6 KEYS to Powerful Profiles

Ask the right questions, and you’ll find that everyone has a story to tell.

By Steven James

A few years ago, I realized that when performing artists come to my town, they take time for media interviews. I started thinking, “Hmm, I wonder if they’d take time to talk to me?”

They did. I was able to land several interviews that ended up becoming quick-selling profiles. More and more publications are buying profiles of successful or intriguing people. The subjects don’t necessarily have to be famous, just interesting.

I’ve found six profile writing techniques that work for me. If you’re looking for a great way to break into new markets, try these tips to write profiles that sizzle and sell.

1. Let the story come to you
Why go in search of interesting people when they already come to you? Watch for lecturers at local colleges, nationally known comedians performing at nightclubs, famous speakers appearing at conferences, bands stopping by on concert tours, singers visiting coffee shops, bookstore signings by best-selling authors or other special events. Let the story come to you!

Look online to find out who is coming, when the person will be in town and where he or she will be appearing. Then, contact your local radio station or arena to find out the name of the road manager for upcoming events. That’s the person who’ll set up your interview time.

Then, contact the road manager. Explain that you’re a writer and that you’re working on a story for (whatever) magazine and be sure to say, “I’d like to mention Joe Famousguy’s new book, CD, video and so on,” so he or she realizes how the person will benefit from spending time with you. Do be honest; if you don’t have the assignment but plan to write a profile to submit to the magazine on speculation, say so.

Be polite, professional and persistent. Many times the person you’d like to interview is pleasant and willing to talk; it’s just tricky getting through all the gatekeepers.

Be sure to ask for a press kit. The publicist will send you free products (books, CDs and so on) and lots of background information that will cut down on your research time. Read earlier interviews online or at the library.

And remember, Joe Famousguy is doing you a favor by granting this interview. His time is a gift to you. So be gracious.

2. Ask the right questions
All good stories need conflict, so structure your interview questions to bring out the conflicts or struggles in your subject’s life. For example:
- “What’s the biggest setback you’ve had?”
- “What dreams do you have? What obstacles do you foresee? How will you handle them?”
- “Some people criticize you for .... How do you respond?”
- “It must be tough dealing with life on the road. What keeps you going? What makes it all worthwhile?”
- “What special memories do you have? What regrets do you have?”
- “How did you get started? What
kinds of struggles did you face?"

Most people in the media spotlight hear the same questions and repeat the same "pat" answers over and over. You'll find out which questions are during your pre-interview research. Look instead for the passion that drives that person. And then ask questions that reveal the story behind the story.

3. Target your article

I like to think of profiles as falling into one of three categories. Before I pitch a story idea to an editor (even before I craft my article), I decide the type of profile I'll be writing because the selling angle differs for each one.

A. Profiles of the rich and famous: Let's be honest, profiles of famous people sell well. Editors want stories about the people their readers have heard of and admire. The key to selling this type of profile is timing—you want your article to land on the editor's desk just as she is thinking about that person.

To do that, you'll need to keep your finger on the pulse of the magazines to which you're interested in submitting. Once, I interviewed a rock band for a college magazine, and, although the editors liked the profile, they told me that band wasn't very popular with their readers. I couldn't sell that story to them because I hadn't taken the time to really get to know their readers.

To sell a profile of someone famous, tell your editor, "Your readers have already heard of Joe Famousguy and want the inside scoop about him. I'll give it to you!"

B. Profiles of up and comers: These are the people making waves and breakthroughs in their fields. Or, they're the people quietly changing the world through great ideas, innovations or inventions. The introverted billionaire who lives just down the street. The Internet pioneer. The reclusive writer. The talented young actor who is on his way up, but isn't well known yet.

When a tennis coach friend of mine mentioned that the 13-year-old girl he was training was ranked internationally, I started asking myself if there were any teen magazines I wrote for that might want to publish a profile on her.

After choosing one, I told the girl the magazine's name, and she said, "Oh, cool! I get that magazine!" She was an up and comer and a subscriber! Of course, I mentioned that when I pitched the story to the editors. The result? A few months later, Bethany's profile ran as the cover story.

Here your selling angle is that the readers should know about this person, but for some reason don't. When you pitch this type of profile, emphasize the surprise: "None of your readers have heard of Joe Notsofamousguy yet, but they should have! You won't believe what he has accomplished!"

C. Profiles of unsung heroes: It isn't always the famous people who have the interesting stories. I've sold stories about the guy who owns the fitness center down the road, my grandmother, missionaries in Guatemala and even the lighting crew at a church in Illinois.

Keep your eyes open. Look for those amazing true stories of real-life heroes. Lifeguards. Firefighters. Police officers. Survivors. Overcomers. Great men and women of the past. Fame or no fame, there are heroes among us. Their profiles show us examples of courage, virtue, integrity and heroism.

When pitching this type of profile, emphasize the drama of the story rather than appealing to the person's popularity. Tell your editor, "Your readers will be inspired by the incredible story of Joe Hero!"

4. Tell a good story

The biggest secret to writing a quick-selling profile is telling a good story. A great profile doesn't just repeat the facts; it tells an engaging story about an interesting person in a unique way. Don't just overwhelm readers with details of your subject's history; focus on telling a gripping story.

Once, I interviewed a Grammy Award-winning singer. She'd sold her first album when she was a young teenager and had been appearing on the cover of magazines ever since. When I asked the editor of a parenting magazine if he'd like to include her profile in an upcoming issue, he said, "Only if you have information no one else has already written."

Like any good freelancer I said, "Of course I do!" Then I hung up the phone and scoured my notes for something—anything—unique!

Yikes!

Quickly, I restructured the article to get away from the typical information about her recording success, and focused instead on her answer to my question, "What's the one message you're trying to get across to teens?" The profile touched on the singer's true passion and, because of the strong message of hope, the editor bought the article.

The more famous someone is, the more tempting it'll be to simply repeat what others have already written. Decide from the start that if you're going to write a profile, you're going to tell people what they don't already know.

5. Open with an image

Instead of spouting facts, start with a specific image that contributes to your story: a tour bus rambling down the dirt road ... a blazing fire in an ornate fireplace ... the cruelly curved barbed wire fence of the prison. I've started profiles with all

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of these images and used them to shape each article's structure.

Take a cue from fiction writers and grab your readers' attention in the opening paragraph. Use action-packed, mysterious or dramatic openings. Often, your opening image can serve as a "bookend" that you can refer back to in the closing paragraph.

6. Look for contrasts

Another great way to structure your profile is by pointing out the incongruities in your subject's life. I've started profiles by telling about a rodeo star who is now paralyzed, a multiplatinum Christian band that plays in bars on the weekends, a missionary who can't speak the language of the people to whom he's been sent to preach.

Look for things that don't seem to fit. They make strong openers for profiles. Paradox also gives you a great angle for your profile because you can show how two seemingly contradictory traits come together in this intriguing person. Listen for those contrasting images during the interview.

To sum it up: Let the story come to you, ask questions that reveal struggles and discoveries, carefully target your article and focus on crafting a good story with vivid images and intriguing contrasts. Follow these steps and you'll be well on your way to selling more of the profiles you write. WD

Steven James is a contributing editor for \textit{Writer's Digest}: The Magazine for Radical Christian Youth. He has published hundreds of articles and stories and has written two books: \textit{Jawdroppers: 36 Shocking Stories for Students} (Standard Publishing) and \textit{Worship Sketches 2 Perform} (Meriwether Publishing).