

Talking

with your

Town



**Steps to a
Successful
Community
Conversation**

Sylvia Gaffney

GAFFNEY CORPORATE STRATEGIES

APME ASSOCIATED PRESS MANAGING EDITORS
National Credibility Roundtables
A Project Funded by The Ford Foundation

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About This Guidebook

Congratulations on your decision to talk with your community about the important work of local journalism.

This handbook will help you plan a community conversation that will be productive for you, your news organization and the public. Sylvia Gaffney, an organizational effectiveness consultant and professional facilitator who worked with the Rockford, Illinois, Credibility Roundtable, shares her expertise and lessons from the first year of APME's National Credibility Roundtables Project.

As you start on the planning process, I want to highlight a few points that the 2001 roundtables showed are particularly important.

- Newsrooms and the public can talk about tough topics in a civil way. You, your staff and readers will all gain more if you choose to discuss local news coverage that raises significant worry about accuracy or fairness, thoroughness or expertise.
- Diversity of participants is crucial. The faces you see at your roundtable should reflect your community accurately, in ethnicity and race, gender and age. Participants also should reflect a range of opinions on the topic you are discussing.
- Journalists must show they are willing to listen and learn as well as explain and defend their work. The public often sees news people as powerful and unapproachable. A key step in leveling the discussion field can be an impartial, well-prepared leader—either a professional facilitator or a respected community figure willing to spend time preparing for a roundtable.

The public has made it abundantly clear during the past decade that it often mistrusts the values, the goals and the performance of the press. At the same time, research and the 2001 roundtables demonstrate that readers, viewers and story subjects care deeply about media in their communities. They retain affection and high hopes for the reporters and editors closest to them. Journalists, skittish at allowing the public a voice in the news process, can find important allies for their standards and mission.

A community conversation is an important start toward building an important partnership. I believe you will find this handbook a useful guide in your planning.



Carol Nunnelley

Carol Nunnelley

Director
APME National Credibility Roundtables

About the Author



Sylvia Gaffney is the president of Gaffney Corporate Strategies and Career Systems. She works with companies nationally and internationally in organizational effectiveness and change management programs.

Sylvia has facilitated workshops, consulted with and implemented programs to large and small corporations in strategic planning, team building, leadership development, and cultural change issues.

She is a Fellow in the Workforce Stability Institute which is a national organization focusing on retention and recruitment issues. Sylvia is a contributing author to the Institute's book on Workforce Stability and its national newsletters. She has authored a book on career development and is currently working on a resilience handbook.

Among her clients are the Gannett organization, Hammacher Schlemmer, American Presidents Line, Aetna Insurance, Hospice, Rohm and Haas, Eclipse, and the Catholic Diocese of Wales in the UK.

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Introduction

Successful projects begin with the end in mind. Being clear about what you want to achieve as a result of your community discussions makes other decisions easier. This critical first step requires agreement on basic assumptions with those involved in the planning process before it begins.

Agree on Basic Assumptions Before You Start

- #1 You agree to hold a community discussion around the credibility of news coverage.
- #2 You agree to commit necessary resources for the discussion.
- #3 You are clear about why you want to have the discussion.

The first and second of the base-line assumptions are quite simple. If you decide to go ahead, you either have or must find necessary resources. These two factors are truly the easy part of the process.

Know Why You Are Planning a Community Discussion

The final assumption is more difficult. Once the decision is made to have a community discussion, and the commitment is made to allocate necessary resources, you need to ask yourself WHY you want to have this community discussion in the first place.

Sound easy?

Many people skip this step as obvious or unnecessary, and refuse to formally define it. Cutting corners here results in more work and cluttered thinking as you prepare and conduct your discussions. Your project has the greatest potential for a successful run if your primary motivator is defined up front. This does not require a lofty philosophical debate. Your reason may be the simple fact that many of your peers are experiencing successful outcomes. You may see this as an opportunity to increase skills in the newsroom. You may want to connect more with your readers. Or, it may make you look good in the eyes of your boss. Whatever your reason, consciously clarify what is motivating you to do this.

WHY are you having a community discussion?

Handbook as a Practical Planning Tool

The following handbook is designed to guide you through a step-by-step process for conducting an effective discussion with your community. The steps in the process are pretty much common sense. Whether you consciously think about it or not, there are six generic steps involved in creating a successful community conversation. If you sat down and logically structured a process to hold discussions with your community, you probably would end up with a similar approach as in this handbook. Use the handbook as a shortcut to your planning.

Question Format with Guidelines and Checklists

The handbook contains questions and checklists designed around the six steps. Since there is no one way to have a successful conversation with your community, case studies show real-life examples of a variety of ways you can talk with your town. Your situation is unique. Only you and those involved with your paper and community can decide what is the best topic, strategy, and delivery model for your discussion.

Review the questions and checklists. Consider what makes sense for you. Take pen to paper or fingers to keyboard and formally commit your answers to paper.

The Steps in the Process Are:

- Step One:** Select Your Topic
- Step Two:** Determine Your Strategy
- Step Three:** Decide on Participants
- Step Four:** Choose Your Model
- Step Five:** Assess Your Outcome
- Step Six:** Arrange for Follow-up

This handbook is really about organizing your choices. The process is a practical guide to help you organize those choices.

Sylvia Gaffney

Gaffney Corporate Strategies

STEP ONE:

Select Your Topic



Zero in on your FOCUS.

Ask:

What topic is MEANINGFUL to you, your paper and/or the community?

Consider:

Meaningful is any topic that you find interesting, important or significant, and has value to you, your news organization and the community using criteria defined by you and the APME Credibility Roundtables Project.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ What criteria are you using to define meaningful?
- ▶ Are you the best person to select the topic for your newsroom and the community?
- ▶ Who else should be involved, and why would you consult with them?

Ask:

What topic is MANAGEABLE by you, your paper and the community?

