

Covering Beats Tipsheet

By Doug Cospers

- Beats provide the publication the best opportunity to lay its fingers on the community's pulse -- to probe society and culture. Parachute and brush fire journalism can't do that.
 - Most big stories are broken by beat reporters because beats are rich hard news and feature story ideas.
 - Your readers depend on you to keep them informed about what their public officials are doing or are not doing. The system depends on you to keep it greased by living up to your responsibility to your readers.
 - Develop a network of sources -- secretaries and night watchmen as well as the top officials. The depth and breadth of your source network largely will determine the depth and breadth of your stories and your success as a beat reporter.
 - If you earn the readers' trust, you can expect good telephone tips from strangers.
 - Be physically present on your beat. Almost daily contact is essential. Several phone calls every day are necessary on some beats, especially law enforcement or other beats that may have quickly developing news.
 - When working a beat, don't let yourself drown in routine. If you can't cover everything, don't try. Go for NEWS and miss a few small meetings if you have to.
 - Keep a current file of office, home and mobile phone numbers.
 - Remember to write for your readers, not your sources.
 - A word about sources: People are not tools or objects or merely means to an end. And they are usually not stupid. They know when they are being "cultivated," and they don't like it. Would you? Establish honest, open relationships with your sources. After all, you must trust them, and they must trust you.
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- **Tips on getting started on a new beat:**
 - Study documents relevant to your beat and people on it. Study the organization's budget, calendar and founding papers if there are any. They are filled with story ideas.
 - Review the morgue, or publication library for past stories. Some of the best ideas come from following up forgotten old stories.
 - Read the competition.
 - Get on the mailing and emailing lists on your beat.
 - Keep a tickler file for follow up stories.
 - Formally introduce yourself to the chief sources -- the secretaries and their bosses. Let them know that you are a professional and that they can expect you to act like one. Get to know other sources in the course of your frequent beat checks.
 - Show your sources you care about them and their work by frequent visits and sound, responsible reporting.
 - Help your sources with a little public relations when you can.

REMEMBER: Everything that happens on your beat is your responsibility. Don't miss it!