

BREAKING NEWS ONLINE

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CNHI Regional Editorial Seminar

Every breaking story is a chance to show readers they cannot let an hour go by without checking our Web sites. The Web gives us the tools to beat the competition, including television and radio, when big stories break. All we need to do is teach editors, reporters and photographers to think like they work for a wire – a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week news operation with a deadline a minute. We must steadily feed updates, bulletins, photos and video to our sites for readers with an insatiable appetite for news.

Write Bright and Tight: Use simple, declarative sentences. Emphasize strong verbs. Resist weak modifiers. Web readers have less patience than print readers. (Ever hear of someone curling up with a good Web site?) Don't waste their time.

Cascade Coverage: Growing stories get growing treatment. A car wreck that ties up interstate traffic is an update to your site's "Local news" section. Wait, it's an overturned school bus. You send people, at least one with a camera to bring back a lead photo for the site. Firefighters are trying to free trapped children? Start blogging. Beer cans beneath the driver's seat mean follow-ups, so you give the story its own section on your site.

Blog: The blog is now a staple of online breaking coverage. A running diary, it lists the most recent event first. It is the easiest way to tell a big news story in digestible bits. It gives your site a sense of urgency. It serves readers who check back for updates.

Things to keep in mind:

- **Work from one story file.** There are lots of ways to build a blog on your Zope-supported site. This is the fastest and easiest. Create a story. Rank it as No. 1 or No. 2 in your local news section. Update, refresh and republish.
- **Appoint a blogger.** This could be reporter, editor or photographer. Your blogger needs near-constant access to Zope. Your blogger must write well and quickly. Your blogger needs to be at a desk, or near a phone, easily accessible to everyone covering the story.
- **Use time stamps.** Every entry begins with a time, and a date if the story warrants. Time stamps give your site urgency. They help explain the chronology, as specific events turn into important moments.
- **Spice it up.** Blog entries are breaking news, such as police bulletins. They are also narrative slices from the scene, describing what happened according to a witness. Keep in mind, "narrative" doesn't mean long.
- **Write an anchor.** Remember first-time readers. Anchor your coverage with a nuts-and-bolts story that links to the blog. Update it as you get pertinent information.
- **Link to documents and other sites.** This gives your blog extra dimension. When you find the company that operates the school bus that overturned on the interstate, link to its homepage from your blog. Bird-dog sources that give readers relevant information, and post those to your site. But, again, don't waste your reader's time.

Headlines Matter: Web headlines are as important as those in print. Yet they often have half as much space. Avoid labels ("Fire department notes") for active verbs and details ("Fire ravages house, kitten escapes") that compel readers to click through.

Think Many Media: The Web works like a newspaper: You don't just publish a story, you put together packages with multiple elements. The Web allows so many more opportunities. Post photos as well as video. Can't do video? Post an audio file of an interview with a key witness.

Plan Tomorrow's Newspaper: Your blog helps outline the next day's Page One story. But that story – a recap of what happened yesterday – isn't enough. It will be crusty when it hits. (This is true, by the way, even if you don't break the story online.) So look for the fresh angle, the why-it-matters perspective, that gives your coverage depth and context.

Grow a Culture in Your Newsroom: And I'm not talking bacteria. Your entire newsroom must recognize your Web site as an independent news product – a 24/7 news product – and not just a billboard for today's newspaper.

Some steps to take, if you have not already:

- **Put someone in charge.** You wouldn't start publishing a new tabloid without putting someone in charge, would you? You may not have the budget for a "Web editor." But even a small newspaper needs someone responsible for building content on the site, especially stories and multimedia reports exclusive to the site.
- **Now make everyone responsible.** Don't leave it to the Web person to do all of the work. Everyone in the newsroom is a multimedia journalist. Everyone must file for the Web, and for print, every day.
- **Emphasize breaking news.** Use the Web to report breaking stories that may not even be big stories in the next day's paper. That fender-bender tying up traffic is a breaking story this afternoon, well worth six inches on the Web, even if it shows up in tomorrow's police notes.
- **Update regularly.** Readers quickly get wise to a stale site. Make sure you update regularly. Again, don't put it on one person or go it alone. Everyone in the newsroom files to the Web throughout the day.

Plan Now: News-hungry journalists love talking about how they will cover the big one. Smart editors direct these twisted daydreams into actual disaster plans. Don't forget the Web. What's your step-by-step plan for updating the site with a breaking news story? Who will do the blogging? Do reporters know how to reach that person?

Sources and Resources

I didn't invent this stuff. Much of it is common sense. Covering breaking news for the Web is also the subject of many articles available on the Internet. Some worth noting:

→ "Journalism 2.0: How to Survive and Thrive: A digital literacy guide for the information age," Mark Briggs. This easy, 128-page book is free online. Or pay \$10 and the University of Maryland's J-Lab will send you a printed copy.

Link: http://www.kcnn.org/resources/journalism_20/

→ "Chip on Your Shoulder," Chip Scanlon. Chip's blog about writing on Poynter.org has turned to the subject of breaking news blogs a few times since the Virginia Tech shootings. The easiest way to find these is to navigate through the Poynter site to Chip's column, then search with the box at the bottom of each page. If you insist on links:

- "Breaking-news blogs: Where old and new combine," 04/26/2007

Link: <http://poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=121745>

- "Blogging breaking news: When a big story happens in your backyard," 04/30/2007

Link: <http://poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=122219>

- "Lessons from the field," May 1, 2007

Link: <http://poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=122381>