Consider:

Even though you believe you selected the perfect discussion topic, it may require the National Guard or hospital ER's to be on alert. The topic may also be of great interest to a large number of readers requiring an auditorium to house the discussion.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ Are you being over-zealous, unrealistic or naïve in your choice of topic?
- ▶ Can you and your organization handle a large number of interested participants?
- ▶ How will you organize all the interested parties?

Ask:

What CHANGES do you want to occur in your newsroom and/or in the community as a result of this discussion?

Consider:

The treatment of this discussion in either your newsroom or in the community may result in changes around perception of your paper or in its actual daily operations.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ What, if anything, would you like to see changed in the operations of your paper as a result of these discussions?
- ▶ Rather than letting a random change happen to you because of the discussions, is there some specific change you would like to consciously encourage?
- ▶ Are you interested in the discussions providing an opportunity for you to alter negative perceptions or deliver your message either internally or externally?

Ask:

What are the EXPECTATIONS for this discussion?

Consider:

You and anyone involved in this process have stated or unstated expectations. It is critical for you to be consciously aware of your personal expectations, and helpful for you to bring to light those of others involved in the process.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ Is your goal to manage, control, ignore or fulfill others' expectations?
- ▶ Do you have or want to take the time to ask others about their expectations?
- ▶ Can you initiate a simple system for you to check out others' expectations?
- ▶ Once you are aware of others' expectations, what do you plan to do in order to manage, control, ignore or fulfill them?

About Selecting your TOPIC

Spokesman-Review in Spokane, WA

Doug Floyd
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► **Why did you choose the topic you did?**

“We had little choice. Cowles Publishing Co., which owns *The Spokesman-Review*, also owns River Park Square, a downtown shopping mall that is the most sizzling issue on the local political griddle. The balance of the city council was reversed as a result of campaigns alleging the mall developer hoodwinked the previous council into letting public funds underwrite a private project. How bad is it? A mayoral candidate whom our editorial board would have been inclined to endorse asked us not to, fearing it would hurt more than help. Our newspaper was being tarred in the alternative press and on talk radio as part of a cover-up. To choose any other topic for a ‘credibility’ roundtable would have vindicated our harshest critics.”

► **What worked well using this topic?**

“Many people were surprised that we would sit down to a frank discussion about this sensitive issue. They were even more surprised to hear some of our writers and editors express concerns about how the story had been handled. If we’d been as candid about issues of lesser visibility it would have been shrugged off as no great gesture. But the paper’s reputation is impacted so much by this issue that I think roundtable participants, critics included, admired the risk we took. Since then, people have been watching to see what changes we’d make. The critics may still feel we’re hedging on details of the original deal, but many of them acknowledge our coverage of new developments is honest.”

Basic Roundtable Facts

Topic Development project by parent company

Number of Participants 31

Venue In paper’s building

Time of day 5:15 PM to 7:00 PM

Refreshments Catered box meals and drinks

Facilitator Internal

Format consisted of 23 community members including local non S-R journalists, civic activists, an out-of-town professional journalist and newspaper reps who

engaged in an informal conversation; individuals at tables arranged in a large square; discussion notes were projected onto a screen visible to everyone

Organizational Prep involved five meetings including: small group of key personnel, full staff and one-on-one sessions plus research, design work and phone calls

Coverage not as a news event, but follow-up commentary on Opinion page

Participant Pre-work no pre-work assigned

STEP TWO: Determine Your Strategy



Start with the END in mind.

Ask:

What do you want to ACCOMPLISH though this discussion?

Consider:

Your strategy is your plan, approach or methodology to achieve your goal. You are going to take time, spend money and expend energy on this project. Know the outcome you want as a result of your investment.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ What specific outcome needs to happen for you to see the discussion as worth your effort?
- ▶ What do you want internal and external participants to walk away saying and feeling about the discussion?

Ask:

What is MOTIVATING you to have this discussion?

Consider:

People are positively motivated by what they need, want, care about or fear. If you are planning to expend any time, energy or money on this project, it makes sense to know why you are doing it in the first place. Take the time to explore your intent and how this project will provide what you need, want or care about.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ Are you going through the motions because it's a mandate from above, pressure from the community or your peers?
- ▶ Do you perceive some value for your newsroom or your own status, but simply haven't taken the time to clarify why, what or how?
- ▶ What else?

About Determining your STRATEGY

**Richmond Times-Dispatch
in Richmond, VA**

Louise Seals
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lseals@timesdispatch.com



► Why did you choose the strategy you did?

“*The Times-Dispatch* needed to come out of the Credibility Roundtable with thoughtful recommendations about improving our coverage of racial and ethnic issues that would make sense to a largely white and veteran staff, a staff on which increasing diversity has been a slow process because of low turnover. Selecting people who could discuss a tough topic thoughtfully was a key step. The executive editor and I knew from our experience that Leadership Metro Richmond pool participants were used to discussing difficult issues in depth without animosity, so we tapped that group. That LMR experience was also why we selected Roy Terry, a local litigator, as our facilitator.

We also wanted to encourage the staff to be open to roundtable suggestions. We needed to balance our staff representatives as we had balanced the community roundtable participants: racial and ethnic makeup, age, gender, types of business or occupation, for example. We needed people in key jobs and from each newsroom department to help spread accurate information. Staff participants were assured that they were expected to speak their minds, that they were not carrying a *Times-Dispatch* banner and that they would face no retaliation for their views.

It’s important to note that the history of Richmond as the former capital of the Confederacy, along with the newspaper’s editorial support of segregation in the civil rights struggles of the 50’s and 60’s, lead a significant portion of readers to view the newspaper as racist and to see every story involving racial issues through that prism. It was very clear to us that what we wanted to accomplish required consideration of all these factors.”

► What worked well using this strategy?

“The community participants, and the format developed by Terry, produced thoughtful suggestions. And those involved from the newsroom prompted frequent informal discussions of the roundtable.”

Basic Roundtable Facts

Topic Coverage of Racial and Ethnic Issues

Number of Participants 32

Venue In paper’s building

Time of day 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM

Refreshments Box suppers and drinks

Format consisted of 32 people divided into 6 groups with

pre-arranged seating and tables formed in a hollow square. During a one-hour time frame, group set ground rules, read 4 articles during the session, held discussions, and wrote conclusions on flip charts. Each group discussed 2 of the 4 articles.

