

COMMUNICATOR

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Ramp Up Your Rolodex

By Sharon O'Malley

To get the story ahead of everyone else, it helps to cultivate sources everywhere you go, and then work them early and often.

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By the time the seven reporters who work for KAMC-TV and KLBK-TV report to their morning editorial meetings, they already have shown their faces at the police station, courthouse or school board office—depending on their beats—to make personal contact with some of their sources.

It's the boss's orders.

Indeed, Russ Poteet, news director for the two competing stations housed in the same building in Lubbock, TX, gives reporters 30 minutes first thing every morning to make their rounds, and then expects them to report on their visits during the meeting.

One morning, the police reporter learned during a casual conversation with a cop that there would be an announcement that afternoon in an unsolved murder case. The tip gave the reporter time to do some digging and break news of an arrest hours before other local media got the information in an official press release.

"The other stations don't make a face-to-face appearance," says Poteet, who says his staff's daily encounters help reporters create a rapport that makes sources think of KAMC or KLBK first when they have a tip. "They're more likely to call us on stories without us calling them."

And reporters who keep in constant contact with their sources, veteran journalists agree, are the ones most likely to have access to them when news breaks.

How to cultivate sources isn't something most journalists learn in college, says Paul Wagner, police reporter for WTTG-TV in Washington. Building a Rolodex of trustworthy experts and informants, he adds, takes both a long time and a lot of time.

"It doesn't just happen overnight," says Wagner, who began as a police reporter for Washington's all-news radio station before switching to TV a few years ago. "If you're a [general assignment] reporter trying to get into a niche only one or two days a week, it's hard to lay the groundwork."

Like Poteet, Wagner says the best contacts are made in person rather than on the telephone or via email—a technology that some blame for keeping young reporters from getting to know their sources well enough to rely on them for tips that can lead to scoops.

"They have to trust you," says Wagner. "If they say, 'I don't want to be quoted,' they have to know that you're going to abide by that and not use their name. If they don't really know you, what reason would they do that for?"

Murrow Award-winning reporter Jason Friedman of KARK-TV in Little Rock, AR, agrees. His award-winning, two-part series about the longest-serving inmate on Arkansas' death row wasn't complete without the perspective of the murder victim's son, who was a teen when his mother died 20 years earlier.

The man lived in a small, windowless house with no phone, says Friedman, who convinced a camera crew to drive more than two hours to the small town where "people don't want cameras and microphones shoved into their faces."

Along the way, Friedman says, "We had to convince a lot of people who were unwilling to talk for 20-plus years to share their stories," so he knew the son would shun the cameras.

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"We approached him the old-fashioned way," recalls Friedman, who knocked on his door with no cameras in tow. Eventually, the man agreed to talk on the air.

Indeed, notes Lee Eldridge, news director for WROC-TV in Rochester, NY, camera-free conversations can convert reluctant sources into regular informants and turn a stilted interview into a unique sound bite.

"I try to teach young reporters that you don't just call up and bam, start asking questions," says Eldridge, who hires much of his staff fresh from journalism school. "You have to have conversations. That's how you build contacts."

Indeed, he pushes his young recruits, who—like Eldridge himself—find themselves working more than the occasional 12-hour day, to engage in after-hours activities like sports leagues and volunteer groups so they will meet lots of local people with whom they can have conversations about what's going on in Rochester.

"It could be that in the grocery store I strike up a conversation with someone and I hear people talking about issues," he says. "It's amazing how the public reacts to broadcast professionals once they take five minutes out of their day to speak to them, especially the on-air personalities."

Such casual acquaintances might not become on-air sources, Eldridge concedes, but they serve up story ideas and, if the reporter sees them often, can help the journalist understand the public's take on an issue. And sometimes, he says, someone a reporter meets at a gym or a civic event is well-placed in government and willing to put the journalist in touch with insiders.

Bob Steele of The Poynter Institute calls those behind-the-scenes experts "rabbis."

"They're not sources per se," Steele explains. "They're wise men and women we turn to who will help teach us about certain subject matter—individuals who have expertise on anything from child abuse to suicide to race relations to local politics to warfare to gambling. We ask the rabbi to make us smarter about a particular issue."

One of Steele's favorite "rabbis" is a former SWAT team member whom he routinely calls to talk through police issues and to share the perspective of other sources. That veteran cop, he notes, can tell him whether his information seems credible and accurate.

Making and nurturing such contacts outside of the rush of a breaking news story could be the best way for a journalist to guarantee access to an expert when every reporter in the city—or country—is calling the same people for quotes, says Chas. Henry, the Pentagon Channel's brand-new executive producer and, until February, the national security correspondent for WTOP-AM in Washington.

Henry, like every reporter on the homeland security beat, routinely needs quotes in a hurry from government and military experts on days when war and terrorism dominate the news. Yet he realizes that the experts can grant a finite number of interviews in the heat of an event that creates breaking news.

