



FINDING TIME FOR EDITORIAL PROJECTS

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INITIATE COVERAGE EARLY

Premise: Comprehensive coverage of an event or issue demands organization. Newsrooms are often guilty of being aware of an event for days, or even weeks, but leaving planning to the last minute.

A checklist:

- Create a master calendar of events and review regularly.
- Reporters should always be on the lookout for key dates. Many of these events are announced or referenced at meetings.
- Reserve time at every staff meeting to look ahead – reviewing, discussing coverage of events at least four weeks out. This gives opportunity to identify fresh approaches to events that occur in regular cycles.
- Identify and record contact information for key individuals associated with each event. Connect early.
- Brainstorm, early on, what coverage is appropriate (given the significance of the event) and is practical (given your resources).
- Initiate discussion early so organizations can make their pitch and editors can explain what to expect for coverage. There will be fewer surprises for everyone involved.
- Project management tools like Basecamp can help you schedule your tasks, plus assign them and follow up, too. Using one single place to check all your tasks keeps everyone running at the same pace. These tools are essential as more and more staffs work remotely due to COVID-19.



CALENDARS/ INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

Premise: Newsrooms often do a great job of preparing to-do lists, assigning tasks and deadlines to staff. The responsibilities, however, necessarily involve the coordination of several individuals to be successful. Election coverage is an excellent example. Your best-laid plans may go awry without connecting early and often with the news sources.

SAMPLE MASTER CALENDAR FOR ELECTIONS

2020

January

- 21 – Candidate filing deadline for general municipal elections
- 22 – Send introductory letter to candidates for spring election

February

- 2 – Candidate committee organization deadline
- 4 – Joint meeting of news/advertising staffs to review municipal election races
- 5 – Deadline to register to vote in charter city, county elections
- 20 – Candidate finance reports due

March

- 3 – Poll area candidates on general election ballot on their re-election plans for those who have not yet announced
- 25 – Candidate filing deadline for primary election
- 26 – Send introductory letter to candidates for primary election

April

- 8 – General municipal elections
- 14 – Prepare for reorganizational meetings of government bodies; explore potential stories

May

- 1 – Joint meeting of news/advertising staffs to review primary election races
- 5 – Contact candidates to set up interviews for profiles and endorsements for primary election
- 5 – Make sure you have complete bios and photos for all primary election candidates

June

- 2 – Make decision whether to produce Voter Guide for general election; identify “first tier” and “second tier” races – which ones will command greater coverage
- 18 – Firm up assignments of which reporters will cover which election races; finalize lineup of races and ballot initiatives for November election



July

- 7 – Candidate profiles begin for primary election; publish schedule of profiles
- 9 – Deadline to register to vote in primary election
- 9 – Registration deadline for absentee ballots for primary election
- 14 – Editorial endorsements begin; announce which races will be presented
- 25 – Deadline for letters to editor that raise new issues
- 30 – Deadline for all election letters
- 30 – Deadline to request absentee ballots for primary election; check on number

August

- 5 – Primary election
- 18 – Contact candidates to set up interviews for profiles and endorsements for general election
- 19 – Candidate filing deadline for general election
- 20 – Send introductory letter to candidates for general election
- 30 – Candidate finance 30-Day After Report

September

- 8 – Make sure you have complete biographical information and photos for all general election candidates
- 15 – Contact individuals who might provide election analysis
- 29 – Take pulse of races to identify any unexpected developments that warrant attention

October

- 5 – Candidate committee organization deadline
- 6 – Candidate forum
- 6 – Candidate profiles begin; publish schedule of profiles
- 8 – Deadline to register to vote in general election
- 9 – Registration deadline for absentee ballots for general election
- 13 – Editorial endorsements begin; announce schedule of endorsements
- 15 – League of Women Voters candidate forum; determine whether to cover
- 27 – Staff meeting: Assign all duties for election night
- 24 – Deadline for letters that raise new issues
- 29 – Have election-night contact list completed for candidates, campaign managers, vote collection centers
- 29 – Deadline for all election letters
- 29 – Deadline to request absentee ballots for general election; check on number

November

- 4 – General election
- 7 – Conduct post-mortem on election; discuss and schedule post-election stories
- 29 – Candidate finance 30-Day After Report

December

- 15 – Identify races, brainstorm stories for the first 100 days in office



DEVELOP A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Premise: Communications plans are standard procedure as organizations plan and promote events. It's a lesson well worth remembering for newsrooms as you plan coverage for both recurring events and special projects. How often do you plan your publicity – your coverage – of any number of events or issues in your newspaper?