Coverage with no one quoted unless permission given

Participant Pre-work no pre-work assigned

STEP THREE: Decide on Participants



Realize that Chemistry is more Art than Science.

Ask:

What combination of internal and external individuals will provide the interaction, information and experience you want for your discussions?

Consider:

People are obviously the key ingredient for roundtable discussions. The chemistry depends on both the individual participants and the interaction of the group as they discuss the chosen topic.

Probe further by answering about external participants:

- ▶ Who are the obvious participants given your topic and desired outcome?
- ▶ Are there any clear alliances, issues, positive or negative historical interfaces that may either prevent or enhance the discussion?
- ▶ Is your intent to include high-profile people with pedigree or unconnected folks who have a vested interest in the outcome?
- ▶ Are you looking for articulate spokespersons that represent a certain cause or for individuals you consider regular readers who care, but have no ax to grind?

Ask:

Who are the internal members of your staff who would most profit by, or are most necessary, to this interaction and how do you plan on preparing them for the event?

Consider:

There may be a message, learning or challenge you want for your newsroom.

Probe further by answering about internal participants:

- ▶ Who are the obvious participants given your topic and desired outcome?
- ▶ Who needs to be in the loop and what kind of a briefing will assure buy-in?

Ask:

What resources do you use to locate names for external participants?

Consider:

Once you are clear on topic, outcome and kinds of people you want populating your roundtable discussion, begin accessing names from internal and external sources. Names of individuals in organizations are available for purchase or simply for the asking.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ What names and groups of people are available to you through your circulation lists, marketing department source lists, general mailings or reporter rolodex files?
- ▶ Who are your newsroom callers and people who write letters to the editor?
- ▶ Can you access your local United Way not-for-profit information for key personnel and Boards of Directors?
- ▶ Can you acquire lists of member companies with leadership team names from your Chamber of Commerce?

Ask:

What is the best method for contacting external participants?

Consider:

The relationship you or your paper has with individuals in your community determines the best method for approaching prospective roundtable participants. It also depends if you are looking for key players in a particular event, community leaders or regular readers.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ Have you or others in your paper cultivated relationships that allow for a simple phone call for a positive response?
- ▶ Do you have some serious recruiting that will require lunch or a cup of coffee at a restaurant or in your office?
- ▶ Would your topic allow you to ask for volunteers from the community through notices in your newspaper?

About Deciding on PARTICIPANTS

**Detroit Free Press
in Detroit, Michigan**

John X Miller
313-222-6400
miller@freepress.com



► Why did you choose the participants you did?

“After *Free Press* editors chose police and public safety as the roundtable topic, we felt we needed a cross-section of participants and two roundtables because police/public safety coverage issues are different for *Free Press* Detroit and suburban readers.”

► What worked well because of their involvement?

- The diversity of participants was a plus because no other forum had ever brought these types of people together, especially in Detroit.
- There was dialogue, not just debate. Yes, people spouted their positions, but did so respectfully, without confrontation and there was listening.
- Unexpectedly, some participants found common ground on the issue of police brutality. Everyone—police, parents of a dead officer, court and juvenile officers—said it should be exposed, rooted out, and punished.
- Evaluation forms at the end of the roundtables captured useful feedback, additional comments for reporting and permission to use their comments.
- Participants said more dialogue was needed among these people and organizations and that police personnel need more information on how media work and their role in police and crime coverage.”

Basic Roundtable Facts

Topic Police and public safety

Number of Participants 40 at two separate scheduled sessions on same topic

Venue Two different newspaper building locations

Times 7:30 – 9:30 AM and 6:00 – 8:00 PM

Refreshments Coffee, soft drinks, bottled water and cookies

Facilitator Internal

Format consisted of 13 participants facing each other around rectangular tables discussing issue, with 10 journalists around the perimeter of the wall; participants asked to review prior 6 months coverage on topic when they arrived at session; facilitator led a Q and A around topic; internal staff member took notes

Organizational Prep involved six meetings with top editors and one-on-ones with a core group, internal e-mails for alerts, information posted on newsroom bulletin board, pre-event briefing with a fact sheet and roster of participants for internal staff; letters with follow-up phone calls to external participants

Coverage on the record for the discussion, but not covered as a news event. Participants signed a form as part of the evaluation asking if they would mind being quoted in follow-up coverage. The editor wrote a column after each roundtable, discussing the reason for them, highlights of what was said and possible outcomes.

Participant Pre-work nothing assigned prior to session

STEP FOUR: Choose Your Model



Know that one size does NOT fit all.

Ask:

What model design will best meet the outcome you want for your chosen topic?

Consider:

The purpose of the model you select is to provide a vehicle to deliver the outcome you want.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ Will a traditional or non-traditional roundtable approach be best for your interactions?
- ▶ What have traditional roundtables provided in information, interaction or outcome?
- ▶ Do you want or need a different approach to get the desired outcome?

Ask:

How much control do you want over the participants and flow of discussion?

Consider:

Your chosen topic and desired outcome may pose issues based on participant behavior in the past. You want the discussion without unproductive outbursts. You still want dialogue around the issues.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ Do you want a highly structured design or a free flow?
- ▶ Do you want high control or low control over your participants' interactions?
- ▶ Are there discussion topics you want to encourage or avoid?

About Choosing a MODEL

Rockford Register Star in Rockford, IL

Linda Grist Cunningham
815-987-1355
LGRIST@rockford.gannett.com



► Why did you choose the model you did?

