

E-mail and Everyday People: Q&A with Steve Gunn

Journalists should work from the bottom up when writing stories, says Steve Gunn of *The Charlotte-Observer*. And that means getting in touch with average readers and ensuring they appear in the paper. The Internet can help make that happen, he says.

Q. How do reporters at the *Observer* use e-mail to stay in touch with everyday people?

A. You essentially accumulate a list of readers that you regularly e-mail looking for news, looking for ideas. One of the big things now is sending e-mails every so often to everybody in your e-mail address book asking them if there is any news. What you are looking for is things that are not coming from official sources, but that they know are going on in real life. So, it could be people who are government employees, but it could also be people on I-77 who saw something different with the traffic patterns.

Q. How fruitful are these fishing expeditions?

A. Generally, it is not going to be Watergate, although you never know. We have gotten e-mails over the transom with information that has led to investigative stuff. But it's more likely that it is going to be more human interest. Let's say, there's a zoned section. It's going to be something from there.

Q. How do reporters get names for the list?

A. Sometimes, it's self-selected: somebody writing us. Sometimes it's us putting out what we call "fetchers," soliciting people who want to be talked to about a specific story. Sometimes, when we are out doing a story, it kind of serendipitously comes up.

Q. Explain "fetchers."

A. "Fetchers" are requests we put in the paper or online. We say, "We're doing a story on the trend of people building bigger swimming pools in their yards. Do you have a big swimming pool? Call me." The best "fetchers," the ones that get the most response, are specific things that are directly relevant to people's lives. For example, we have a zoned section and the reporter wrote a story about traffic jams in this one area. He put a "fetcher" in and asked people to tell him the worst place for traffic that they knew. He got 200 responses. There you have a very limited circulation publication and you

have a tremendous reaction. If we had put in there, “What do you think about the philosophy of traffic?” we wouldn’t have gotten as good a response.

It’s the old problem of specificity. A general thing is “What’s the news?” But if we send out an e-mail or put something in the paper that’s more specific, say about summer vacations, and ask people if they want to be in it, we get a better response.

Q. Is there someone at the *Observer* who does this particularly well?

A. The woman who was the queen of this was traffic reporter Dianne Whitacre, who just retired. She had 1,100 people she regularly sent e-mails to. She kept all the names in a database by where they lived. So when we needed to know what the commuters on I-77 who live north of this exit thought about something, she had a list that she e-mailed. I can’t remember ever feeling that she was using the same people over and over; it was always growing.

Q. What kinds of details do you keep on each of those sources?

A. Name, e-mail address. Often, we put their phone number if we know it. We put what’s relevant, maybe their neighborhood or profession. This is not rocket science. We use Excel for the database.

Q. Is there one overall list reporters use?

A. We don’t do that, because each reporter needs something specific.

Q. Does this approach work for every beat?

A. Honestly, there are some beats that lend themselves to that – neighborhood coverage, traffic coverage, business coverage. Traffic is probably the poster child of how this would work. It works well with those beats, with those zoned coverage sections, where readers and reporters are closer to each other.

Q. What benefits does this approach give to readers?

A. In a way, you could say the Internet has made reporting more democratic. The media are more accessible. I think people like to feel they are represented in the media. They want to see themselves in the paper when they pick it up. They want to feel, “Hey, I’m real worried about my kids’ overcrowded classroom, and the paper is covering that and letting people like me talk about it.”

Q. Are there any drawbacks?

A. It's good to ask for reader input, but you tend to get the people who are the most into the topic. So you can't use it for broad, sweeping statements. If you say: "Are you the mother of triplets?" you won't get most mothers of triplets. Most of them are too busy!

Q. Can reporters be too reliant on the Internet and e-mail?

A. It's like drugs or alcohol: if you use it too much, it's bad. What you need to do is integrate this new reporting tool into what you do to maximize what you can get done.