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# Tips to learn your beat

By Carla  
Kimbrough-  
Robinson

**T**oday, you've been assigned a new beat at your newspaper. You don't have the expertise, and you have less time than you imagined to master it. Or perhaps, you've landed in a new city on a new beat, and you have to get up to speed yesterday.

In the corporate world, most leaders expect their new hires to be effective in about six months. When you can make the transition fast, you can make solid contributions to the paper.

A four-step plan can help you create a strategy that gives you direction and brings greater depth to your coverage. A little tinkering to fit your particular job and the process works for anyone in the newsroom. It goes like this: Pull the paper; poll the people; plan your approach; and process and proceed with your plan.

## **Pull the paper.**

Get back issues of your publication for the previous year. Go back further if time allows. You're looking for anniversaries, sources, trends, turning points, challenges and opportunities.

Get statistics that bring context to the picture. What are the key numbers you deal with on your beat? Use some of the key numbers to give you a baseline "boom, bust and average." For example, if you're covering education, you should gather district, state and national statistics.

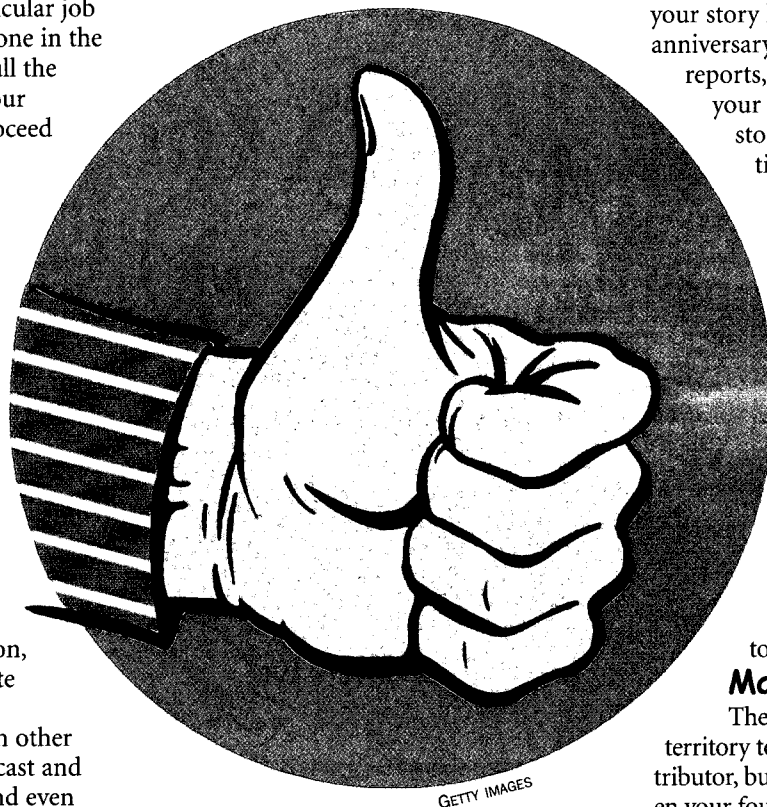
Explore what's appearing in other media, including print, broadcast and online — locally, regionally and even nationally. What topics are your competitors covering or not? Do you understand what they deem important? Do you have sources (even their sources) well oiled in that area? In coverage areas that are lacking, what new opportunities exist to corner the market, so to speak, on those topics? Don't ignore the bloggers. Blogging has exploded for a reason: people want a platform to share their opinions. Check them out for another perspective.

## **Poll the people.**

Pulling the paper has given you a solid background in the area. The numbers pro-

vide the skeleton. The people provide the flesh and the heartbeat.

Talk with folks who care, and go beyond the obvious sources. For example, in covering education, go beyond teachers, students, parents and administrators. Add employers, taxpayers, urban and suburban, women, and people of color. Some questions to tackle with them: What are the critical issues that have affected our community in the past? What trends are you seeing? What is happening in other parts of the country? Who are the movers and shakers? What stories haven't been



told? What stories need more explanation?

Get the inside-the-newsroom perspective. Talk with people who've covered the topic and editors who direct the coverage area. What are the stories they wanted to tell before leaving the beat? Who are the movers and shakers? What do they want to "own" in terms of coverage? What are their expectations for the beat?

Third, plan your approach. The foundation has been built, but now it's time to create a strategy that identifies priorities and guides how you spend your time.

## **Plan your approach.**

Provide a written overview. This document is based on the research you've done and the conversations you've had with folks who care and those within your newsroom. Identify the key issues and trends you've discovered. Don't write a book, but be thorough. This document will become your guiding force, giving you direction and setting the agenda for how the beat will be covered.

Develop a story list. Use a calendar to give yourself some deadlines. First, start with the stories that always have to be done at a certain time and put them on your story list and calendar. These are the anniversary stories or quarterly business reports, for example. Second, review your notes for some of the quick hit stories, 15-inch profiles, new initiatives, etc.

## **Process your plan.**

Share your plan with your boss and then, with any revisions, proceed. A plan is only as good as the action put behind it.

Give your proposed coverage plan, your overview and story list to your editors. Get their insights on what your priorities should be on the story list. Get agreement on the stories you think will take longer to develop. With approval, it's now time to make your written plan reality.

## **Manage your time.**

There's only one you and plenty of territory to cover. You've got to be a contributor, but also must continue to strengthen your foundation. Know the deadlines and meet them. Produce a steady stream of news stories and enterprise stories. And, don't forget to build in time to cultivate your sources. Visiting sources, going to receptions and attending important conferences are all critical to creating relationships that will lead to stories later. Remember, you're only as good as your sources.

*Carla Kimbrough-Robinson has spent nearly 20 years in newsrooms and is a trained life coach with Inspire Higher International, LLC, a Denver-based personal development company. Send her questions at [coaching@inspirehigher.net](mailto:coaching@inspirehigher.net)*