“The *Rockford Register Star* needed a format that would accomplish these things: (1) Elicit maximum information in a short time from a large group; (2) encourage normally quiet people to offer their ideas; (3) allow talkative folks an opportunity to offer their ideas without dominating the discussion; (4) give folks a chance to vent their anger or frustrations without derailing the entire roundtable. The carousel model, coupled with the ‘fishbowl,’ worked well. Six months prior to our Credibility Roundtable in May 2001, the *Register Star* conducted a series of six breakfast roundtables using the traditional ‘let’s all share’ model to discuss concerns about our investigative coverage of local not-for-profit organizations. Participants spared us none of their anger about what they felt was unfair ‘piling on’ by the newspaper. We did not need another round of angry venting. Instead, we needed a model that would allow us to develop solutions.”

► What worked well using this model?

“The carousel model we used in which small groups circulated around the room to five different flipcharts with five questions. This ensured everyone had their say, could add new ideas or expand on previous ones, and had a chance to discuss concepts in groups of five-seven, rather than have one large group of almost 40. The carousel ensured we got a lot of information—written down—and openly discussed by lots of participants in a relatively short time. The model lowers the ‘intimidation factor,’ as well. No one could dominate the whole group (as happened at our traditional roundtable breakfasts).”

Basic Roundtable Facts

Topic Community booster versus watchdog role

Number of Participants 40

Venue At a community college

Time of day 7:00 PM to 9:30 PM

Refreshments Cookies, fruit, drinks

Format involved five randomly selected break-out groups moving around a large room in a carousel format answering five key questions around the topic; small groups reported out to larger group for discussion; conclusions from large group discussion were examined in a fish bowl in which the group selected 7 individuals to represent them. The 7 representatives sat in a circle in the middle of the room with the remainder of the

group around them. There was one empty chair for any member of the large group to join the discussion.

Organizational Prep involved initial two-hour brainstorming session with internal staff; two face-to-face planning meetings; phone calls and e-mails with facilitator; attendance at the APME training session; briefing session with news room and facilitator; research for pre-work assignment; handling of event arrangements; sending letters of invitation and thank yours to participants; debriefing with internal staff.

Coverage Comments at session for background only; editor wrote series of columns.

Pre-work Participants asked to read background info.

STEP FIVE:

Assess Your Outcome



Appreciate the VALUE of your efforts.

Ask:

Were your expectations met and did you accomplish what you wanted to accomplish?

Consider:

By the fact that you invited individuals to participate and you hosted this event, something inevitably changed in your newsroom and with certain members in your community. You had an outcome and expectations in mind when you created your process. The topic, participants and strategy were designed to accomplish your goal.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ Was there a way to observe or measure the outcome of your discussion?
- ▶ What kind of feedback did you receive from your evaluations?
- ▶ Are you satisfied with the results?
- ▶ What do you want to repeat, and/or rework?

Ask:

What successes will you build on to make your next efforts even better?

Consider:

There will be high points that occurred during the process for both internal and external participants. Interview individual roundtable members and record their responses for use as a starting point to build future sessions.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ What about the discussion gave you insight that you previously didn't have?
- ▶ Was there a part of the discussion that gave you a sense of hope or encouragement around the chosen topic, or another's view?
- ▶ Thinking of something specific, what was your personal high point during this process?

About Assessing your OUTCOME

**The Patriot-News
in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

Tom Baden
717- 576-4025
tbaden@compatriot-news.com



► What did you do to assess the results of your discussion?

“We held a follow-up roundtable, with about two-thirds of the original participants. As part of that, we asked for ways to improve our coverage. We received about 10 proposals, most of which we can act on, in some fashion. We also asked community participants to fill out a brief survey assessing the roundtable and suggesting topics for future roundtables or community forums. Finally, many of the newsroom participants had a separate discussion, sort of a where-do-we-go-from-here chat.”

► What worked well with your assessment process?

“I can’t stress enough the value of a follow-up roundtable. In some respects, it was a continuation of our first session and aired some of the same contentions. But, for many people, it was a chance to be more reflective about issues raised in the initial discussion. There seemed to be a greater willingness for people to ask questions of each other and to listen to the answers. Participants seemed more curious and interested in how the newspaper works, and they were more inclined to offer ideas for better coverage and for ways to build trust between the newspaper and the community.”

Basic Roundtable Facts

Topic Coverage of the Harrisburg City School District

Number of Participants 30

Venue Local community college

Time 7:00 – 9:30 PM

Refreshments Light supper with soft drinks, coffee, bottled water

Format Participants sat around tables in horseshoe configuration. Eight questions were posted around the room and individuals wrote comments with markers on the question sheets. The facilitator then led a discussion around the topic.

Organizational Prep Met with department heads to brainstorm topic choice; had four face-to-face meetings

with facilitator one of which included internal participants; two co-coordinators met six times around details of roundtable; phoned external participants, and then followed up by formal written invitations.

Coverage On the record, video taped and open to the public with an audience of 20 people who came and watched. An Associated Press reporter covered it, as did a photographer. A lengthy story was published in the paper.

Participant Pre-work No assigned reading. The parameters of project were given in the invitation to participants along with a request to submit any ideas they wanted to pursue around the topic.

STEP SIX: Arrange for Follow-up

Ask:

What follow-up activities are necessary for this discussion to have credibility with internal and external participants?

Ask:

Are you factoring future sessions into your design?

Action TO TAKE

Keep the process alive, active and ongoing.

Consider:

You have successfully completed the process to this stage. Most of the time, it is what you say and do after the event that demonstrates your credibility.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ How do you plan on debriefing with your internal staff and communicating with staff members not actively involved in the event?
- ▶ Have you arranged for letters or calls thanking external participants?
- ▶ Did you promise participants anything during the session that requires action?
- ▶ What are you doing around local coverage?
- ▶ Have you arranged for a report to APME?

Consider:

You want to be clear if you are planning a one-time event, or creating an on-going process that demonstrates your commitment to credibility inside your newsroom and throughout the community.

Probe further by answering:

- ▶ What structure and systems need to be in place to ensure future action?

About Arranging for FOLLOW-UP

**Florida Times-Union
in Jacksonville, FL**

Mike Clark
904-359-4111
mclark@jacksonville.com



► What did you do to follow up on your roundtable discussion?

