

## **Accepting the challenge**

From boredom in the board room to fleeting moments and rain in torrents, nails in shoes and breaking news, photojournalists face a variety of challenges.

While it's all part of the job for any news photographer, there are some challenging situations that just aren't going to yield good photos.

Many photo assignments with poor visual potential can be avoided altogether by doing your homework ahead of time. Don't go where there's nothing interesting to shoot. Just say "no" to the ribbon cutting or the committee meeting.

Don't go when the light is crummy. If you're the one setting the appointment time, don't schedule the community garden shoot during high noon daylight.

As an assignment photographer, you may not get that choice. But it's always a good starting position!

## **Do your homework**

Advance preparation -- while you're lounging about the office in the air conditioning -- can pay huge benefits when you're sweating it out in the field.

Part of coping with "bad" situations is having considered the possibilities ahead of time and anticipating some of the potential pitfalls.

Set yourself up for success by doing your homework. If you're illustrating a story on a professor who's developed a new type of seed corn, find out when she'll be working in the field or in the laboratory. Pick a time for photos when your subject will be actively working in a visually interesting environment. Will she be planting, inspecting, harvesting or working in the laboratory? If you don't ask beforehand, you may end up with just another photo of someone behind a desk.

Yes, your readers and viewers will want to know what she looks like. But they'll be much more interested in the story if it's presented along with compelling photos of the professor at work.

Once you've identified a good assignment for yourself, the next step is preparation.

Being prepared means having the technical basics of photography mastered and out of the way so you can concentrate on seeing.

If you have a camera that you're not really familiar with, be sure to spend some time with the instruction manual and make some practice photos at home before using it on an assignment.

Make sure you have fresh batteries and spares, as well as plenty of memory cards or film.

Being prepared means you have some idea of what to expect and can try to be ready for it. The best photographers are famous for the amount of prep work they put in before they ever pick up a camera. They know where the good things are going to be happening so they CAN wait for the pretty light -- they already know they're in the right place.

Put yourself in a good situation, keep your eyes open and be ready when good things start to happen.

If you have found a good assignment and are fully prepared in both mind and equipment, much of the rest of your effort should be focused on "seeing" potential photos as they unfold around you.

### **Now, deal with it**

Most of your advance preparation has centered on avoiding bad photographic situations. Once you're out in the field, though, it is what it is. You're going to have to deal with it.

Public enemy number one is Time, or the lack of it.

Given enough time to think through, sort out or wait out a visually challenging situation, most any competent photographer can come up with a good shot.

Very few photo situations, especially those we consider to be "bad," can't be improved by a booster shot of some more time. I'd always rather wait for a real moment, some interaction or great light.

Inflexible schedules and deadlines are, of course, in direct conflict with waiting. Sometimes it's now or never and you have to come back with a picture.

Once (and only once), early in my newspaper career, I came back from an assignment and reported that there wasn't anything there to shoot. It created quite a stir in the newsroom when the five-foot-tall, over-medicated city editor threw a phone book at me.

Don't pass up a decent picture thinking that there's a better one just around the corner. To roughly paraphrase Voltaire, "perfect is the enemy of good enough."

## **Snagging a moment**

Capturing a telling moment is what the practice of photojournalism is all about. That one little slice of time where all the elements come together is precious and perishable.

If real, telling, photographic moments are likely to be scarce, make sure you don't miss one.

If you're shooting face-painting, or a series of three-legged races at the church picnic, you know there will be plenty of moments to choose from. If you miss one, just move on to the next.

If you're at a boring committee meeting, visually-compelling moments are a bit more scarce. You'd better be ready when one comes.

Do your best to maximize ANY chance, however brief, to capture that great shot.

This means: Camera out of the bag and turned on, fresh batteries, basic exposure set, flash handy, etc.

## **Stop, don't shoot!**

If you have to work somewhere where folks don't want you to make pictures, this will, of course, limit your opportunities. There won't be time to stand around and think or fumble with your equipment.

