

## Finding the Story

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Sure, you've mastered many tools of the trade. You're aggressive, relentless. But time and again you watch in bewilderment as big enterprise stories by your competitors or colleagues break around you – spectacular reporting efforts that overflow with unique findings.

*I could have done that story, you say. If only I had found it first.*

Don't just "follow your gut." Anyone can work a telephone, file public record requests, and query the web. Develop a strategy that helps excavate story nuggets into polished stories.

Begin by understanding the elements that make for great stories (see checklist handout). For most reporters, the mandate is to find great local stories that reverberate nationally.

Here are some of my hunting grounds and tips on selling your story.

### Stage 1: Scouting:

#### **Scour state agency disciplinary and regulatory reports**

Enforcement actions are rich repositories. Be vigilant for the unusual. Look for patterns. I once stumbled on a notation that a psychologist, who had sex with a patient, was not allowed to treat women age 50 and older. So, a 49-year-old woman represented a sexual risk but a 50-year-old woman was fair game? This nugget was one of many behind a three-day series (a Pulitzer finalist) that found more than 500 health providers who had sexually preyed on patients. Untold stories are often found in plain sight.

#### **Follow the paper; find the data**

Identify every public record connected to your topic. For example: a fatal police chase crash. How many agencies are involved? Police, paramedics, medical examiner – that's three sure-fire routes of public records. But fatal car crashes are also reported to a state computer system (which you can get), which reports to the federal Fatal Accident Reporting System (which you can obtain via IRE and NICAR). Veer from the beaten path. Look for lawsuits (depositions) and worker compensation claims (medical information). Who pays for the damage? Are police protected by sovereign immunity laws, even when they are at fault? How many cop cars crash each year?

#### **Review state audits and state or federal inspector general reports**

Make these reports a regular reading habit. Sure, most reports are boring, even old news. But embedded in these reports can be exciting story nuggets. These reports usually disclose all sources of information. I've culled new datasets and obscure records from

links in these reports. When you see aggregate data, ask how the agency derived that information. You might find new data-rich repositories.

### **Follow the law**

Lawsuits connect us to documents, exhibits, depositions and sources of every type. Lawyers are great sources; they are document-based creatures – like us – and they often relish media contact. Pick a state agency or large company and pull every related suit. Most will be dismissed but that doesn't mean that there isn't a story lurking within the pages.

### **Follow the money**

This Watergate-era mantra endures because it's true. Demand line-item budgets. Identify contractors. Look for questionable expenditures to unknown consultants or obscure companies. With state or public agencies, it's always fruitful to ask for a list of every civil settlement. Some states create a spreadsheet that shows legal settlements for all agencies.

### Stage 2: Research:

### **Get organized with a spreadsheet**

You have *the* idea. It's met the checklist challenge. Now you need to scrub the idea, pull and twist it and see if it falls apart. Don't pitch it to an editor just yet. Many story ideas fall into the trash after this phase – at least for me. An Excel spreadsheet is an excellent organizational tool to keep lists of names, companies, budget numbers, etc.

### **File preliminary public record requests**

Start the process quickly – time is not your friend. Make discreet requests – don't jam everything you want into a giant request. This way, you get the record as it's available instead of waiting for the agency to pull together 19 more items.

### **Create a timeline**

This is an essential tool. I use a Word file and start putting dates as well as chunky narrative passages from lawsuits or reports, etc. I use a timeline for every story. Not only does it help keep complex events in focus, it will save you time during the writing phase.

### **Find the guy in the basement**

No matter how obscure the topic, you can bet that there is someone, somewhere who has devoted their life to it. Find that person. I don't care if they wear foil around their head or weave conspiracy theories about Mars – I want their documents. To be sure, most of these sources will be well-heeled advocates. Remember, just because someone has an agenda doesn't mean they aren't right.

### **File a record request for all databases manuals**

What better way to discover what data is kept and all the fields of information. No redaction is required because these are the user manuals. Don't underestimate the power of this technique.

### Stage 3: Write the pitch memo

#### **Open with story language**

Tease the strength of the story. Structure it like a mini-top. Make sure to cover the bases in the project checklist: relevancy; potential for reform; unique findings; etc.

#### **Outline the reporting strategy**

Show your editor that you have a plan – step one, two and three. be honest about what you have and don't have, and what it will take to finish. I detail travel plans and projected costs.

#### **Don't forget multimedia**

Describe the rich array of photo, video and graphic possibilities

#### **Story structure**

State whether this is one large story or a series.