

Finding Famous People

So You Want to Be a Journalist · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

Finding the famous

This is about finding famous people (or experts). That is, finding people to quote on the topic of your article.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Ask around. Yes, as simple as that. You'd be surprised who your friends and acquaintances have as friends and acquaintances. "Hi! You know lots of interesting people. Do you know anyone who knows about [topic]?" Your friend says no, but so-and-so might. You phone so-and-so, and lo and behold, her cousin's wife's mother is an expert in the topic, and here's her home phone number . . . Yes, it happens like that if a.) you make enough calls and b.) if you have the right friendly, inquiring and appreciative phone manner. Remember: if it's only information you're asking for, everyone likes to help nice people.
1. Keep building a contact book. When you see other articles on your topic, make a note of the name and title of people quoted. If they've been willing to be quoted once before, they'll do it for you too.
1. Go to the public relations department. It seems that every famous person and every topic is covered somewhere by a PR (public relations) person. Phone these people. They are paid to get as much information as possible about their famous person (or topic, or both) out to the public. They are paid to be helpful to all journalists. Use them to get through to the people you want to talk to directly.
1. Go to the famous person's website and look for a section called "media releases". At the ends of these media releases, there is usually the work, home and mobile numbers of the PR people, so you can phone them out of hours.
1. Go to the expert factories called universities. They are bulging with authorities on everything, and universities have terrific PR departments which can lead you quickly to talkative, helpful experts. If you're looking for an expert in say tropical diseases, log into some university websites, and type

in "tropical diseases". Then look up "staff". It will often list their work and home numbers and their mobiles. Bingo! You've got your expert.

1. Use the Yellow Pages and the White Pages. I never stop bashing this primary piece of information into the brains of my students from day one. The telephone directories are your most important research tools. All directories are on the internet.

1. Use the internet. It will give you some great leads to famous people (and experts), but it can be slow. You might have to send an email, and since most experts and all famous people receive a lot of emails, they might be slow to respond, or they might not respond at all. That's why phone contact is the fastest and most professional way to find experts and get them talking and providing you with fresh quotes, quickly.

1. Helen Townsend The best researcher I ever worked with was my sister-in-law, now a famous book author, Helen Townsend. She had an odd, but effective telephoning habit. She would not let go of the telephone handset until she had found the person she was after. She used her right hand to leaf through phone directories and to make notes. But while she was not talking on the phone, her left hand remained holding on to the handset, even as it rested in the phone cradle. This was her self-challenge. It was annoying and cramping to not let go of the phone. But until she tracked the person down, she held on to it. She always found her person.

1. Find agents. Go to your hardcopy Yellow Pages. [Never forget how valuable the telephone directories are in finding people.] Go to the index of the Yellow Pages. Look up "A" and look for AGENTS. Underneath the word, it's divided into Entertainers' Agents, Casting Agents and so on. Then look up the kind of agent you're interested in. Phone an agent and ask: "Do you represent So-and-So?" If they say no, ask: "Who does?" Agents are usually aware of which agent represents who. Is this a bit of work and inconvenience for you? Of course it is. It's what's called "digging around" or ground floor research . . . finding someone by asking around, asking around, asking around.

Finally, remember that you must constantly ask.

Ask, ask, ask!!!

Never stop dialing and never stop asking each person to lead you to others. Your phone calls shouldn't cost you more than say 17 each. But your personal time is worth \$128 an hour (the Media Alliance's union rates). The faster you get to your experts, the faster your writing is done, allowing you to move on to create the next paying article.

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