



Digging Deeper and Understanding Your Community: Q&A with John X. Miller

For years, John X. Miller took the newsroom staff at the *Detroit Free Press* on community “bus tours” which got journalists away from their desks and into the city. Along the way, he organized visits from community leaders who would get on the bus at different stops and explain their role in Detroit. Now, he has expanded these bus tours beyond the newsroom.

Q. What is the goal of your bus tours?

A. I conducted my last bus tour for the newsroom in September 2006, but the idea’s gained popularity among the executive staff for the corporation, so I’m now setting up a bus tour for our business side. They want to get the same thing out of it – generate interest and information about the market.

And the framework and the premise are identical – get people out of their seats and into the community as a way to explore and examine things they haven’t seen and to let them have conversations with people who are making things happen.

Q. What are bus tours like? Who goes on these tours and where do you go?

A. We try to have the tours be very specific to a geographical area, so we had a tour of Southwest Detroit that took a half-day and had six or seven locations. We went on a tour of McComb County, one of the fastest growing areas, and took a tour along a specific area that was growing. We visited the GM technical center – one of the largest in the country. We spent about one and a half hours there watching everything they did, from matching the paint on cars to figuring out stopping distances.

We ask reporters as well as artists, designers, copy editors and assignment editors to go on the tours. Everybody needs some kind of edification as far as what’s in our marketplace. We drive by a lot of places day in and day out, but we don’t know what lies within. We make sure to take tours and stop at places that can be revisited at a later time.

Q. How do you get journalists interested in the tours?

A. We tell them they’ll gain insight and possible links to new sources. We tell them that they’ll learn something they didn’t know before about the geography we’re touring and we offer them free lunch.

Their attitudes afterward are “Wow, we didn’t know what we were missing. We didn’t know all of this stuff about the area.” It was much more interesting than they thought it was going to be.

Q. What about the community members you pick for the tours?

A. Sometimes we have politicians get on the bus with us, like mayors, members of the Chamber of Commerce and municipal officials. We focus on a geographical area first and then we figure out where to start. We go into the history as well. One of the oldest churches in this part of the country is a nearby Catholic church. The priest gave us a tour and we got to see some of the relics in there. It was two miles from the newsroom and most of the people on the tour didn’t realize it was there or its significance to Detroit.

Q. Describe what you call “listening posts,” the places where journalists can learn more about their community.

A. One of the places we stopped on the last tour was the YMCA Youthville, where they work with mentoring teens and children. It’s also a recreational facility.

As a listening post, you can go there on any given day and talk to teens about what’s going on in their lives.

You can just go sit and listen – not necessarily ask questions. The important part is listening without intruding, so that the conversations don’t change and people won’t perform for the media.

Q. You emphasize holding a dialogue with the public. How does that work?

A. I think dialogues are different from focus groups, because in focus groups you’re listening for a different thing and testing an idea. With dialogue, you can either convene conversations or let them happen naturally. The aspect that’s critical is allowing people to speak their mind without being intimidated to do so. The truth looks and sounds different when someone believes they can say it how they feel it.

You need some ground rules with dialogue – ones as simple as be respectful, talk one at a time, make sure you make eye contact, call someone by their name, no profanity. These ground rules are the key thing with dialogue.

Q. What if people don’t get along?

A. You should expect misunderstanding, contentiousness and disagreement – so you need to plan for this so it doesn’t simply turn into a debate where no one wins, they just get their point across.

Everyone’s a participant and they gain from listening and hearing others’ perspective, thinking over that and then replying, not necessarily replying just as a reflex to someone’s argument.

Q. As the community affairs director, how are you helping newsrooms understand and connect with citizens?

A. One of the things I’m trying to work on is to have our building be a place for a company to come and hold its meetings. I say, “We don’t have the money to fund this scholarship or program, but what is just as important is making a connection.”

We establish our location as a listening post and then we can invite in who we want, as often as we want, and help direct that conversation.

We're looking to do this with groups of people where we don't already have robust connections. We have a growing Latino community and we didn't know these people before. We just had a meeting with a group of Hispanic MBAs, so the journalists could come by at the end of their meeting and have a meet-and-greet – a networking experience.

We have the meeting space and a great cafeteria. All we ask is that there's a 45-minute networking time at the end so business cards can be exchanged.

Q. What are other ways to build trust with the community?

A. I think trust is a function of believability – people have to believe what you're telling them and the more transparent you can be in how you make decisions increases that believability. Some of the things the Covering Communities site talks about are understanding communities and framing stories. You can accomplish these by having authority, authenticity, accountability and affection. Trust is a combination of those things.

Newspapers automatically have authority, but authenticity derives from accuracy and truthfulness. Newspapers need to be as transparent as possible so they can be held accountable – I'm afraid that many newspapers don't have that and aren't very interested in having that. We want to hold other people accountable, but who holds us accountable?

Q. People don't always associate affection with journalism. How does it fit into community journalism?

A. Affection is the last thing that makes up trust. How does a newsroom convince the community that it loves the community it serves and is there to report in its best interests? It needs other vehicles to tell the community what it does – to validate itself. We have to prove to the community that they should like us. Even if they have a negative news story, they'll trust us a bit more if they know that we run a charity that helps the community out a lot or they'll remember the story that actually helped the community last year.

You have to have an affinity for helping the community. We need that capacity in the newsroom. When we're arguing about what we do, we need to argue with all the ammunition that we have, including our good stories.