <p>I run [Your Publication Name], where I write about [one-sentence positioning that connects to their work]. Different angle, similar reader. I think there's real audience overlap.</p> <p>Would you be open to a recommendation exchange? I'd add [Publication Name] to my recommendations this week if you're up for adding mine when it makes sense for you. No pressure either way.</p> <p>[Your name]</p>	
02 / 03 · FOLLOW-UP	DAY 5 · NO REPLY
<p>SUBJECT Re: Quick note from a fellow [niche] writer</p> <hr/> <p>Hey [Name],</p> <p>Just bumping this up in case it slipped past. No urgency at all. I know inboxes are a problem. Whenever you've got a moment.</p> <p>[Your name]</p>	
03 / 03 · CONFIRMATION	WITHIN 24H OF "YES"
<p>SUBJECT Re: Quick note from a fellow [niche] writer</p> <hr/> <p>Thanks [Name], appreciate it. I've added [Publication Name] to my recommendations. You should see it on your end shortly.</p> <p>Quick note on the blurb I'm using: "[Your blurb here, 1-2 sentences, written specifically about their publication, not generic]."</p> <p>If anything in there doesn't feel right, just let me know and I'll adjust. Looking forward to seeing what your readers find on my end.</p> <p>[Your name]</p>	

3.3 · THE MATH & THE 30-DAY PLAN

How to reciprocate without diluting

A working cap: **8–15 recommendations**, refreshed quarterly. At 8–15, each gets visible placement and meaningful subscriber flow. Above 15, the marginal recommendation produces fewer subscribers and dilutes your curation signal. Keep recommendations to publications you'd genuinely tell a friend to read.

The math of recommendation networks

PEER · 1x–3x**0.5–2%**

of their new subscribers will subscribe to you via the recommendation flow.

LARGER · 3x–10x**1–3%**

of their new subscribers — and much higher absolute volume.

WHALE · 10x+**Rare**

Hard to obtain at this stage but produces substantial flow when it does.

The 30-day recommendation outreach plan

TARGET LIST

30–40 publications in your size and adjacency range.

FOLLOW-UP CADENCE

One follow-up at Day 5. No second follow-up. Move on.

DAILY VOLUME

3–5 personalized emails per weekday. Above 5, the outreach goes templated.

REALISTIC 30-DAY OUTCOME

Of 40 emails: 8–15 acceptances, 5–10 declines, 15–25 non-responses. Acceptances produce 30–100 new subscribers in their first live month.

**COMPANION DOWNLOAD**

The Recommendation Outreach Email Templates · .docx

FORTY PERSONALIZED EMAILS PER MONTH IS REAL WORK.

It's the part of the playbook most operators offload first.

Have an operator run the outreach →

SECTION FOUR

04

The First-30-Days Posting Cadence

*The first month builds the backbone. Eight posts.
Four corners. A publication that, by Day 30, a first-
time visitor can read three of and immediately know
what it's for.*

4.1 · THE FOUR POST TYPES EVERY NEW PUBLICATION NEEDS

A reader on Day 30 should hit four corners.

If a stranger lands on your homepage and finds three posts that all read like "thoughts on [topic]," they don't know what your publication is for. If they find a flagship essay, a manifesto, a tactical resource, and a personal POV piece, they have a four-corner understanding of your work — and a much higher likelihood of subscribing.

NO. 01 · CORNERSTONE ESSAY

The piece you'd link if a stranger asked.

1,800–2,500 words · Definitive · Linkable

Open with a sharp framing of an under-articulated problem. First third builds tension. Middle introduces a resolving frame. Final third applies it and acknowledges limits. Written assuming this will be the most-shared piece in your first six months.

NO. 02 · SIGNATURE MANIFESTO

Your worldview, with conviction.

1,200–1,800 words · Declarative · Philosophical

Open with conventional wisdom in your niche. Name what's missing or wrong. State your alternative position. Walk through 3–5 implications. Close with what you're building or doing differently as a result.

