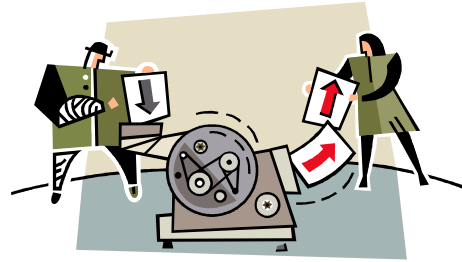


# Examples of Community Journalism – According to Those Who Practice it

*(Based on Q&As conducted in 2008)*



## Series #1

### **Q: Does your news paper use a personal approach for community journalism?**

Because we are such a small community (around 2,000), our paper uses a very personal approach on stories. An example could be identifying the parents or local relatives of someone featured in a story, especially if that person is now living elsewhere. While larger papers may shun the old "line 'em up and shoot 'em" approach to photos on awards and check presentations, we do a lot of that, and we always identify everyone in the photo. From the kid with the spelling bee certificate to the senior citizen who took first in a local bowling tourney to the gardener with the giant cucumber, there's a place for them in the paper.

### **Q: What does your newspaper do to get readers (and citizens in the community) involved in the news and the events in your community?**

I try to make reports of upcoming events or ongoing issues relate to the reader, such as the use of "our community" or "your newspaper" and the like. The front page of our paper includes a "how to contact us" spot with our phone, fax and e-mail, etc. We just this week started an electronic edition of the paper that is available online and there are ways for persons to e-mail us with their thoughts and news.

### **Q: Does your newspaper do anything special community-engaging projects? If so, could you give me an example?**

We work closely with the Chamber of Commerce on all their local events. We also work with local clubs and schools to publicize their happenings. We sponsor (and this is exciting, I'm sure) the annual turtle race at Olde Tymes Day each fall.

### **Q: And lastly, based on your experience, if I want to be a journalist what should I work on or focus on in school?**

Based strictly on my own personal experience, learn how to do good feature stories, articles about local people and what they do, because people stories are important and almost everyone has a story to tell. Try to bring bigger stories (like bond issues, municipal ordinances, etc.) to a more personal level, such as how it would affect the reader if passed, etc.

**Answers from: Dala Whittaker – The Enterprise, Cabool, Mo.**

**Q: What does your newspaper do to get readers involved in the news of your community?**

We print a lot of contributed photos that people bring to us. They include pictures of a youth with the turkey or deer he or she killed, organizations donating money to charity or a student graduating from college. Parents especially like to see their kids' names in the newspaper. People submit announcements when babies are born, people get married and couples celebrate wedding anniversaries. I once heard community journalism referred to as "scrapbook journalism," meaning people cut articles out of the newspaper to put in their scrapbooks. Another aspect of reader involvement is our Web site. There we allow readers to post comments to stories and upload photographs to share. It provides more interactivity than the print edition.

**Q: Does community journalism make your paper better?**

Definitely. We have an editorial staff of five people and we cannot be everywhere at once, especially when we also have to do a lot of the production of the newspaper (adjusting photos, laying out pages and updating the Web site). Readers often call us with story ideas. I believe it does help our reporting by giving us ideas of what our readers want to read. As far as circulation, yes I would say it helps there, too, because parents want to keep a copy for their scrapbook and extra copies to send to grandma and grandpa.

**Q: What is strength of your community newspaper?**

The Bolivar Herald-Free Press has a long-standing tradition of excellence, with seven Missouri Press Association Gold Cups. But more important than the awards is that, on average, 6,500 people purchase each issue of the BH-FP. That many people trust us to provide reliable information. By printing twice a week (Wednesdays and Fridays), we can cover more news and do it in a more timely manner than when we printed once a week.

**Q: Does your community newspaper have a weakness?**

Our biggest weakness is not having the editorial resources to cover all of Polk County as thoroughly as we should. We cover Bolivar city government, Bolivar school board and Polk County government thoroughly, but that leaves five other city governments and school districts that we do not have the resources to cover as thoroughly. Sports is another area where we are lacking in coverage simply because we do not have the manpower to cover all the county schools' sports programs as well as we should. In addition to six school districts, we also have a university in Bolivar for which we must cover all sports programs. We have one full-time sports editor who must cover it all with only minimal assistance from the rest of the staff.

