

What is news?

~Peter Turkington, Strategic Communications Solutions

In today's constantly connected, media centred world, this is the billion dollar question.

The basic premise that attracts a reporter to a story is friction – two competing agendas; two people facing off over a contentious issue, two groups that are at odds with each other.

Friction tends to lead to interest, and that's what reporters and editors want. Ultimately, they want a story that will cause their readers, listeners, or viewers to sit up and pay attention. If the story isn't out of the ordinary – if it's just every-day stuff – it will not be read, heard or seen.

Once journalists have found a story that their audience will find interesting, they stick to a simple formula – the five W's.

We are taught to use the formula of who, what, where, when, why and how from the earliest years in school. And, it's just as important today as it was when we first learned to frame a story. However, there is one significant difference when dealing with the media. There's a sixth W.

Why should anyone care?

This is, perhaps, the most important W – as every editor will ask it before letting a story see the light of day.

The bottom line is, that we as communicators have to make the stories we tell newsworthy. The more that we strive to hit the right buttons with the media, the better the chances of seeing them on the evening news.

But what makes a story newsworthy?

Let's take a look at some headlines and see what gets a story published or aired.

Thousands of Ontario farmers protest – Plea for government aid to avoid crisis

This story is newsworthy. It deals with a point of friction between two organizations. Disagreement generally leads to an interesting story. The simplest example is politics. Political arguments and posturing get a lot of press for precisely this reason. There is disagreement, conflict, unrest.

What about this one – is it news?

Wall Street firm wants to purchase NHL

Absolutely! It's dramatic. It's shocking. It's emotional.

How about this one?

20th Annual Oakville Polar Bear Dip raises \$49,000 for Tsunami Relief

This is a local twist on a larger story (i.e. the December 26, 2004 Tsunami in Southeast Asia). Local angles are important as they have a direct impact on a targeted audience. Brent Hanson, news anchor for CKCO TV, describes the relevance of localization, “the viewer will want to know if they know anyone involved and if it will have an impact on their own lives.”

In addition to the examples above, the unusual and unexpected often make interesting news. You just have to look at the popularity of tabloids such as the *National Enquirer* for proof.

Another important aspect of newsworthiness is universal appeal. That is, a story that has an impact on ‘everyone.’ Consider the outpouring of sympathy from around the world when Pope John Paul II passed away. Those that went to St. Peter’s Square and tuned in on television were not all members of the Catholic faith. There was universal mourning for a man that had managed to reach out to people of many faiths during his pontificate.

Last but not least, entertainment or celebrity often garner instant newsworthiness. A little over ten years ago, viewers were glued to their television sets as OJ Simpson led a squad of police cars down an L.A. highway in a white Ford Bronco. Today just as many people are following the daily reports of the case against Michael Jackson.

To conclude, the words that seem to repeat over and over again as I write this piece are **story** and **interest**. Ultimately, it’s all about the story and how you package it. An awareness of the components of what makes a story newsworthy will help you become successful in getting your key messages to the right audiences.