

50 places to shop for story ideas

January 2, 2012 [Ronald R. Rodgers](#)

Every newsroom has 'em: Reporters who come up with their own stories, and reporters who don't come up with their own stories. The job is much easier – and enjoyable – if you're a story hunter rather than a perennial assignment receiver.

Funny, it's usually the reporters who don't come up with their own stories who grumble about the assignments they receive and the 'news' value of such stories. "Half of what we cover isn't news!" a perennial assignment receiver might protest.

Story hunters – whether they be reporters or editors – usually always have a slew of ideas. Perennial assignment receivers can change into story hunters. . . . with a little effort. If you're having trouble getting your own story ideas, try these 50 tips. They're simple. They're effective. And they should virtually guarantee that you will start to get in the habit of hunting for your own ideas.

1. The Internet: Check out your local Internet service providers' websites. Most ISPs host free web space for members to have their own websites. Usually, you'll find people with simple websites about their hobbies, family, groups, etc.
2. The grocery store: Scan those bulletin boards.
3. Veterinarians' offices: The public loves animal stories. And there's no shortage here. I once spotted a photo of a badger in a vet's office. I asked about it, knowing the animal is virtually extinct in Ontario, Canada. Turns out, the animal was found injured only kilometres away and was being rehabilitated.
4. Cable television station: Most run a community events service. Check it out. (And don't forget your own newspaper's community events listings)
5. Health department website: It's interesting what officials will sometimes post on their websites, yet not send press releases to the media. For example, our health department will post notices about beach closings on its website, but will not issue press releases about closings.
6. Start Googling: Google names, Google town names, Google organizations' names. You'll be surprised what you find.
7. Arena bulletin boards: Association news gets posted here.
8. Church bulletins: We have a staffer who routinely gets tips from church bulletins.
9. Community signs: Be alert when you're driving and read community signs. What are people publicizing to other people?

10. Rezoning notices: You see these posted on properties where there is a proposed zoning change. Read them. There's information there about development happening in your community.
11. Classified ads: People sell items. They look for items. And then there are the oddities such as a cemetery plot for sale. . . you never know what you'll find.
12. Ads: Don't confine your reading to the classified ads. Check out the other ads in your paper. Businesses and organizations use ads to announce events.
13. Club notes: Many newspapers print club notes from various organizations and clubs. It's amazing what groups will bury in these hand-ins. Once, a local club buried an item about the coming visit of a Belgian prince. In another item, a Women's Institute formed in 1918 announced that it was folding due to declining membership.
14. Your local ISP's forums: Local Internet Service Providers usually operate discussion forums on their websites. These forums are usually very locally based and feature chatter about all sorts of issues and newsworthy items.
15. Anniversary notices: Read 'em! It's how you'll find terrific human interest stories such as Mae and Jack celebrating 75 years of marriage.
16. Graduation notices: These can be a treasure trove of story ideas. Learn about the local high school grad who's going to university in Australia, or the university grad who's starting a new career in Hong Kong as an ambassador's assistant, or the young woman who's becoming a police officer.
17. Obituaries: There are nuggets buried (pardon the pun) in obituary notices. Nuggets like the person who once taught in a one-room schoolhouse, or the soldier who landed on the beach on D-Day, or the fellow who was a prospector. All stories waiting to be told.
18. School newspapers: Students will publish all kinds of breaking stories about their school in their newspapers. Find out what events are upcoming, what trips are planned, and about staff and student accomplishments.
19. Sports association websites: Find out how teams are doing, what tournaments are scheduled, get association news.
20. Telephone poles: People aren't supposed to staple notices to power poles, but they do. Sure, some notices tout stuff like 'Lose 10 pounds in 10 Days', but others may advertise a giant neighbourhood yard sale or a rock concert by an up and coming young band.
21. Sports hand-ins: There are some human interest gems in those writeups that parents and coaches slide through the mailslot late at night at your office: little Johnny who scored six goals in one hockey game, or the basketball game where Jenny netted 47 points.
22. Eavesdrop: Eavesdrop at the grocery store checkout. Eavesdrop at the coffee shop. Eavesdrop at the arena or sports field. Learn to listen to what people are talking about.