“The newspaper’s editor wrote each participant a thank-you letter. The reader advocate, the organizer and facilitator of the sessions, wrote a report to all the newspaper’s staff that outlined the key points of the sessions. This report goes to the entire newsroom on its Intranet, to news bureaus in written form and to the top management of the newspaper. These forums have become part of the newspaper’s strategic plan. The sessions, while not designed to produce story ideas, did produce news stories. While they were off the record, some of the participants will be interviewed later for future stories. The group of participants and their contacts are being saved as a special sort of databank or focus group for future feedback. They are like reader consultants who already have a special relationship with the staff.”

► What worked well with the follow-up you did?

“The most promising and productive probably is the intent to tap these readers more than once. It would be a shame to waste the groundwork, like a construction project that stops at the foundation. One of our participants has already written two detailed letters outlining ideas for the newspaper.”

Basic Roundtable Facts

Topic Sins of Omission

Number of Participants Held four separate forums with 40 people involved

Venue In paper’s building

Time 8:30 AM to 10:30 AM

Refreshments Rolls, coffee and juice

Format consisted of a focus group of eight individuals around a table discussing four separate issues with six newsroom staff and six additional staff as observers. Each focus group member made a prepared 10-minute opening statement followed by a 30-minute open-ended discussion after the presentations.

Organizational Prep involved initial meeting with management team, three hours on research for pre-work, e-mails and weekly memos to internal staff, letters of invitation to participants followed by phone calls and e-mails.

Coverage A follow-up article was written in Opinion column.

Participant Pre-work A packet was sent out to review prior to the session.

Selecting a Facilitator

Is it best to use an internal or external facilitator?

There is no hard and fast rule. It depends on your unique situation. Knowing the topic you wish to discuss and what results you want, you choose whether someone connected to your paper or separate from your organization would be better suited to facilitate your discussion.

Should the facilitator be part of or external to the community?

Again, it depends on your unique situation. Consider if the community facilitator carries baggage that would compromise his or her effectiveness with your group. Factor in the possibility that your topic is so complex that only a community insider has the necessary background to facilitate your selected participants. Most professional facilitators are capable of handling complicated situations. You need to make the judgment call around the connectedness you need.

Should the facilitator be a paid professional or community volunteer?

This requires the same thought process as deciding on an internal or external person to your community. If the only reason for choosing a community volunteer is about money, it's possible to offer incentives other than cash for the services of a paid professional.

If I use an outside facilitator, how much should I expect to pay?

Fee structures differ for facilitators throughout the country. They may charge by the hour, project or on a daily rate plus expenses. The ranges could vary from \$500 to \$5500 depending on complexity, prep time and time-on-task.

Is it feasible for a professional facilitator to work without pay?

You won't know unless you ask. You can offer a modest, flat rate honorarium combined with other attractive incentives. You can negotiate creatively with the facilitator. For example, if you live in an area that an outside facilitator may be interested in visiting, it's possible to offer a couple of days before or after the event at an impressive hotel, resort, or spa, etc. The facilitator may be interested in expenses paid for attending training sessions your association is holding. Be resourceful. Think creatively.

How much, and what kind of background information does an external facilitator need to be effective on this project?

A good facilitator will do the necessary homework to be effective in creating the design and handling the event. Facilitators differ in knowledge and experience. A facilitator needs to know the outcome you want, background information about the topic, and an understanding of the credibility project.

What can you expect to discuss and decide with your facilitator?

Review the agenda, format, room set-up, design, pre-work assignments, handouts, participant issues, briefing and debriefing of your newsroom.

Setting the Date of the Event

What is the best time of day and day of the week to hold the discussions?

Time of day and day in the week for your discussion depends upon availability of internal and external participants, facilitator, site and local events. You need to decide the order of importance for each of these factors to your discussion. If you are hiring an external consultant as a critical component of your discussion, check available dates before inviting participants. If certain participants are critical to your discussion, contact them before setting the date. If time of day is an issue for your participants, be conscious of when that time is. Check a community calendar to ensure you are not competing with any other major event. If there is a certain venue that you want, make sure it is available when you want it.

Coverage of the Event

How do you want this discussion to be covered?

Consider whether a reporter and photographer will stifle conversation, versus whether no coverage will lessen its value in the eyes of the participants and the community. Ask whether the newspaper's stance on access issues could be diminished. Consider the variety of ways you can cover a roundtable: An editor's column, comment pieces from participants, news coverage by a staffer, news coverage by an outside journalist, for example.

Venue Selection

Do you want the location of your discussions at your building site or away from your campus at a neutral site?

Consider if your participants will be more comfortable in or away from the newspaper building. Many times individuals are honored when they are invited by you inside your walls. Others may feel threatened.

Number of participants, date, time of day, available parking, safety issues, and format for the discussions also need to be considered.

Pre-work Assignments for Participants

Should you request or require participants to do any preparation before the roundtable discussions?

Advance work does set the scene for your discussion. Consider if it is necessary for the format, or if the conversation would be enhanced by participants being prepared in advance of the discussion. Reading background information or organizing formal reports may encourage more active and informed participation. However, it is possible that individuals won't take the time to fulfill their assignment creating an unbalanced situation.

Recommended Sequence and Checklist

Agreement on Basic Assumptions

- Decision to have Community Discussion
- Commitment of Necessary Resources
- Clarity Around Prime Motivators and Desired Outcome

Pre Event Planning

- Topic Determined
- Facilitator Contacted and Confirmed
 - Internal or External
 - Inside or Outside the Community
 - Paid or Unpaid Professional or Community Volunteer
- Date of Event(s)
- Decide with Facilitator
 - agenda
 - format
 - room set-up
 - design assignments
 - pre-work
 - handouts
 - other
- Participant List Determined
 - External Participants
 - Internal Participants
 - Total Number of Participants
- Briefing with Internal Participants and Facilitator
- Handling of Event(s) Coverage
 - on the record pros and cons
 - off the record pros and cons
- Venue Selected
- Time of Event Determined
- Refreshments Arranged
- Pre work mailed to Participants

Roundtable Event or Events

- Parking
- Signage
- Staff Greeters
- Name Tags
- Sign-in Sheet
- Refreshments
- Welcome and Introductions
- Statement of Desired Outcome
- Group Guidelines
- Agenda
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Session Evaluations

Post Event Activities

- Evaluations/Review
- Follow-up
 - Debrief Session with Internal Participants
 - Send Letters of Thank you to External Participants
 - Follow through on Promised Actions
 - Local Coverage
 - Future Sessions
 - APME Report

Develop Ground Rules

Discuss with the Group:

“You have all participated in group situations where a few basic rules of the road facilitated a fairer exchange of ideas. Before we get started, how do you feel about setting some basic ground rules for our discussion?”

