

## **First-Aid Tips: Survival in the Journalism Freelance Jungle**

By Matt Baron

In January 2005, Medill magazine, the Medill School of Journalism alumni publication, solicited tips from freelance writers for an issue. My suggestions were among those included in the magazine, albeit in edited form due to space constraints.

Below are suggestions that may help folks looking to survive in the freelance journalism jungle:

### **- Be a team player.**

When contacted by a Tribune staffer or another freelancer for help on a story—even stories for which I'll get no pay or credit—I go out of my way to be prompt and helpful. It's simply the right thing to do, and how I'd want to be treated.

As interesting tidbits come across my path, I pass on story tips to editors, even when they aren't in my beat or coverage area. Not only is it the right thing to do, but also editors are more likely to think of me when assigning stories that could go to any number of people.

### **- Leave your ego at the door.**

Some folks may lift their nose at “grunt” work, such as covering tedious meetings or inheriting a stressful last-minute deadline because of someone else's poor planning.

But true grunt work is forced manual labor in an oppressive country without clean water. And the most dazzling buildings start with unglamorous-looking foundations. There's security in being viewed as the guy who helps lay in the foundation.

## **- When in doubt, communicate**

You can't be "too" in touch with editors. Call on the phone, e-mail, visit the office to build a rapport. Send a weekly update of stories you're working on—I started that over a year ago and it helps keep me on track, and keeps my editors in the loop on coming work. Send good, concise pitches. Write good, concise stories.

## **- Be willing to do work in unusual, inconvenient settings.**

When strolling my sleeping twins during their first year, I conducted interviews daily on my cell phone, leaning over on the stroller as I scribbled notes. I've done more than a few interviews, dripping wet and in a towel after clambering out of the shower to a ringing phone.

If the phone rings and I'm able to talk, then my "office" is open. It's amazing what a few two-minute conversations can do for a story.

## **- Regularly plant story seeds with sources.**

Especially when covering a beat, plenty of stories have "long legs"—the potential for periodic follow-up articles. Keep in touch with key contacts and reconnect with old contacts to see what's new.

## **- Stories are all around us. Pay attention!**

A week before our babies were due, my wife and I were returning home from a shopping expedition. About a mile from our home, we saw cops all over the place. I asked an officer what was going on, heard there was an escaped jail prisoner, and contacted the Trib Tower.

I filed a breaking story within a few hours, as well as a follow-up story the next day on the prisoner's capture.

*For more than 20 years, Matt Baron, founder of Chicago-based **Inside Edge: Public Relations & Media Services**, was a staff and freelance reporter for small-town weeklies, big-city dailies and national magazines. Through workshops, webinars and columns, Baron has trained thousands of reporters and PR professionals how to tell stories more effectively. You can reach him at [Matt@InsideEdgePR.com](mailto:Matt@InsideEdgePR.com) or 708.860.1380.*