



Getting to Know Newcomers: Q&A with Leigh Dyer

Like many reporters at *The Observer*, Dyer keeps a computer database of sources. But technology can't take the place of getting out into the community, she says. Reporters still need to balance technology with old-fashioned shoe leather.

Q. How do you get in touch with everyday people?

A. It's not that hard. It's a matter of reaching out. You just have to be sure to get out of the office, be out and about at community events. My years of having to randomly approach shoppers while covering the retail beat give me a certain comfort with the man-on-the-street process. I try to get out to community events frequently. Basically, I use every event I go to as a chance to meet people. I think the key is constant involvement, just constantly being out there, constantly going to events.

Q. What about using the Internet to stay in touch?

A. I also use my Web presence. I probably get about 20 to 30 e-mails a week. I respond to everyone who e-mails me and get e-mail addresses for people whenever possible to add to my database.

Q. How difficult is it to connect with newcomers in Charlotte?

A. Newcomers tend to be more active and enthusiastic about forming connections. Once settled, people tend to stick to their status quo a bit more.

By their definition, though, newcomers are a shifting community. You're always trying to get the word out to the new people as the old people are losing interest. I think it's more challenging than other specialty topics.

Q. Where do you go to meet people who are new to the area?

A. It's a combination of man-on-the-street and a targeted approach. For example, there was a newcomers event sponsored by one of our bureaus. There were only three people there, but I made use of all three.

One of the things I did early on was go to outdoor concerts. I found that was a good place to approach people. Those concerts tend to be held in high-growth areas. I had good luck when I approached people there; they were almost always newcomers.

Q. Is it more challenging because newcomers can't refer you to other newcomers?

A. You would think that and I did think that, but newcomers tend to congregate. They tend to realize they have that in common. They are much more active about getting connected, getting involved, meeting people. They're so enthusiastic. Many of them have formed connections with people who moved here from their area. They have certain places they hang out. They have certain bars.

Q. What prompted you to start a database?

A. I always thought it would be a good idea. I covered retail a long time; every so often I'd have to go out and see what shoppers thought. I wished I'd kept a database because if I needed to, I could have found shoppers quickly instead of having to get in the car and go find them.

So the database was something in the back of my mind I knew I wanted to do from the beginning.

Q. How does it work?

A. It's an Excel file and I just manually enter everyone I run across.

Q. How useful has it been?

A. It works pretty well. When some new Census data came out and revealed there were more African American newcomers in the area, a reporter came to me and asked for help; I was able to pull some names from the database because I've had personal contact with most of those people.

It's early yet, but I'm starting to see patterns. There's a ton of connections here with upstate New York. That's actually a story I'm doing. I plan to look at the database for trends and patterns.

I also have this feature in my three-day-a-week column, where I run a newcomer's headshot and print questions. I've been using the database to keep track of the people I need to contact for that feature. So it has an immediate application.

Q. Are there any drawbacks to using a database?

A. Inevitably, I won't be entering some information about people that I later wish I might have, such as their religion, their ethnicity, or something else I don't have a field for. It's a pretty basic database. I get their e-mail address, phone number, name, age at time of interview, when they moved here, where they moved here from and an "other" field where I put whatever will

help me remember things about them. I don't want to ask every single person a bunch of questions that might make them uncomfortable.

Q. Do you ask for permission to include someone in your database?

A. If I asked them for their contact information, they know they might be contacted again. Sometimes, I say I need a few more pieces of information for my database and they understand that they're going to be part of that.

Q. Another tool you use is your blog. Why did you decide to start that?

A. It was part of my vision for this job. Most newcomers find us online first before they find us in the newspaper. I just knew it was going to be crucial to have a strong online presence. So, it was a choice between a blog and a question-and-answer thing that we do. Those are the two ways we establish an online presence. I chose the blog, *New Around Town*, because I wanted to be freer to write my own things. (*Dyer started the blog on June 15, 2006.*)

Q. Some of those entries have drawn quite a few negative comments. How do you feel about that?

A. It's been really interesting for me. There's this whole thing: we're so welcoming and southerners are so hospitable. I think there's this undercurrent that people don't express in polite company that they use the anonymity of the Internet to address. So there's this undercurrent of hostility. It's just growing pains.

Q. How do you handle negative comments?

A. For a while, I had a couple of entries with zero comments and it was a relief to me. I didn't have to worry about slurs or obscenities. Once I started getting the really ugly stuff, I set it up so that the comments are automatically e-mailed to me. Whenever I see a bad one, I go in there and delete it.

But I don't want to change how the system works. If you have to log on and give your real name, you won't comment. I'd rather get anonymous comments than no comments at all.

Q. Has that changed how you blog?

A. It's taught me to be careful about subjects that are divisive and to treat those subjects carefully. I still blog about whatever I'm interested in or have time for, but I do give certain subjects more thought since that first shocking batch of comments.

Q. What other tools do you use to connect with newcomers?

A. A lot of times I say, "What do you think about this? Drop me a line." I'm hoping people will e-mail me so I can have their e-mail and contact information to use in the database. But now I find most of them comment rather than e-mail.

I recently tried a give-away and it was so successful. I put a promo in, saying that I was giving away two free tickets to a local barbecue I wrote about. You had to be a newcomer to be entered into the drawing. Thirty-seven newcomers said they wanted a chance to win free tickets in response to that one sentence.

Now I have this whole new database of 37 newcomers, so I invited them to a focus group I'm having. I'm trying to get people to come into the newsroom to talk. Since those were people who expressed an interest in free food, I thought e-mailing them directly would work.

Q. What makes you so connected to newcomers?

A. There's no substitute for getting out and meeting people in person. E-mailing and blogging are nice but it's really so much better to meet people face to face. I go to a lot of events and shake a lot of hands and meet a lot of people that way. People are more inclined to help you if they've already met you in person.