A checklist:

- Create a “to do” list.
- Identify individuals responsible for each task.
- Set deadlines.
- Identify all the news platforms from print editions to digital venues.
- Include all departments of your news organization. Are there opportunities to generate advertising support? What about a special circulation promotion?
- Go beyond the news organization. Share key elements of plan with readers, and solicit their ideas.
- Review plan regularly to ensure you stay on track and adjust as circumstances warrant.
- Forms and input tools: make it easy for readers and advertisers to make you aware of what's going on. Are there forms on your site that allow easy submission of dates, times, photos and videos? Are those forms easy to find? Are they mobile-ready?
- Bring necessary folks into the conversation early to brainstorm the project – for example, photographers, page designers, copy editors, online staff. They all are critical to the success of the project, plus they may offer valuable perspectives in shaping the project.
- Promote the project on all channels from print edition to digital platforms.
- Conduct a post-mortem to evaluate what worked and what didn't work.
- Celebrate successes to energize staff.



PROJECT SCHEDULE

Premise: Producing a step-by-step “to do” list enables you to approach projects in bite-size pieces with several deadlines along the way to help with planning.

BIRTHING THE PROJECT Enterprise Planning Document

Brainstorming

The key question:

Maximum story nut graph is:

Minimum story nut graph is:

Data/sources needed to determine what we’ve got (list):

_____ Lead editor OK to pursue
_____ Next check-in date

Preliminary Reporting

What have we found (what data/sources say): _____

Pursue or no? Kill Daily enterpriser Weekender Project

(If kill, end here. If anything else, continue.)

Reporting

Working title & type of story: _____

Nut graf: _____

Why should the reader care:

Estimated reporting hours needed: _____

_____ Estimated publication date
_____ Lead editor approval
_____ Publisher approval
_____ Next check-in meeting

Writing/Editing

Discuss advancements made on reporting: _____

Ready to write? (If yes, put down draft deadline. If no, deadline for reporting): _____

Budgeted? List tentative stories/sidebars: _____

Photo/graphic possibilities: _____

Info to designer when? _____

Video? _____

Documents to scan to put up on the web? _____

Draft back to reporter? _____

Final project schedule checklist

Publication date: _____

Final draft to publisher for review: _____

Photo/graphics deadline: _____

Layout ready for review: _____

Package on web (date): _____

Post-mortem

Single-copy sales on date(s) of publication: _____

Web page hits for story, video: _____

Community impact, if any: _____

Hit deadlines? Lengths? _____

What did we learn? _____



TIPS FOR PURSUING THE BIG PROJECTS

Premise: It's increasingly difficult for small and large news organizations to simply spring a reporter – or an entire newsroom – into a significant project without having it affect your primary role of collecting and generating the everyday news that your readers rely on. You must be creative in your tactics and strategies to tackle big projects in increments.

A checklist:

- Identify opportunities to collect information during daily routines. For example, if you need to talk with police officers, connect with them during your regular check-in at the police station.
- Connect with key stakeholders as you explore the premise and lay the foundation for a special project. Invite them to your office for a brown bag lunch to discuss the project and solicit their perspectives.
- Network with other journalists to collect information or cover an event beyond your resources.
- Enlist the help of retirees and part-time stringers.
- If you're part of a newspaper group, identify corporatewide projects that individual newsrooms can localize.
- Do your research. Become familiar with resources to prep for stories.
- Don't be afraid to ask the question.
- Know how to access information through Freedom of Information laws.
- Use the editorial page to supplement – but not substitute – news coverage. Features such as point/counterpoint can be a great tool when you are short on time and resources.