Most people agree to set some kind of ground rules.

Ask the Group:

“What are some of the ground rules you would like to see in play during this event?”

List their suggestions on a flip chart or board.

These are sample guidelines that most groups will agree are fair:

Don't interrupt others when they are speaking.

Side conversations distract from the work of the group.

Self-police the length of your comments. How long do you think is too long for one person to be talking when giving an opinion?

Everyone has a right to an opinion.

Listening with respect to what others say is not necessarily agreeing with them.

When you do disagree, attack the issues, not the person.

Don't take yourself too seriously.

As your facilitator, I may need to intervene to keep the group focused and on schedule.

If you are not hearing all the guidelines you want, suggest from the list above and ask the group if they believe the “rule” would help to better facilitate their discussion.

Sample Roundtable Evaluation (used by the *Iowa City Gazette*)

Please take a few minutes to complete this form. It will help APME in evaluating such roundtables around the country. Fee free to write on the other side of this form. Thank you.

Did this discussion meet your expectations? Was it helpful? Why or why not?

What could have been done better or differently to make the discussion more productive?

What was your overall impression or biggest surprise? In other words, if you were writing a headline for the roundtable, what would that headline say?

Are there any topics that did not come up this evening that you believe should be discussed at another time? If so, please specify?

Do you think more such meetings should take place in the future? Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up discussion?

Were you able to express your thoughts and opinions during the roundtable discussion?

Do you have any further suggestions or additional comments—for example, about format?

Name (optional) _____

Note: *THE Gazette* ombudsman will be writing about the roundtable. If you don't want your comments published, please indicate.

- Yes, use my comments AND my name.
- Yes, use my comments BUT do not use my name.
- No, DO NOT use my comments.

Sample Session Evaluation (used by the *Rockford Register Star*)

On a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 being excellent, how did this session rate with your expectations?

- | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| ▶ As far as format? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| ▶ With regards to content? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| ▶ As far as facility? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| ▶ With regards to the facilitator? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Is there anything discussed tonight that you believe the best solution is for individuals to agree to disagree?

What wasn't included in the topic of discussion tonight that you would appreciate discussing at another time?

Was there a personal high point that you experienced during the process of this discussion that you don't mind sharing?

Additional Comments:

Name (optional) _____

Sample Invitation

Missoulian

500 S. Higgins • P.O. Box 8029 • Missoula • Montana • 59607-8029
(406) 523-5200 • FAX (406) 523-5221

Aug. 6, 2001

Jim Brown
Missoula, Mont.

Dear Mr. Brown:

Natural-resource issues are big news in western Montana. Always have been. For years, the Missoulian has recognized this; that's why we remain the only Montana newspaper with a full-time environmental reporter.

The beat, as you well know, is a lightning rod, because it involves emotional issues that have polarized western Montanans for decades. In the 22 years I've worked at the Missoulian, I have hoped that western Montanans could learn to talk about these issues in a way that emphasizes our common interests and not our differences, but our progress toward this goal seems halting at best.

So I've set aside an afternoon for what I hope will be a wide-ranging discussion on natural-resource issues and our responsibility at the Missoulian in reporting those issues.

Our discussion is part of a national newspaper effort, a series of Credibility Roundtables that is taking place at newspapers across the nation; nationally the effort is sponsored by the Associated Press Managing Editors. As the name suggests, one of the topics that will be up for discussion is newspaper and media coverage of these tough issues: What are the hallmarks of responsible and credible natural-resources reporting? I think that we do a good job reporting these issues, but I want to hear what you think.

We could have picked other areas of coverage for a Credibility Roundtable, and if this afternoon is a success—or even if it's an interesting failure—we'll probably host future roundtables on other areas.

But natural-resource issues are so vital to Montana—and the tone of our discussion on those issues has taken such a strident turn—that this was the area I wanted to tackle first. And I'm interested in hearing this group discuss how the newspaper can help lead a civil discussion of natural-resource issues, because I refuse to believe that such discussion is a lost cause—and I believe that newspapers can help.

The session will be facilitated by Ginny Tribe. Ginny has a wealth of experience that will be helpful to us, not just in facilitating and leading discussion about tough issues but also in natural-resources issues.

Here are the details: The Roundtable will be held on Tuesday, Aug. 14 from 1:30 p.m. to about 6 p.m. at the C'mon Inn in Missoula, 2775 Expo Parkway. We'll serve a light dinner of sandwiches and salads to wrap up the evening. RSVP to me at 523-5250 or by e-mail at mmcinally@missoulian.com; that phone number and e-mail address will work if you have questions. I'll be following up with you to gauge your interest in attending the event.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Mike McInally
Editor

Sample Invitation

P.O. Box 70
Las Vegas, NV 89125-0070

Dr. William Slater, dean
Reynolds School of Journalism
Mail Stop 310
University of Nevada, Reno
Reno, NV 89557-0040

Name: _____
Institution or company: _____
Phone: _____

This roundtable will be worth my time if:

You may return this card or send the information via e-mail to Dr. Slater,
dean of the Reynolds School of Journalism, at slater@unr.edu

LAS VEGAS
REVIEW-JOURNAL
CREDIBILITY ROUNDTABLE

Sherman R. Frederick, publisher,
Thomas Mitchell, editor, and
Charles Zobell, managing editor,
of the Las Vegas Review-Journal
in conjunction with a national initiative
on newspaper credibility by the
Associated Press Managing Editors,
cordially invite you to participate in a
roundtable discussion on coverage
of the casino industry.

