

Think Visually, Keep It Real, Be Patient

By Alex Garcia, Photojournalist

I used to work for a Ralph Nader organization in Washington D.C., and I remember sitting at the fax machine, wondering what it was going to take to get seemingly out-of-touch reporters to see the story that was screaming to be told.

I remember thinking that if I ever became a journalist, I would help people who needed a particular issue/cause to be fairly represented at whatever newspaper I'm working.

What are some of the things I've learned during the past thirteen years on the other end of the fax machine?

To first and foremost be pleased about anything that you can get into the paper, because it can be an arbitrary and inconsistent experience. Even for the writers and photographers.

Stories don't fly for a litany of reasons: timeliness, interest, uniqueness, relevance, importance, simplicity, complexity, space, time, etc. Newsworthiness is a catch-all phrase that comes to mind. Even the best reporters have had stories shelved for just one of these reasons.

Given this situation, what can help?

Studies of photographs in newspapers have always shown that stories accompanied by photographs are far more likely to be read than stories that do not have a photograph. Also, stories that have photographs usually get better placement on the page than stories that don't. It's imperative, therefore, to think visually.

Real People Doing Real Things

As a photographer, I can say that we are always looking for "Real People Doing Real Things." It's nearly impossible to photograph a report, idea or statistic. The most interesting pictures involve people involved in an activity. The more interesting the activity, the more compelling the photo. Press conferences are by and large boring to photograph, and we only shoot them if we have to. TV photographers, however, are happy to have talking heads, but still photographers avoid them unless they are absolutely necessary. We still photographers are always looking for activity -- something to document.

If there is no relevant activity to photograph on a news story, at the very least hold a press conference in a relevant location. Make sure that people affected by the issue are in attendance at the event, and introduce them. The least desirable option would be to have a press conference in

a boring office building. Also, whatever you can do to facilitate the process, especially on deadline, will only help your cause. Despite what you may have heard, a spread of catered food doesn't help things.

Don't Fake It

Most newspapers won't hesitate to kill a picture after it was taken, or pull out a photographer, if it becomes known that the "live activity" or "real person" was actually a manufactured situation or a paid employee putting on a show solely for the benefit of the news media. That becomes manipulation and makes us all furious. Again, "Real People Doing Real Things."

In a desperate attempt to create sensational visuals, some P.R. firms will stage over the top visuals that are clearly pandering to the newsmedia's appetites for pictures. I can say that our paper resists any kind of manipulation, unless we happen to be extremely desperate that day. And even then it will probably get killed.

Don't stretch the facts, misrepresent or overreach to get someone from the paper involved. It's like the boy who cried wolf. Journalists won't come back.

Plan Ahead

Highlight in your communication what there might be to photograph at the event. If a factory is a big polluter, for example, it makes sense to have the event at that factory, and call attention to it. But it makes no sense to be there when the sky is blue and the factory is quiet.

If minors are there, make sure that their parents know they might be photographed. Otherwise it's a big waste of time for everybody.

If language translation is necessary, it's best to have someone available who can speak both languages very well, in case no one from the news media speaks that language. My experience with translation is that it requires a deft grasp of English to communicate the subtleties of another language and culture. There's nothing more frustrating for a reporter than to have a subject speak for five minutes, and for the translator to say, "He says, 'Yes'."

If you have a press release, be sure one goes to the photo assignment desk, because sometimes photo might be interested in something that the metro desk doesn't care for. I talked to the Chicago Tribune's assignment desk editor, and he said they prefer emails -- with all the information contained in one e-mail. Make it thorough with contact numbers, so that a call-back is unnecessary but still possible.

Faxes are unwanted. A one-page press release gets buried in a 20-page fax from the Defense Department. Calling to say "Did you get my e-mail" is about as unwelcome as a fax, at least here at the Tribune, which on some days resembles the Tower of Babel.

Photo assignment desk editors make decisions over where to send photographers. They are a bit like air traffic controllers, constantly trying to adapt to breaking news, communication issues, bad weather, bad hair days, etc. Don't be surprised if they are short, or a little too direct.

Consequently, it doesn't do much good to call a week before an event to see if a photographer will be there. Generally, a decision won't be made until the day of the event, a few hours before. Photographers call in sick, assignments have wrong directions, shoots take longer than expected, etc. A story that would otherwise get significant visual coverage one day might not the next because of a crazy confluence of circumstances. It might just be a conspiracy of unfortunate events.

Other Tips

Sunday metro stories are put together generally by Friday. Few changes are made to the Sunday paper on Saturday, so news events on Saturday don't always get the attention they might deserve, unless they are well-planned. Friday for Saturday is a risky gamble, as Saturday is one of the least read papers of the week. Observe the paper you are pitching and see when you might have a better chance to get a story into the paper.

Keep in mind that there is a general rule that photographers will be assigned to something when a story interests a reporter. So if photo says no, a reporter might pick up on the story, and it will have new life.

Also, if you get a cold shoulder or a blank response, try to recast your idea. There are many sections of the paper in which your idea might fit someone's needs. If, for example, an organization has a story about slumlords, don't hesitate to try our homes or Real Estate sections instead of the Metro or A section. The story might get new or stronger legs in a different section, and the editors might be happy to have a gritty story to round out relatively quiet stories.

Another example: If you have a lot of mothers upset about an issue, think about a particular mom with a compelling story who could be profiled in WomanNews or the magazine. Maybe in the single page feature "For the Better", which runs periodically in the Magazine, in which people who have made personal strides or acts of public service are profiled. It's a full page photo and provides good exposure.

I'm in features now, and we are always looking for interesting stories for Tempo, Q, WomanNews, Arts & Entertainment, AtPlay and the Magazine. A lot of stories

in the features sections could run and do run in the main news sections, and the reverse is true as well. Tempo runs stories that might be less "hard" than a news story but is nonetheless interesting. We even have a page 5 photo page that run in Arts & Entertainment. Is there a possible arts angle? It might be a stretch but art therapy done to cope with social ills might fit better in A&E than in the news sections. Even the Perspective section might be a possible way to editorialize an issue. Write something and submit it. If you have the time and energy, please don't wait for someone's approval.

But if you do try to pitch to different people, let them know, as it causes confusion if different sections are wanting to take up the same story.

The Sunday Magazine might even take it up for a full-length story, but you would have to interest the individual reporters, generally. Take notice of the different writers and their specialties.

Check out our Web site for e-mail addresses. When sending an email, use their first and last name in the subject line. We get so much spam here; that will help your message avoid getting trashed.

Try to establish relationships with reporters and/or photographs who have experience on a particular issue who might be more willing to see the vision that you have for the story.

Much of the time, the reporters I talk to have a list of story ideas that they can't get to. There is a constant balancing of what the reporter wants to write about, and what his/her editor thinks should be their direction. Sometimes a story proposal will light some bulbs over someone's head, or add a different and much needed perspective. At the very least, your conversations might give you some valuable advice about what it might take for the story / photograph to get into print.

One last thought: Resist the temptation to think that it shouldn't be this hard, that somehow it is the obligation and responsibility of the news outlet to involve itself about a particular cause impacting our world. "Why should we do their work for them?" you might ask.

Initiative does happen in newsrooms, but not always in the time frame and in proportion to what is considered desirable by any particular advocate. It's hard and frustrating, but I think it is helpful, and almost imperative, to have a forgiving attitude.

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