

Safe Distance: Cultivating – and keeping – inside sources

Be honest. “My advice to a new cops reporter? Be up-front and honest and accurate,” said the Free Press’ Jack Kresnak.

Keep your cool. When sources decide not to give you information, don’t get mad, says Jack Kresnak, police reporter at the Detroit Free Press.

Be fair. Sometimes, police reporters have to write stories that their sources may find unfavorable. But that doesn’t automatically signify a broken source relationship. “The thing is, don’t make enemies if you can help it,” Kresnak said. “I think people who are caught doing wrong and you write about them, they appreciate it if at least you’re being factual and fair.” Patrick Orr, public safety reporter at the Idaho States man, added: “You just have to be professional and fair – they hav eto trust you that even if the story is not going so well for them, that their viewpoint will be reported accurately and in the appropriate context.”

Pay attention to reactions. Police reporters walk and work among their sources every day. Instant feedback is almost guaranteed. Listen to what your sources say about your coverage, and learn from it. “If you show up every day, they will tell you, ‘Man, that sucked,’ or ‘That wasn’t too bad,’” Kresnak said. “You can get a lot of instantaneous feedback, and if you screw up, you hear about it.”

Never underestimate the power of the brief. Some police reporters suggested that covering the positive stories – retirements, awards, recognition, etc. – is just as important to developing sources as showing up at a crime scene. “One of the best sources I have is one who called me and said, ‘Hey, a buddy of mine is retiring...’ [The story I wrote about it] made his buddy hugely appreciative. And that guy will do all kinds of things for me, and I can always call him. And that’s invaluable,” said David Heinzmann, a staff reporter who covers the Chicago police department for the Chicago Tribune. “And it doesn’t hurt the paper, it doesn’t hurt your integrity, and it doesn’t hurt the reader.”

Know your source’s preferences. Some people are going to want to talk to you every day; others won’t have the time. Figure out the best way and manner in which to contact them, and stick to it. “Some people have time to talk to you, want to hear from you any time,” said Heinzmann. “Other people, and really good sources, are really busy. And they don’t necessarily have a lot of time to shoot the breeze, so I try too call them when I really need something and catch up with them a little bit on the personal stuff while having that conversation. But also, be really direct and don’t eat up a whole bunch of their time.”

Use your best judgment. “Every reporter is different – some like to get to know cops and have the occasional beer with them or something,” Orr said. “That doesn’t work for me. I don’t want to give anyone the impression I am leaning one way or the other.”