So Henry contacts the experts on days when there is no breaking news. He scours the opinion pages of newspapers for names of experts with unique points of view and learns the leanings of those who work for political and military think tanks. He'll shoot an email to a stranger to introduce himself, comment on the article he read and ask if the person would be willing to talk to him on the air the next time there's a breaking story related to that source's expertise. The expert, he says, is usually flattered and eager to be on the air.

And when news breaks, the source knows who Henry is. "When a big story breaks about that person's subject, he'll get calls from 100 reporters, half of whom can't even pronounce his name," notes Henry, whose Rolodex bulges with about 2,000 names. "There are varying degrees to which these people will suffer fools, and they can take a finite amount of calls. They'll pick the people who are smart enough, who understand their themes."

He adds: "Like so many things in life, the end product is better when people take time in advance of the deadline to do this type of research."

Identifying not-so-famous experts, agrees Eldridge, is a good way to get unique viewpoints on the air and assure an interview when the usual suspects' lines are busy at deadline.

"Everybody has the spokesperson for every department of every organization in the city, every PR person, every [public information officer]," he says. "That's just the surface. That's not going to allow you to get other information."

He complains that inexperienced reporters too often rely on the sources they meet when they cover breaking stories, but notes, "Insider contacts don't come from what they see to be traditional situations."

Indeed, Eldridge encourages his reporters to spend their downtime searching for minorities in the community who might be overlooked as experts by the local media.

Reporters on deadline, notes Eldridge, “automatically think of relationships they already have”—and those experts largely match the race of the reporter. Too often, he says, the result is a newscast peopled by white faces except in crime stories, which leaves viewers with the impression that minorities make the news only when the news is bad.

Minorities in the community, he says, are frustrated that “there is this very wrong perspective.”

He notes that “there’s no time under deadline” to cultivate minority sources, but says, “If you go back and create this philosophy, if you teach your staff this concept out of the gate, then under deadline pressure, you should have at least a handful of diverse contacts.”

Even veteran reporters often rely on their tried-and-true sources and neglect expanding their contact lists to include newcomers who might bring a fresh on-air perspective, notes Steele.

“I find myself getting ornery with those who blame young journalists for the faults of our profession,” he says. “Those who have been around the track quite a few times can be just as incompetent or lazy or unethical as those who are new to the game.”

He points to the CBS investigation that relied on what turned out to be fake documents about President Bush’s military record for a big story that led to the mass exodus of a number of experienced journalists.

Even veteran reporters, he says, can feel uneasy when it comes to talking to strangers. “It’s comfort-based,” he says.

And for some, notes Ron Dresner, president of Your PR Department in Farmington, CT, an agency that publishes a newsletter of sources for media, it’s a matter of not knowing where to look. He recounts a conversation with a reporter who revealed she considers only the sources whose names or websites appear on the first page of a Google search on the Internet.

“She doesn’t go to pages 2, 3, 4 or 5,” says Dresner. “But the ones on page 1 aren’t necessarily the best ones. They’re just the ones with the best marketing.”

“I told her: ‘You have to get a bigger perspective. You have to take that extra step.’ Maybe reporters have a hard time looking for sources, so they rely on the same old, reliable thing.” He admonishes reporters to be “hungrier to dig.”

Once they do, says Wagner, they’ll find that people are eager to share their views with reporters—but that they have varying reasons for doing so.

And one of the journalist’s jobs, he says, is to consider whether the source is trying to be helpful to the media or to reveal an injustice—or if the informant has a less-trustworthy agenda and hopes to sully someone’s name or political chances.

Like most investigative journalists, Wagner typically verifies information with two or three sources, especially if the original tipster asks him to keep his identity secret.

And he says he’s not surprised when informants ask him for a favor in return: More than once, a reliable police source later has asked WTTG to show a sketch of an evasive crime suspect, and the station has agreed. Another time, a police informant fed Wagner information about a botched investigation because the source was frustrated with the way his superiors had handled it. The source was able to expose the fiasco, and Wagner got a scoop.

“It’s a funny business,” notes Wagner. “There’s always the other side of the coin.”

But the ongoing relationships are the ones that helped him break the news of an arrest in a years-old unsolved triple murder at a Starbucks in Washington’s tony Georgetown neighborhood and the story of how Washington police alerted other jurisdictions that the now-infamous snipers were driving a beat-up Chevy Caprice and not a white van as was widely reported—yet Maryland and federal authorities did not release the information to the public.

“The main thing that works for me is being a personable person,” says Wagner, who refers to his sources as “friends” even though he rarely socializes with them.

Henry agrees. “Whether you’re dealing with the principal or with his gatekeepers,” he says, “courtesy across the board always yields better results than being curt or quick and abrasive. The person who thinks he or she is more important than the principal will be less successful than the person who isn’t caught up in his own importance.”—Sharon O’Malley is a freelance writer in College Park, MD. ■

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