23. School websites: Learn about staff news, alumni news, policies, upcoming events and happenings.
24. Blogs: Search for bloggers online in your community. What are they talking about?
25. Meeting minutes: Government organizations (councils, committees, school boards, conservation authorities) usually post notes from their meetings. If you weren't at the meetings, it's a quick way to review what was discussed and stay on top of newsworthy decisions. Also, look at agendas before meetings.
26. Tourism websites: Find out what's being promoted as tourism destinations, and find out what's being overlooked. Get a list of festivals. Find out who belongs to your local tourist association. Learn where the association is going to promote tourism.
27. Radio, TV: Most have a community events board. Just because a citizen didn't call you about an event, it doesn't mean they didn't call competing media. Find out what the competition has that you don't.
28. Nature / environmental groups: Most communities have these organizations. Find out about their projects, their issues, unusual animals sightings, field trips, etc.
29. Trends: Get up to date on the latest trends and find out how they're impacting your community. It might be the hottest new toy for kids. Or it might be something more sinister such as an illegal drug.
30. Cemeteries: Read inscriptions on tombstones. One reporter here noticed a tombstone with the inscription that the man died in Buchenwald concentration camp. With a little digging (sorry for the pun), it turned out the man was a spy for the allies who was caught by the Nazis.
31. Your newspaper's ad reps: These co-workers walk the business beat on a daily basis. They hear gossip. Ask them what they're hearing on the street.
32. The What Happens Next factor: Look at stories that have appeared in your paper in the past two weeks. Read them again. And then ask yourself: What happened next? If it hasn't already been followed up, find out what's happened.
33. Crime statistics: Talk to police about what trends are happening, what are the most common crimes, get stats on break-ins, car thefts, drunk driving charges, 911 calls, etc.
34. Weather, weather, weather: From your local weather office, monthly stats are readily available on temperatures, snowfall, rainfall, etc. It's no secret that readers love weather stories.
35. Other newspapers: Read their stories. Look for buried leads. Look for angles that they missed. Look for advancers that tip you off to upcoming events that you were unaware of. Consider how you can give the story a different twist.

36. Use the 'Is there anything else happening?' question: When you're talking with people, or interviewing them, at the end of your conversation, throw in the 'is there anything else happening that might be newsworthy?' It's a simple interview-ending technique that can lead somewhere else.
37. Demographics: Research statistics compiled by sources such as Statistics Canada. You'll find community populations, age breakdowns, income, etc. How does your community compare with national averages?
38. The Barber / hairdresser: Fifteen minutes chatting while in the chair can produce several leads. Don't laugh. If it's happening in the community, a barber or hairdresser has likely heard about from someone sitting in his/her chair.
39. Community centre: All kinds of organizations post information at these places. All kinds of activities take place here.
40. Year in Review: Most newspapers publish a Year in Review every January. Print it off and refer to it throughout the upcoming year. Many stories can be updated.
41. Police briefs: In press releases, police give the media a few paragraphs on crimes that can often be expanded into stories. Also, be alert for multiple briefs over several weeks that show crime patterns.
42. Read magazine covers at the grocery store checkout: No, we're not talking about the headlines that scream Aliens Cry Foul Over TV Show Mork & Mindy. We're talking about the magazine covers that try to lure readers with theme statements such as Bicycle Helmets: Should they be mandatory for adults too? Or Skin Cancer: Are you at risk? These theme statements can help you generate localized stories on topical issues.
43. Employment listings: Who's hiring in your community? Tell your readers about the factory that's seeking 10 workers due to an extra shift being added. Sometimes a story about the flood of applications for a single job can be a telling story about the employment prospects in your community. And don't forget about government employment listings. Taxpayers always like to know how their money is being spent to hire staff at municipal offices.
44. Welfare agencies: Who's helping the poor in your community? Government agencies that distribute welfare payments will keep statistics on how many people are receiving aid. Food banks also keep statistics on how many people are visiting for food. These types of statistics can be reported on a regular basis throughout the year.
45. Member of government websites: Visit the websites of your local member (MP or MPP) of government. Obviously, there will be lots of news releases touting the 'great work' they do, but read between the lines and you'll have lots of conflict-based story ideas: Politicians fighting with groups, rival politicians, policies, legislation, etc.

46. Variety stores: Frequently on a store counter, you'll find donation jars for various causes or benefits. Occasionally, there are even petitions hoping to attract the signatures of customers.
47. Notices on storefront windows: these windows can feature a mish-mash of notices, everything from community events to legal notices about a business being shut down.
48. Community newsletters: For example, Ontario Power Generation publishes a newsletter for employees and the community. Sure, it's a public relations vehicle, but there are story tips. Get on the mailing list of companies which send out such newsletters.
48. Go for a walk: Go for a walk through your downtown and ask people and retailers what folks are talking about in town? What's happening that's newsworthy? What are some issues? What's the best thing that's happening? Who would make a good human interest story?
49. Letters to the editor: They offer additional viewpoints on subjects, possibly other angles for stories. The writers are also commonly Average Joe Citizens bringing to light an injustice, a complaint or opposition/approval of an impending decision by government.

This used to be at: <http://www.notrain-nogain.com/Train/Res/Report/50places.asp>