BEYOND THE SNORE: SEVEN PATHS and an 8th Way to STORY (plus a few side roads)

Any event, idea, issue, press release, calendar listing, trend, agenda item, dinner conversation, billboard, church bulletin … has potential beyond the obvious or traditional. After you post your Web-burst but before you move on to the next assignment, or before you dismiss an idea as tired or predictable, use this brainstorming process to identify fresh, creative enterprise stories: ***

1. ISSUE OR TREND. Does the event of the day tie into something bigger and ongoing? Is it a window of opportunity to revisit an issue readers need to know about, or to reveal how that issue plays out in specific ways? What is the bigger backdrop or context for the idea of the moment?

2. EXPLANATORY. Can you show readers why something happened or how something works? Is this event, issue or trend worth a microscopic examination that helps readers understand how their world works?

3. PROFILE. Is there a character you relate to at the center of an event or issue, or affected by it? Is there a "tour guide" to help readers see/understand an issue? (NOTE: Profiles don't have to be about people; they have to be about character. You can profile a place or an event, as long as you bring its character to life.)

4. VOICES. Are there people who can speak to this idea or event in a way that illuminates it for readers, that provides deeper or more expert layers of understanding, or that connects readers to each other? If you could eavesdrop on a passionate and enlightening dinner debate, whom would you want at the table?

5. DESCRIPTIVE. Is there somewhere you can take the reader to *show* an event or idea or issue? Can you be the readers' surrogate to show them some relevant place or happening they would not have easy access to?

6. INVESTIGATIVE. Who has power and/or money and how are they using it? Is there a public interest at stake? Do records, reports or data bases reveal a pattern or problem?

7. NARRATIVE. Does an event or idea lend itself to a beginning-middle-end story that follows a central character through plot, action and forward motion, tension or conflict and resolution? Is there a universal or macro theme you can reveal with an individual or micro story?

The 8th Way. VISUAL. Does a story need to be *seen* to be best understood? Is there an emotional or physical center to a story that makes it best told primarily through photos, graphics, illustrations, video or audio, with words as supporting material?

*** Some notes on brainstorming stories:
- The best creative thinking on deadline comes from a disciplined structure. Rather than throwing spaghetti at the wall, use focused, purposeful questions to drive deeper ideas.
- Good questions are the key to good ideas, and to good stories. Each of the above story approaches or genres is driven by a central question. Actual stories will overlap genres – an explanatory piece will contain elements of a profile or background of an issue. But for brainstorming, try to stay with the one question and dive deep instead of broad until you are ready to move on to the next.
- Separate brainstorming from production. Separate the blue-sky mind from the editor mind. Once you collect the best and wildest ideas, you can bring them back to reality. Do not – repeat, DO NOT – edit ideas.
- Depending on your publication, you may want to create your own list of brainstorming questions or genres. Consider this a basic, but not exhaustive, template.
- The VISUAL step is not an afterthought but a thinking tool. It can be it's own story genre, or can encompass all the other genres. Multi-media thinking can be a boost to brainstorming, and a story destination.

~ Jacqui Banaszynski ~
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