WHAT IS A BIG PROJECT? BROADENING THE DEFINITION

Premise: Strike up a conversation about big projects, and the mind-set often focuses on an in-depth series that can take weeks to research and write, and then will be published over multiple days in your newspapers. Newsrooms should strive to do those projects, even if it's done only once a year. But big projects can also mean generating more substantive reports in your everyday coverage. Find ways to expand coverage after reporting the spot news.

Ideas for ongoing coverage:

- Annual reports are routinely presented at meetings of local government bodies – from a wrap-up of parent advisory council activities to building permits to public safety. Review these reports for the most compelling statistics. Highlight those in a story, accompanied by a sidebar with the overall statistics. It may generate follow-up coverage.
You don't have to wait for the statistics to be presented at a meeting. Brainstorm ideas where you give attention to statistics in conjunction with an event. For example, do a feature package on neighborhood activities for National Night Out by incorporating a story and graphic highlighting public safety statistics.
- Election coverage is an exhaustive, months-long process. Identify stories beyond your normal coverage. For example: the diary of a candidate; campaign contributions; the inner workings of a campaign committee – first-time candidate vs. incumbent. Consider pooling resources and doing a group interview of candidates with other newspapers. It will help with everyone's scheduling, and you'll likely have a broader and more enriching report.
- Give attention to second-day stories – coverage that looks beneath the surface of the circumstances. Broaden the conversation with individuals beyond those associated with the original news event. These stories are also a great way to distinguish your coverage from that of “outside” media. This follow-up coverage is especially worthwhile and effective when reporting on sensitive and challenging stories that may prompt charges of sensational coverage.
- Expand your definition of business news beyond store openings and anniversaries, new hires and labor disputes. Jobs consume a great deal of people's lives. A variety of workplace – employer and employee – stories can be pursued that are both substantive and interesting for your community and readers.
- High school graduations are among the numerous stories written about year after year. Research and find a distinctive fact about each class in your readership area and produce a feature: for example, academic and/or athletic accomplishments; student who has overcome personal challenges; high number of twins in a class.
- Local governments spend months in developing and reviewing budgets, yet many reporters see the materials for the first time when they pick up the meeting packet – or, worse yet – at the meeting when the budget is adopted. Take the initiative and develop a plan to present the budget to readers in a meaningful way.



Ideas for special projects:

- A day in the life of your community. Think beyond your newsroom to find individuals to help record 24 hours in your community through words and photos on all your platforms. Enlist staff from other departments. Enlist community members as well, who can take photos of an event, or write a diary for a specific time slot in the 24-hour period, such as working at a night shift.
If you serve multiple communities, consider a schedule to highlight each community during the course of a year. Pitch an advertising package to go with each one. These editions should be turned around as soon as possible to make them timely and relevant.
- A summer guide to fun things to do in your readership area. Reporters can take turns writing this feature that will appear on a regular schedule. Expand this to a year-long spotlight of things to do. Consider your resources and schedule the feature accordingly – weekly, every other week, monthly.
- Profile individuals not regularly in the news. Scan any batch of your newspapers, and it's a good bet that many of the same names and faces appear on your pages. Introduce individuals who are not your traditional newsmakers but are no less noteworthy or interesting for one reason or another. The profile can be used to localize a state or national story.
- Set an agenda for your community in the first editorial in January, identifying a handful of key projects or a theme that your newspaper will emphasize during the coming year – for example, supporting funding for a new biking trail or focusing on the need for addressing affordable housing. Then identify news/editorial packages to advance the theme.
- Brainstorm projects as a team; get story ideas from everyone. Those who suggest a good idea get first dibs on the story, but they don't have to do it either.



CONNECTING WITH YOUR READERS

Premise: If you're going to put the time and effort into big projects, you want to identify those reports that resonate with your readers. Be proactive in soliciting citizen comments and suggestions on everyday coverage – including ideas for special projects. Find ways to regularly connect with readers. COVID-19 makes tools like Zoom, Skype, Facetime and other real-time digital communications tools a must.

