

# 10 Commandments of local news coverage

## 1. **Know your community intimately.**

- Who lives there and why?
- Check Census reports, demographics and psychographics.
- Past growth, projected growth.
- Read legal ads, classifieds. They can lead to stories.

## 2. **Identify the people to meet and go meet them.**

- Elected and appointed officials.
- Checkout clerks, day care operators, waitresses, gas jockeys, bank tellers, real estate brokers, postal workers, funeral directors, anyone who interacts with the public. Soccer moms know everything.
- Clergy of all denominations.
- Retired snoopy people at the senior center. Ex-cops.
- Regulars at places people congregate – coffee shops, library, restaurants, playgrounds.
- Town characters. Every community has them.
- Get on e-mail lists of community organizations. Deputize them as citizen journalists.

## 3. **Find fresh, creative ways to do stories.**

- Start every day with the question: What can I tell people about this community that's interesting and useful? Never let the answer be, "nothing." And almost never let it be, "a meeting story."
- Approach government stories from the standpoint of how they affect local people, not the process.
- Do stories about ordinary people, especially if they are doing extraordinary things.
- Look for stories about the concerns of ordinary life: potholes, burned-out streetlights, rusting playground equipment, hazardous intersections, landscape eyesores, dangerous school crossings.
- Quote at least one non-official person in every local story. One Bubba Rule.

## 4. **Find the money.**

- Who are the town's biggest employers? Taxpayers?
- Who are the big property owners? How much property does the town own?
- Who gets the most overtime on the town payroll and why?
- Get a copy of the town and school budgets. Know them line by line.
- Get a list of vendors doing business with the town, what goods and services they provide and for how much.
- Know the high, low and average tax bills in town. Ditto home sales. Find out how they compare with neighboring or similar towns statewide.
- Look for stories tied to homes sales. The first million-dollar home sold in town. A barn turned into a house. The unusual.
- Make friends with the assessor and real estate agents. They know who is buying and selling and for how much.
- Check public records for nonprofit booster and community organizations. Review how they spend their money.

## 5. **Covering the fire department.**

- Visit the fire station regularly. Chat with the chief and the commanders.
- Check the log, ask questions, cultivate sources.
- Look for stories about people, equipment and trends, such as a growing number of condemned buildings or an increase in small fires.

#### **6. Covering the cops.**

- Visit the police station every day. Check the log, ask questions, cultivate sources. Cops love to schmooze.
- Look for crime patterns. Repetitious unlawful acts, no matter how small.
- Do feature stories on new officers, promoted and honored cops. New technology. Training techniques.
- Develop a list of the most notorious crimes in town and do appropriate anniversary stories.
- Find out what highways or streets pose speeding or safety problems, and why. What's being done about them?

#### **7. Reporting on schools.**

- Visit the schools regularly. Look for stories in posters on the walls, bulletin boards, teacher memos, the school paper.
- Know the teachers, custodians, administrators and students. Ask to speak to classes about your job. If a school paper exists, work with the students. Deputize them.
- Look for features about teachers, trends and curriculum.
- Use school board meetings as a jumping off point to bigger, better stories. If the discussion is about a math textbook, visit a math class, talk to teachers, students, parents.
- Know how much the district spends per pupil, where the money comes from, and how it compares with like towns.
- State competency tests are big news. Know where your town stands.
- Get the story behind the scores. And get the scores before anyone else.

#### **8. Getting religion.**

- Cover religion in town like the important topic it is. More people attend church, synagogues and mosques on Saturday and Sunday than watch the Super Bowl.
- Read the weekly bulletins and the bulletin boards.
- Profile people and groups. Look for trends. Don't overlook non-traditional religions.

#### **9. Make local business your business.**

- Know the business professionals, including chamber people.
- Know the people responsible for phone, gas, oil, water, electricity, cable TV and satellite TV.
- Make a list of employers, largest to smallest. Get to know who is in charge at each.
- Check records for commercial licenses and building permits.
- Identify public companies. A lot of information is available through SEC filings.
- Do stories on companies that import and export goods. Trace the path of these goods.
- Housing is business. Zoning is about money and power. Cover both thoroughly.
- Know the town health and building inspectors, and check their records.
- Attend after-hours and networking events.

#### **10. Covering meetings.**

- Prepare before the meeting. Identify the major issue(s) that will probably lead your story. Collect the background. Talk with people who will be major participants in the discussion. Write an advancer.
- Look for human-interest stories.
- Report on meetings from the perspective of the people affected, and follow up with a story about their views.
- Watch for news happening outside the meeting. Alliances are formed, opinion ventured in hallways and parking lots.
- Seize the drama, whatever it is. If there's a sharp disagreement, use sharp quotes. If there's conflict, use it to frame your story.