NO. 03 · TACTICAL RESOURCE

The bookmarkable how-to.

1,500–2,200 words · Numbered · Worked example

Name the specific problem and who has it. Say why most existing solutions fail. Walk through your approach in numbered steps or a structured framework. Include at least one worked example. Close with a diagnostic the reader can run.

NO. 04 · PERSONAL POV

The human behind the publication.

800–1,400 words · Conversational · Specific scene

Open with a specific moment or story. Walk through what happened and why it mattered. Connect to a larger principle. Close with what you took from it and what it implies for your work.

Below 800 words you can't demonstrate the kind of thinking that earns a subscription. Above 2,500 you ask too much of a first-time visitor. 800–2,500 is the working zone for the first 30 days.

4.2 · THE 30-DAY PUBLISHING CALENDAR

Eight posts. Four corners. Thirty days.

Two posts per week — the working range for most established creators. Scale up if you have capacity, down to one per week (stretched over 8 weeks) if you don't.

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
WEEK 1	Day 01	Day 02 MANIFESTO Sets the tone for the publication	Day 03	Day 04	Day 05 PERSONAL POV Humanises the manifesto	Day 06	Day 07
WEEK 2	Day 08	Day 09 CORNERSTONE I Your strongest, most linkable piece	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12 TACTICAL I The bookmarkable how-to	Day 13	Day 14
WEEK 3	Day 15	Day 16 CORNERSTONE II Different angle from the first	Day 17	Day 18	Day 19 PERSONAL POV Another specific moment	Day 20	Day 21
WEEK 4	Day 22	Day 23 TACTICAL II A different problem	Day 24	Day 25	Day 26 SYNTHESIS Pulls threads from prior 7 posts	Day 27	Day 28
+	Day 29	Day 30	—	—	—	—	—

- Cornerstone Essay × 2
- Signature Manifesto × 1
- Tactical Resource × 2
- Personal POV × 2
- Synthesis × 1

COMPANION DOWNLOAD

The 30-Day Publishing Calendar Template · Notion / Google Sheets

4.3 · THE PUBLISH-AND-AMPLIFY LOOP

Every long-form post should produce 3–5 Notes over the following 7–10 days.

Non-negotiable for the first 30 days, and it remains standard practice for the long-term operation of the publication. Each Note is a re-entry point to the post — some readers encounter the post first, some encounter a Note and click through.

DAY 0F	One Note announcing the post — framed as a sharp claim from the post, not "new piece up!"
DAY 2	Extract the post's main contrarian argument and post it as a Hook.
DAY 3–4	Extract a specific example or detail and post it as an Observation or Micro-essay.
DAY 5–7	Open a question raised but not fully answered in the post.
DAY 8–10	Revisit the post's central frame in a new context.

When you finish a long-form post — before you publish — draft the first three Notes you're going to spawn from it. Don't wait until the post is live to start thinking about distribution.

EIGHT POSTS IN 30 DAYS PLUS DISTRIBUTION LOOPS

If your calendar can't accommodate that without breaking other things, you have two options.

Stretch to 60 days — or bring someone in to execute against it. We can help you decide which path fits.

[Talk to an operator about which path fits →](#)

SECTION FIVE

05

The Welcome Email That Does Real Work

A new subscriber's relationship with a publication is hottest in the first 48 hours. The default welcome email squanders that window. A good one converts it.

5.1 · THE FOUR JOBS OF THE WELCOME EMAIL

A tote bag at a conference. Polite. Mildly branded. Immediately forgotten.

That's the welcome email most established creators send. The one that converts has to do four jobs at once, in 250–400 words.

01 Confirm what the publication is

In one sentence, in language a stranger could repeat back. Not "thoughts on [topic]." A specific positioning that earns the click on future emails.

02 Set the cadence

How often you publish, what kinds of posts to expect, what should land in their inbox. Calibrating expectations now prevents unsubscribes later.