If someone doesn't want to have his or her picture made, and you have to do it anyway, be ready for the slightest, briefest opportunity, no matter how slim it might be.

If you think you might run into trouble, grab something quick then protect what you've got. Change camera cards and squirrel away the one with your hard-won photos on it. Then, if you do run into someone who demands your card, you can feel free to give up the new, empty card. By the time they figure it out, you should be long gone.

The same goes for an extended shoot of any kind. Back up your images every night. Back up your images every night. Back up your images every night.

Ideally you should have at least two copies of your images on separate media. If you do have two copies, leave one behind wherever you're staying, rather than taking them both with you while you're out shooting.

Don't shoot a week-long trip on one huge memory card that stays in your camera the whole time. If something happens to that card or your camera gets stolen, you'll lose the whole take.

## **Disaster area**

Take care of yourself. Safety always comes first.

Sometimes, you may decide to put the photos ahead of your own personal comfort, but never put photos ahead of safety.

If you're going to cover a disaster, you need to make sure you're not going to become a part of the disaster yourself. You have an absolute, moral obligation not to be a burden on those affected by the disaster or on those providing aid.

So make sure you can work self-contained and keep out of the way.

That could mean anything from wearing sensible shoes and carrying a granola bar and some water, to toting your own fuel, food and shelter for a week's stay. Give some thought to electricity and communications and your ability to transmit pictures.

Take whatever you need to take care of you. Only you know what that is. It's different for different folks.

If you have a trick stomach, it might be Immodium and a roll of toilet paper.

You might want a supply of aspirin or allergy medicine, as well as any prescription medication you may need.

If you can't eat certain foods, bring something you can eat.

Here is short list of things I consider vital:

- A flashlight and spare batteries.
- A GPS and/or a map and compass.
- A pocketknife or mutli-tool.
- Some sturdy (nylon) cord.
- Matches or a lighter.
- A hat and sunscreen.

- Insect repellent.
- Rain gear, for yourself and to protect your camera equipment.
- A couple of heavy plastic garbage bags (contractor grade).

Take care of your feet! A sturdy, comfortable pair of boots will allow you to walk through a variety of hazards without worrying too much about stepping on something like a nail or broken glass.

As far as camera gear goes, less is probably more. Definitely don't take anything that you can't personally carry for an extended period. Don't count on using any kind of roller bag over rough terrain.

If it's really cold, layered clothing with good wind protection for the top layer will let you keep working. There's a big difference between being comfortable while dashing from heated car to heated office and having to work outdoors in foul conditions for several hours at a time.

Remember that batteries lose much of their power in cold conditions. You may want to carry spare camera batteries inside your coat and next to your body where they stay warm.

There may very well not be electricity where you're going. So you'll need to take enough spare batteries for your camera, flash and computer to take care of business. Being able to charge batteries from your vehicle can be very useful. Many electronic items have auxiliary 12-volt chargers. A small DC to AC power inverter can save the day. Just be aware that, despite the appearance of a standard AC outlet, an inverter provides very limited amperage. Check the rating of your inverter and add up the wattage of all the chargers you want to plug in at one time.  $Watts = Amps \times Volts$ .

If you have serious, unmet needs for AC power, a gasoline-powered generator may be an option.

No power from the grid means no gasoline from electrically powered pumps.

Watch your fuel level continuously. Refill your tank at every opportunity. Don't wait until you have a quarter tank. You may need to consider carrying spare fuel cans. This is unpleasant at best and can be dangerous at worst. So carry fuel cans at your own risk.

No electricity also means no free, high-speed Internet. If you have to send photos while you're out, a cellular air card may get the job done.

If there is lots of damage to houses and other buildings, there will be sharp pieces of metal, nails and broken glass all waiting to shred a tire. Make sure your spare is ready to go and consider adding a couple of cans of Fix-a-Flat.

Best of Luck and Happy Shooting!

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