

30 tips

for top-rate newspapers

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Story ideas

- 1 Mission:** Reinvent the paper each day.
- 2 Brainstorming:** Paint the editor's office turquoise, purple and yellow and turn it into an ideas room. (The editor may need some convincing on this one.) Bring non-editorial staff into brainstorming.
- 3 Contacts:** Get the newsroom to make a mandatory six extra contacts per week – and check up on it. Set up readers' forums and open days.
- 4 Difference:** Take reporters out of their boxes. Sit with each one, find out what interests them, and then sell them something different.
- 5 Context:** We are still focusing on events and not underlying processes, so we write a story that says there is a gang warfare again and three people have been killed, without explaining why there are gangs or what is being done about police corruption. We need background, context and the local angle. We need to add value.
- 6 Select:** Instead of doing 20 stories badly, we'll do 10 that are relevant to readers and do them well. We pay for Sapa, we don't have to compete with them.
- 7 Mix the grill:** Bad news comes unbidden and cheap. Stockpile good news stories to offset the big, purely negative stories.

Transformation

- 24 Match, point:** Reporters need to realise they don't necessarily represent the target market. Try to see stories through the eyes of a person of a different sex, age or race.
- 25 Making it simple can be stupid:** Reporters with little experience of a community run the risk of contenting themselves with easy labels that obscure complexity – like the term Muslim fundamentalist in regard to the Cape Flats Pagad movement.
- 26 New horizons:** Try visits to informal settlements, mosques, and police stations, and attending lectures and reading selected materials about various communities. Bus trips for white reporters to the townships may smack of trips to the zoo, but it is better than nothing.
- 27 Making the effort:** In many cases, blacks make a daily effort to fit into a white world – whites have to try too.
- 28 Necessary, not sufficient:** Newsrooms need to be representative, but that is not enough. Having a diversity of staff backgrounds helps, but it does not automatically get a newspaper in touch with the communities it serves. If we aren't relevant to our readers, they're not going to buy the newspaper.
- 29 Cross boundaries:** We have to encourage communities to take an interest in each other. When a child is raped in Sandton, let's call an NGO or school teacher from Alexandra to comment. Make people see their common problems instead of unwittingly emphasizing the divide.
- 30 Meditate on this mantra:** there's a virtuous circle where great news by great journalists grows circulation.

Readers

- 8 It's the reporters, dummy:** Sensitise journalists to potential markets by analysing and debating market research. Too often, such surveys have not gone beyond the editor's desk.
- 9 Circulation:** Lazy readers are not to blame for falling sales. We're boring! If people are going to pay for us, they have to want us.
- 10 Tune in:** Not only do reporters not read their own and other newspapers, they don't watch television news or read news magazines or other publications. The first half hour of work should be designated for reading the papers.
- 11 Shooting for new ideas:** Assign someone to trawl through publications aimed at the opposite markets and pull out useful ideas.

Reporters

- 12 Listen up and liberate:** News-editors tend to dominate a discussion with a reporter. We need to listen more and hold back a bit before trying to shake the story into the form that is taking shape in our heads. Allow reporters more of their own voices.
- 13 Coaching:** A coach doesn't kick the ball himself, (nor does he kick the players!). He does what he can to get the best out of each member of the team. Coaching is not to be confused with critique, debrief, an edit or a re-write. It's a distinct and additional strategy.

- 14 Catch'em all:** Some reporters either need very little coaching, or they are very resistant to it. But no writer or sub is too experienced or old not to benefit from coaching.

- 15 Pay back:** We need systems of rewards for reporters.

Internet

- 21 Access:** Persuade, argue, nag and scream to get Internet access.
- 22 New angles:** Journalists can use the Net to help localise international stories and globalise the local.
- 23 Local is lekker:** The Internet means we can't compete with the Jerusalem Post on Israel, but you should see the job we can do on our own country and locality.

Story styles

- 16 Just the facts:** If media consumers prize entertainment and emotional fulfillment above information and intellectual satisfaction, then the most important facts of a story are not always the most important facts. Using more impressionistic first-person copy generates more feedback than when we reveal startling new information.
- 17 Great cliché hunt:** Get reporters to pore over papers hunting the overdone, share the humour and raise awareness.
- 18 South Africanise:** Stimulate reporters' interests in black literature and evolving SA idioms.
- 19 Tell the subs:** More creative writing is needed to capture the reader and keep interest. Subs and editors must accept and understand new styles of writing.
- 20 Visualise:** Reporters must be encouraged to think of stories in terms of graphics and pictures and to develop a strong visual sense of how a story can be presented.