03 Drive the second click

Point to one or two specific cornerstone pieces with a sentence each on why they matter. Subscribers who read a cornerstone in the first 48 hours show dramatically higher long-term engagement.

04 Establish your voice

If the welcome email reads like a SaaS onboarding tool, you've already started losing the trust they brought in.

Opening line examples

"If you're new here, welcome. Quick orientation before the first regular post hits your inbox."

"Glad you're in. A few things you should know about what comes next."

"You've subscribed. Here's the version of this publication you've signed up for, in 300 words."

"Before the regular rhythm kicks in, three things worth knowing."

5.2 · WHAT THE WELCOME EMAIL MUST ACCOMPLISH

A dead subscriber is worse than no subscriber.

Counterintuitive but important. A subscriber who never opens corrupts your open-rate signal, makes the publication look bigger than it is, and pushes your sender reputation down. A clear welcome email triggers the right unsubscribes early — and keeps the right subscribers engaged.

Three patterns that kill welcome email performance

PATTERN 01

The biographical opening.

"I'm Jane, I've spent 20 years in marketing, and I'm so excited to share my journey." Nobody cares yet. Bio belongs on the About page.

PATTERN 02

The vague positioning.

"A place for thinkers, dreamers, and doers." That sentence describes a fortune cookie, not a publication.

PATTERN 03

The empty close.

"Thanks again for subscribing! Talk soon!"
Wastes one of the two highest-attention positions in the email.

A note on building the external list

Substack itself isn't built for heavy promotion. Posts and emails that lean too commercial underperform; the culture and algorithm reward thought leadership far more than direct selling. The strategic implication is clean: **your Substack is where you build positioning. Your external list is where you run the monetization sequences that pay for everything else.**

Wire your Substack to your external list (ConvertKit, MailChimp, Beehiiv, ActiveCampaign) from day one, so every new subscriber lands on both. Most established creators don't get around to this until month four or five, after they've already lost months of email-list compounding. Build the integration on day one.

*Your Substack handles positioning and orientation.
Your external list handles everything that pays.*

SECTION SIX

06

What This Looks Like as Ongoing Work

The honest hour breakdown, why most established creators stall at 100–200 subscribers, and the two paths from here.

6.1 · THE HOUR BREAKDOWN

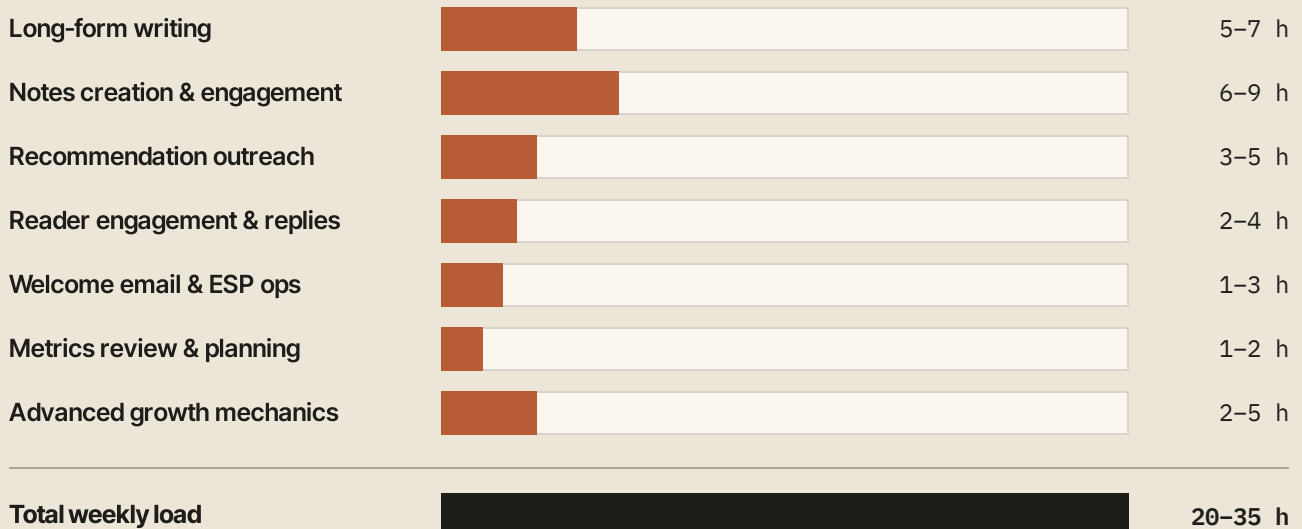
A reasonable estimate for one week of execution, in real hours.

