

# ***Straight from Reporters' Mouths ...***

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Trying to answer the question, "What is news?" is like trying to hit a moving target. The response most of the time boils down to "It depends." Who is making the decision? What else is happening that day? Who do you want to pitch: radio, TV, or print? How does it relate to something else that is happening?

I recently had the opportunity to interview four print reporters as part of a video project I produced for a client. With each reporter, I addressed that age-old issue of defining "news." We also discussed what they think makes a good interview and an appealing quote. Here's what they said.

## **A Good Story**

Good stories have a "hook"—something that makes this particular news item important or interesting to this particular news outlet's audience at this particular time.

"A good story captures our readers' interest even if it's not their area of expertise," says Kathy Tulumello, business editor of the *Arizona Republic*.

Heidi Elliot, a former editor of *Electronic News* agrees news must target a publication's audience. "In this business it's all about the reader. What are they interested in? They don't really care how wonderful you think you are. They just want to know how it affects them."

"Typically it has to be different from what's happened before," says Ed Sperling, editor of *Electronic News Online*. "It has to have enough impact for a reader to say I want to read this."

Tulumello thinks a compelling story usually includes the human element. And an interesting story often has its elements in conflict. "Something is pushing against something else. There's change. Anytime there's change there's inherent conflict."

Sperling says the number of people a story affects and its quiriness often determine whether he'll print it. "Sometimes it's magnitude. Sometimes it's just plain weirdness," Sperling says. "If you have something that is far off the wall, yes people will read it."

"I'm not asking for somebody to reinvent the wheel," says Andy Reese, editor of *Supply and Demand Chain Executive*. "But for somebody to at least talk about a new way of putting spokes on that wheel so it will be a little bit different."

Trend stories appeal to almost all publications and reporters. Often they generate these stories on their own as they see industry or society moving in certain directions, but other times trend stories come from sources who tell reporters what they see happening in their businesses.

"In a complex world where readers are bombarded with information, we want to organize it for them. That's why we try to identify and place incremental news within an industry or economic trend," adds Tulumello.

In bad news situations, Tulumello says organizations fare best when they address tough issues honestly and forthrightly. "If you're talking about difficult issues straight on, we're going to put a lot of credence in what you tell us about another subject. If you've got something that's really exciting or groundbreaking and you're up front with us about the difficult stuff, we're going to really believe you on the other front as well."

### **Good Interviews and Quotes**

Reporters know that good interviews help bring life to a story. "To me, a good interview is someone who can tell a story from start to finish in a complete, cohesive manner and in English versus corporate speak or jargon," says Elliot. "A bad interview is someone who answers my questions with their corporate answers whether they fit the questions or not. And someone who speaks in such vague generalities that it's not a useful interview."

"The best types of interviews are folks who are sort of thinking in PowerPoint slide form," adds Reese. "You can almost see them thinking in their mind, going through the bullet points. Those people have organized themselves beforehand."

All agree that a good interview is one that gives them quotable quotes. Tulumello says these are essential because they become the soul of a story. "Quotes are the voices of a story come to life," she adds.

Reporters seem to have a difficult time pinning down just what makes a desirable quote. "It's sort of one of those things you know it when you hear it," says Elliot.

She says quotes can be the best of the best or the best of the worst. "Sometimes a story is developed around the quotes. I've got to use this quote so I've got to include this part of the story. If you have a series of bad interviews, it's what is the least horrific or boring quote to use."

Reporters inevitably run into interviewees who can never get to the point in a way that's quotable. "They'll just go on and on," says Reese. "When what I really need is just a summary of that."

Other times, Reese says, he gets so many good quotes, he can't use them all. "Somebody will give me so much good meat and will be such a friendly person that I'll take that whole interview and turn it into a side bar for a story."

"A quote has to add some personality," says Sperling. "It has to be different from what you'll get out of the numbers and the press release."

Tulumello says she wants a quote to sound natural and unscripted. "It gives a sense of perspective, a sense of fun, even if you're dealing with something dry."

"It's something that has a bit of color to it," says Elliot. "Something that adds, that moves a story forward."

"I've found that it's often that last catchy line they give me that winds up being the perfect quote," says Reese. "It summarizes their take on a topic and puts that unique spin on it."

What about misquotes, one of the biggest complaints I hear from clients who've been interviewed? Elliot says more often than not, people did say what was quoted, but just didn't like how it came out. "Reporters are human. I'm not going to say it doesn't happen. But a lot of times they haven't been misquoted. They just don't like the quote that is used."

Most reporters want to be accurate, according to Tulumello. Interviewees can help them do that by educating them about a topic. "Normally you're dealing with a reporter who has a very sincere interest in getting it right. But they may need a little bit of background to help them get it right because they're not coming to it at the level of expertise as their interview subject."

Media Expert Kathy Kerchner's depth of experience includes 15 years as an award-winning news anchor and reporter and more than 15 years as a media advisor to international corporations, associations, government agencies, banking institutions, and other organizations. She has coached CEOs of Fortune 500 companies to perform better during analyst calls and media interviews, has helped executives win new business using masterful presentations, and has trained managers at global companies to talk to their employees about sensitive issues.

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