Wednesday, July 25, 2001
7 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Conference Room, Clark County Library
1401 East Flamingo Road

If you have not confirmed your participation,
please call Ronelle Botwinik at 383-0265 by July 20.

*Dr. William Slater, dean of the Donald W. Reynolds
School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno,
will be the facilitator for the roundtable. To assist him in
preparing for the discussion, please complete and mail
the enclosed card.*

Sample Thank You Note

December 6, 2001

Janis Kinley
1311 S. McDuff Avenue
Jacksonville, FL 32205

Dear Janis:

Thank you for participating in our most recent gathering at *The Florida Times-Union*.

I regret not being able to attend myself, but Mike Clark, our Reader Advocate, said that you had a healthy exchange of ideas regarding Jacksonville. I hope that we can do more of these in the future.

Wishing you the very best during the holiday season.

Sincerely,

Patrick A. Yack

The 2001 Credibility Campaign: A sampling

The Birmingham News Birmingham, Alabama

Topic: Accuracy

Action Update: In March and April, *The News* conducted a series of staff seminars on 15 subjects concerning accuracy. Following the roundtable, the paper added to its policy on corrections: the person at fault must now telephone the victim of the mistake and apologize.

Tom Scarritt, editor: “While they were generally tolerant of what they called little errors, [participants] thought we should do a better job of correcting larger errors, especially those that might affect a person’s reputation.”

Brian Erickson, college chaplain: “If you have a front-page story, and the next day there’s a little correction in the corner, it’s not getting enough coverage.”

Arizona Daily Star Tucson, Arizona

Topic: A perceived anti-gun bias in the *Daily Star*

Action Update: The paper’s action plan includes developing a course for reporters on firearm basics, analyzing content to identify bias, revising guidelines on firearm terminology, creating an expert-source directory and increasing outdoor sports coverage.

Maria Parham, reader advocate: “The gun issue is one of such polarization that I think reporting both sides is perceived as bias. Each thinks the other side misrepresents the facts.”

Todd Rathner, member of the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association: “The most worthwhile change was when a reporter from the *Star* called me to check a fact about a firearm. He wanted to be sure he described it properly as ‘semi-automatic’ or ‘full automatic.’ This seems like a small distinction, but it makes a difference to those that know.”

San Jose Mercury News San Jose, California

Topic: Does coverage reflect readers’ daily lives?

Action Update: As a result of requests made at the roundtable, the *Mercury News* is expanding its local news coverage. While the paper must cut other sections to make room for the growth, the change, editors said, is important.

David Yarnold, executive editor: “We learned that we need to see the world through Silicon Valley’s eyes, and report on the life and culture of the people who live here.”

Paul Colin, reader: “There is very little [in the paper] about what the less affluent are doing on a day-to-day basis.”

The Tampa Tribune Tampa, Florida

Topic: Coverage of State Attorney Harry Lee Coe III

Action Update: When Harry Lee Coe III committed suicide last year, some people blamed the media. *The Tribune’s* roundtable opened discussion on how the media should cover elected officials and their personal lives. *The Tribune* is considering how a newspaper might apply a “mercy test” in covering such stories.

Donna M. Reed, managing editor: “Readers gave us appropriate reminders that our story development and front-end editing processes should ... give more time to the reporting process if the relevance is not clear, and always question the motivation of the tipster (if there is one). Rules to live by: be fair, be balanced.”

Forrest Hawkins, software developer: “The private lives of public officials in an area where it could have an effect on their role as public officials is fair game and should be mercilessly pursued.”

The Times Gainesville, Georgia

Topic: Fairness in covering diversity

Action Update: *The Times* is communicating with black churches in Gainesville more, partly as a result of the roundtable. The paper is also working with the Latino community to develop a resource guide for new Hispanic residents.

James Healy, metro editor: “While all agreed a reporter doesn’t need to be black, white or Latino to cover a particular group, sometimes a shared experience can lead to greater insight and trust in a racial or ethnic group.”

Haydee Anderson, publisher of Spanish-language newspaper: “I think that *The Times* has reaffirmed that ... they have to get more information about how the people feel in the different sectors of the local community ... I hope they have another [roundtable] next year.”

The Journal Gazette Fort Wayne, Indiana

Topic: Running graphic material in the paper

Action Update: While *The Journal Gazette* maintains a policy on running graphic photos, naming juveniles and naming rape victims, it has not always communicated the policy to readers. The paper plans to include such explanations in its coverage from now on.

Sherry Skufca, managing editor: “That was the lesson from the roundtable: That these folks are very understanding if they know there is a reason and a policy behind [running a name or photo] — if they know it’s not capricious. It’s not a lightning bolt, but it should have hit us before now.”

Betty Mullin, jury commissioner: “I was perhaps a little surprised maybe that the newspaper cared about the impression they were giving with their headlines and the pictures they were using. I didn’t think that.”

The Wichita Eagle Wichita, Kansas

Topic: Reporting on crime

Action Update: *The Wichita Eagle* now explains its controversial decisions to readers as editors and reporters make them. The paper also now includes a warning with crime stories that include graphic material.

Sherry Chisenhall, managing editor: “The group members said it’s critical for the paper to show that many lives are negatively affected by crimes, even if it makes readers sometimes uncomfortable in the process.”

Patricia Dooley, professor at Wichita State University: “I’m real interested in protecting privacy, especially of children. But I also understand ... the concerns of journalists, and know that it’s more complex than members of the public sometimes understand.”

St. Cloud Times St. Cloud, Minnesota

Topic: Covering crime

Action Update: The *St. Cloud Times* is creating a database for track-

ing felonies and now groups crime stories on the same page so readers can follow coverage from day to day. The paper has also developed a new policy for describing suspects: if there are enough characteristics to reasonably identify a suspect, a story will include a description; if there are not, the story will say so and won't include a description.