**Q: Is it more important to learn how to write objective news stories or editorials?**

News stories. A lot of small-town newspaper editors don't even write editorials. (Personally, I do not like writing them, and I find it difficult to go from writing objective news stories to having to state an opinion on the same matter). Solid, objective reporting is what will gain the community's trust. Without that, they won't even bother reading your editorials, so it is important to learn reporting first. Editorial writing can come after that.

**Answers from: Charlotte Marsch – Herald Free Press, Bolivar, Mo.**

**Q: Does your newspaper use a personal approach to practicing community journalism?**

Community journalism is what makes papers like the Monitor unique and more effective in a small town versus a paper in a larger city. Reporters and editors have to get involved in a smaller community and this makes it possible to get to know more people. Being the editor of a small town paper is more rewarding than working for a larger paper. We have the opportunity to know people, make friends, share our reader's lives on a deeper level. We get involved and people come to expect us to cover the news accurately. They learn to trust us, and know we care about our community. I've become involved in the community and people know me. To me, it's a passion. It's not just a job, but a way to reach out to people—show them I care about who they are, what they are doing, and how life is treating them.

**Q: What does your newspaper do to get readers involved in the news?**

It takes hard work to get them involved. My philosophy is to just keep getting the word out to people through the paper. Repetition seems to help. An example of this is the recent Republic Relay for Life. I wrote a story about it and the new co-coordinators in January. Then each week I put in a spotlight article highlighting a cancer survivor, team captain, or corporate sponsor, just to keep the name Relay for Life in front of people. When one of the co-coordinators called to tell me they raised \$151,000, blowing their goal out of the water, she told me that people had commented to her about seeing the spotlights every week. She felt that having it out there like that each week was part of what helped them exceed their \$130,000 goal. Our Newspaper in Education program also delivers newspapers to the area schools to get kids involved in reading about their community.

**Q: Does community journalism make your publication better?**

Community journalism makes your publication better because it makes it possible for us to report at a deeper level. If you know the person, and they trust you, they are more likely to open up and share things. I do believe it improves reporting and it can be good for circulation. The more people's faces that are in the paper, the more likely you are to sell papers. And, if people trust you and know you are accurate they are going to read the product.

**Q: What is strength of your community newspaper?**

A strength of our paper is not only the local stories we write, but also all of the local content that people bring in for us. My readers know if they bring it in, it is going in. They now bring things in, e-mail me items, and even take their own photos to submit. This helps me out because it allows us to focus on what we need to cover and write up for the week. We don't have the time or the staff to cover everything, so this is our way of getting more news in the paper.

**Q: Does your newspaper have a weakness?**

I would say a weakness we have at this point in time is the inexperience in my staff. My reporter has never had journalism before, and is learning the job from me as we go along. My sports reporter was promoted, and I know have a college intern for the summer. The only veterans left are myself and our office manager, whose been here for 10 years.

**Answers from: Amy Brant – The Monitor, Republic, Mo.**

**Q: What approach does your newspaper take on practicing community journalism?**

South County Mail prides itself on being a community newspaper. Our focus always has to be local, local, local. We cover local government, local schools, local athletics, local happenings with the idea of serving our readers better than anyone by providing the most detailed coverage. We feel we can do this because we live here and are a part of the community. We provide background and insight that a larger media outlet, charged with covering a whole region, cannot. Getting to know the people you cover, and what is important to them, is crucial to successful community journalism.

**Q: What is a strength of your community newspaper?**

Dedication and heart. We really care about the people we work, play and live around. It forces you to be unflinchingly honest and ethical. If readers perceive you as taking a side or giving someone special treatment because you play softball or are in some other club together, your credibility is shot. It is crucial for people, friends included, to know that you are never going to play favorites, and that you are always going to have the reader's interest at heart first. Sometimes that means putting in ridiculous hours.

**Q: Does your newspaper have a weakness?**

Every job and every organization has a weakness but ours probably goes back to strength. It is hard to walk that fine line between caring about the community but remaining objective in your reporting. Slips happen, you just have to be on guard to try to prevent them.

**Q: What advice would you give someone pursuing a career in community journalism?**

You better really love it. The hours are long, people are going to take potshots at you because they perceive you as being in a position of power and you will never get rich doing it. But, the rewards can be amazing. They are intangible. If you are doing your job as a service to the community, because you really want your neighbors to be well-informed and enlightened, that comes across and your readers will love you. The times I've felt like I was beating my head against a wall have usually been the times where I get the most encouragement, cards, letters, phone calls and even hugs at ball games.

**Answers from: Alyssa Spradlin, South County Mail, Rogersville, Mo.**