UPPER BOUND · HOURS / WEEK

35

A SERIOUS PART-TIME
JOB.

For an established creator with an existing professional calendar (clients, speaking, the day job, the book deadline, the podcast), these hours don't exist as free time. They have to come from somewhere — typically evenings, weekends, and the time previously allocated to other strategic work.



The lower end (20) is disciplined solo execution of the basics. The upper end (35) is what serious operators put in when they're running the deeper growth layers as well. Most established creators land somewhere in the middle and quietly wonder why they're constantly behind.

6.2 · THE TWO PATHS FROM HERE

Why most established creators stall at 100–200 subscribers.

It isn't because they aren't smart enough or don't understand what to do. The work cadence is incompatible with their existing professional calendar. The creator has a finite number of hours, and those hours are already committed to higher-leverage work. Substack is the new strategic priority but it can't actually compete with paying client work or a \$30,000 keynote for time on the calendar. **This isn't a discipline problem. It's a capacity problem.**

PATH 01

Keep going solo.

Right for creators who can carve out 20+ uninterrupted hours per week, who genuinely enjoy the operational work (not just the writing — the Notes engagement, the outreach, the metrics), and who have a long enough time horizon that slower growth is acceptable.

First 90 days will feel slow. Next 90 will feel like things are starting to compound. By month 6–9, the publication has its own gravity.

PATH 02

Hire an operator.

Right for creators whose primary work is high-value and whose Substack time would otherwise come at the expense of client revenue, book progress, or strategic priorities. At \$300/h on client work, doing 25 hours of Substack ops yourself is \$7,500 of weekly opportunity cost on labor an experienced operator does for a fraction.

The operator runs the playbook on your behalf — ghostwriting matched to your voice, daily Notes, outreach, welcome email design, metrics review. You retain editorial authority. The publication remains yours.

I won't make a hard sell here. The fit call covers whether your situation is one we can do real work on. Some creators we talk to we recommend the solo path for, because they don't yet have the publication clarity for an operator engagement to produce strong results. **The point of the call is to figure out which path makes sense — not to convince you of one.**

CLOSING

The call costs you nothing.

The unbooked call costs you the next 90 days.

The first 500 subscribers are the hardest 500 you will ever build. Everything in this playbook is designed to compress that window — to give you a working system instead of a year of trial and error. Whether you execute it solo or hire an operator, the systems are the same. Most readers of this guide will close it, intend to execute, and then watch the next 90 days slip away to higher-priority work.

IF THAT'S LIKELY TO BE YOU

Book the call. We'll spend 30 minutes diagnosing your situation, mapping what a Postby engagement would do for you specifically, and deciding together whether it's the right time.

Book your 30-minute consultation



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NICK QUICK · FOUNDER, POSTBY

A studio that runs the publication end-to-end, with the depth of operator skill an established creator deserves.

Nick has been ghostwriting and operating publications for 20+ years, including 30+ executive voices across leadership, technology, and creative industries. He's the author of the Substack Growth Engine manuscript and operates a daily-publishing Substack as proof of execution discipline.

He built Postby to give established creators access to the level of operator skill their primary work deserves on the Substack platform — not a coaching offer, not a course, a studio that runs the publication end-to-end.