Susan Ihne, executive editor: "When people presented problems, the others came forward with solutions that they hadn't thought of. There was such a good diversity of people, that the solutions were very diverse."

The Kansas City Star

Kansas City, Missouri

Topic: Covering Kansas City's Hispanic community

Action Update: *The Kansas City Star* is covering more issues and events that participants said were important to the Hispanic community. Editors from the paper also met with various Hispanic community leaders after the roundtable, and more Hispanic readers began joining the paper's monthly visitor programs, which allowed them to sit in on news meetings.

Miriam Pepper, readers' representative, associate editor/forum: "The meeting at *The Star* was a beginning. Journalists listened and offered explanations as readers described newspaper shortcomings. It was a chance for the paper to gather new sources and story ideas."

Ana Melgoza, community affairs liaison for Kansas City city planning commission: "What could have turned out to be a feeling of animosity for the newspaper turned into a wonderful experience. ... I don't know how often it happens where a publisher and a top marketing executive could sit down with a community's grassroots and civic leaders and say 'here are the concerns.'"

Las Vegas Review-Journal

Las Vegas, Nevada

Topic: Covering the gaming industry

Action update: Following the roundtable, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* covered story ideas suggested by participants, including taking an in-depth look at the effects of mergers and acquisitions on the gaming industry, and reporting on Las Vegas' changing demographics. The paper is also updating its ethics statement and communicating changes to the newsroom. The *Review-Journal* is planning a roundtable on minority and ethnic communities for the near future.

Thomas Mitchell, editor: "In the end, I thought we journalists were our own worst critics, but anyone who doesn't think they can do better is already on a downward slide."

Roger Morris, author of *The Money and The Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947–2000*: "You don't live in a democracy in this town. ... Gaming is far larger and more powerful than any other entity in this society."

The Santa Fe New Mexican

Santa Fe, New Mexico

Topic: Art, religion and the First Amendment

Action Update: Editors and reporters at *The New Mexican* are working to stay away from labels and shallow sources. Editors and reporters are also now more confident about addressing directly issues of cultural and ethnic difference. The paper will create an E-mail group for participants to continue to offer feedback.

Rob Dean, managing editor: "Can a newspaper, as a defender of the First Amendment, be impartial on stories in which freedom of expression is an issue? In such a case, how does a newspaper safeguard its credibility?"

Tom Chavez, director of the Palace of Governors: "With this kind of

thing, I suspect, people being people, they'd want to get into the debate over the issue rather than how it was reported. But I think the questions the facilitator prepared kept us focused on the issue."

The Bismarck Tribune

Bismarck, North Dakota

Topic: Health care coverage

Action Update: Managing Editor Ken Rogers said the roundtable encouraged reporters and editors to discuss reader interest, and the consequences of stories more during assignment and news meetings. The paper is planning to reconvene its roundtable group in a year.

Ken Rogers, managing editor: "More readers will be involved in shaping coverage and editorial policy. And more thoughtful inspection, with the bigger picture in mind, will be given to stories, not only on health care but other issues as well."

Denise Hanson, community relations executive for medical group: "By the end of the session, there was a remarkable difference in just the acceptance and understanding that *The Tribune* was really making an effort to do a better job, and understand the issues and have a frank discussion. You could see ... the sense of hope by the time we were done."

The Edmond Sun

Edmond, Oklahoma

Topic: Coverage of the death of a local teen; distrust of the newspaper's corporate ownership

Action Update: Following the roundtable, the paper revamped its mission statement to include "improve the condition of the community by publishing information in an accurate and responsible manner." The paper also ran a five-part series on the newsgathering and decision-making processes of newspapers. Reporters now have access to the Potter Box, a printed list of questions that helps them deal with ethical dilemmas.

Carol Hartzog, managing editor: "The entire newsroom has a clearer understanding of the impact their stories can have on individuals. ... Also, there is a renewed look at the ethics of the decisions we make every day, every minute, concerning how a story is written, how it is 'played' in the newspaper, and the headlines we place on it."

Martha Turner, marketing executive: "Bringing this credibility and honesty to journalism is a real positive thing ... I was very pleased at the healing it created in our community."

The Providence Journal

Providence, Rhode Island

Topic: The push for privacy

Action Update: *The Providence Journal* is developing a new policy on identifying victims in crime stories. The policy will likely reaffirm the notion that news stories need basic facts such as names and addresses, but it will also include a list of considerations for when exclusion and anonymity may be appropriate.

Carol Young, managing editor: "It's always good to try to explain why we do what we do, and to listen to people about the effect of what we do."

Donald E. Kettelle, Foster police chief: "I depend on the news media greatly to help me solve crimes, so I don't agree with any restrictions on the news media and what they can't do."

About APME

The Associated Press Managing Editors is a professional, non-profit organization made up of editors, managing editors and their top assistants from the more than 1,400 American newspapers affiliated with The Associated Press. The group has active members in every state. Since its first national convention in 1933, APME's mission has been to assist newspaper editors in coping creatively and effectively with newsroom management challenges. Recent APME projects, in addition to the National Credibility Roundtables Project, include the National Time Out for Diversity program; organization of APMEOnline, a group of editors of newspaper online sites; publication of "Let's Do It Better", a best practices guide to building newsroom diversity.

About the National Credibility Roundtables Project

In 2001, APME worked with 63 newspaper partners in 49 states, to launch the National Credibility Roundtables Project. Editors of participating news organizations sponsored community conversations about local coverage that raised questions about accuracy or fairness, thoroughness or expertise. They then took steps in their newsrooms to build journalism that deserves to be trusted and is. The project's continuing goal is to apply findings of national media credibility studies in real-life, real-newsroom situations and to build bridges between newsrooms and the communities they serve. The project is supported by a grant from The Ford Foundation and by contributions of The Associated Press.

For more information, call, email or write:

Nationality Credibility Roundtables Project
APME
The Associated Press
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New York, NY 10020
(212) 621-7502
credibility@ap.org