Convene a readers board.

Invite and rotate a panel of citizens to regularly meet and evaluate the newspaper. Sessions can range from critiquing content to soliciting story ideas to identifying gaps in coverage.

Solicit perspectives for in-depth series.

Solid research is integral to any story, and that especially applies to stories and series that dig beneath the surface. Reporters should first talk with the stakeholders of a story, who can identify aspects they deem important to understanding a subject.

Insert “public” voice in editorials.

Large newspapers may have formal editorial boards. At small newspapers, the publisher and/or editor may represent the editorial board. All newspapers can benefit from having one or two community representatives, rotating them on a regular basis similar to reader boards.

Open newsroom discussions.

Readers obviously forward ideas that are incorporated in everyday newsroom discussions. Why not take another step and open newsroom meetings so readers can witness firsthand the process for content and offer comments. Have a regular online “chat with editors.” Extending an invitation may be especially beneficial when planning special projects.

Identify and follow key influencers.

The digital world gives you the opportunity to bring the community to you at any time and any place. Find local bloggers, tweeters and other influencers on Facebook, Instagram and other social media avenues. Follow them and track what's on their minds.

Preview, promote content.

Digital platforms provide an excellent venue to preview stories in the works. An editor's blog gives readers a chance to submit ideas that might strengthen stories. It's also a great tool for promoting circulation.

Explain your decisions.

There's no better way to keep readers in the loop than through regular communication. A column by the editor and/or publisher should be standard on the editorial page – in addition to a timely blog.



Enlist a citizens panel.

Many newsrooms, no matter their size, are strapped for resources to present thorough coverage on a variety of issues. Select a citizens panel – representing a cross-section of your community’s demographics – and have them weigh in during the course of community discussion on important topics.

Establish editor/reporter blogs.

Newsrooms are the clearinghouse of community information. It places editors and reporters in excellent position to offer their insights. Many writers provide their perspectives with columns. Take this a step further – and make observations more immediate – with blogs.

Provide forum discussions.

Allow readers to not only participate in online discussions, but to start them as well by introducing topics. Your goal is to provide as many opportunities as possible for readers to engage in communitywide dialogue.

Convene brown bag lunches.

Invite citizens to offer their perspectives on various aspects of coverage. Topics can range from a discussion of general content to specific content such as business news.

Take your show on the road.

Convene a town meeting to ask citizens how you can better serve their needs. This is especially useful when trying to establish coverage in outlying communities. Be aware that these sessions can turn into a gripe session or generate unreasonable expectations.

Conduct a “call the editors” night.

Promote an evening when managers will be “on call” to answer any and all questions. Make it a point to answer questions on the spot or, if that’s not possible, to provide follow-up to inquiries within 24 hours.



JIM PUMARLO

Community newspapers, at their best, are stewards of their communities. The news columns are a blend of stories that people like to read and stories they should read. The advertising columns promote and grow local commerce. And the editorial pages are a marketplace of ideas.

Jim Pumarlo understands that energized newspapers are at the foundation of energized communities. His message is straightforward: Community newspapers – whether delivering information in the print or on the Web – must focus on local news if they are to remain relevant to their readers and advertisers.

His seminars and training workshops are practical and interactive, including handouts that participants can use to tailor policies and procedures to their operations. In addition to his standard menu of seminars, he works with newspapers to provide custom training for their needs, including individual writing critiques.

He released a book in 2005, “Bad News and Good Judgment: A Guide to Reporting on Sensitive Issues in a Small-Town Newspaper.” His second book, Votes and Quotes: A Guide to Outstanding Election Campaign Coverage,” was released in 2007. His third book, “Journalism Primer: A Guide to Community News Coverage for Beginning and Veteran Journalists,” was released in 2011.

He is involved in the Minnesota Newspaper Association as a member of its Journalism Education and Legislative committees. He is a former member of the Minnesota News Media Institute, the training arm of the Minnesota Newspaper Association. He served on the hearing panel for the Minnesota News Council, which promoted fair, vigorous and trusted journalism by engaging the news media and the public in examining standards of fairness.



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