

# Special Report

## Mark Your Calendar *How to Generate Story Ideas All Year*

Let me share one of the secrets to creating a continual flow of media placements or articles. Pay attention to the calendar. Make that a variety of calendars.

The media often looks for stories that tie into holidays, historical events, industry cycles or other yearly occurrences. So schedule these perennial idea generators into your timetable to help set up a year of continual stories.

### **Holidays & Anniversaries**

Do you realize how many holidays and observances are going on all the time?

For example, except for February, which has Black History Month, Groundhog Day, Valentine's Day, Presidents' Day and Mardi Gras, it may seem as if there is usually only one general holiday per month. For example, there's St. Patrick's Day in March, Earth Day in April, Mother's Day in May and so on. However, there are a host of lesser-known observances in every month.

Take January, a rather quiet month except for New Year's Day and the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., right? Wrong. January is also Human Resource Month, Hobby Month and Adopt a Rescued Bird Month. The third week is Health Weight Week and the fourth week is National Handwriting Analysis Week (to commemorate the birthday of John Hancock). You also have Elvis' Birthday (January 8), National Clean Off Your Desk Day (the second Monday in January) and Religious Freedom Day (January 16). And these are only a few of the holidays within that particular month.

How did all these diverse observances come into being? Associations and other organizations created most of them in order to draw attention on a particular cause or issue.

Editors often use these observances to decide on topics for upcoming articles. My first experience of this was when one of my past editors asked her regular contributors to submit queries on small business safety issues. The pieces were to be written and approved in time for June, which was Safety Month.

You can find an observance for practically anything you can imagine, and the timelines range from yearlong to just a day. Besides proposing ideas that are straightforward tie-ins, you can also give your stories a creative twist. Here are a few ideas:

1. Some celebrations may provide a ready-made story by having themes that clash with other observances that occur at or near to the same time. For example, February is designated as Children's Dental Health Month and also Snack Food Month. Can you find an idea in that?
2. Try putting a twist on the observance's theme in order to come up with a less conventional story idea. Take Mother's Day or Father's Day as examples. Instead of gift ideas or extolling the virtues of family, try pitching ideas about family conflict and repairing relationships.
3. Tie a current trend to an established tradition. You know several people are going to write about the origins of Thanksgiving, but how many will write about a "turkeycam?" The story about a live webcam on a Kansas turkey farm ran in *Fortune* in 2004, and it was one of the only two Thanksgiving articles I read.
4. You can expand on the previous tactic by piggybacking your article or promotional idea onto a cultural event. *Time* commemorated the bicentennial of the Lewis & Clark expedition (which opened up the western part of the United States) with a special report. Instead of only running historical pieces, one of its articles focused on fish conservation efforts on the Yakima River, which was part of the expedition route.

The bicentennial year (2003) also saw the publication of at least two Lewis & Clark cookbooks. I know of a restaurant that capitalized on one such cookbook and the bicentennial by offering a commemorative whiskey dinner. The idea was that Scotch whisky was one of the staples of the expedition, so the restaurant provided diners with single malts and a meal based on historically accurate recipes from one of those new cookbooks.

To find observances and spark ideas like these, try *Chase's Calendar of Events*. Published annually by McGraw-Hill, it is one of the most well known directories of observances, holidays, anniversaries and festivals. If you don't want to buy it, the book should be in your local library. You can also access similar information at Earth Calendar.net ([www.earthcalendar.net](http://www.earthcalendar.net)).

One last word of advice: thanks to the Internet, email and immigration, many publications have a reader base that is becoming increasingly multicultural. This means that you should never make assumptions about the way people perceive or celebrate holidays, even common ones like Christmas.

### **Seasonal Activities**

Another way to find article ideas is by watching what people regularly do during particular times of the year.

For example, during winter, people try to avoid gaining “winter weight,” they get ready for the cold by winterizing their homes and vehicles, and they try to stay well during the flu season. The first part of the year is awards season for many industries, especially entertainment. Many lifestyle magazines will distribute special bridal issues, and publications of all sorts will predict what lies ahead in the coming year. It’s also the time when people start paying more attention to their taxes and financial planning. Students go on spring break, and college seniors begin or intensify their job searches and worry about paying off student loans.

When spring has sprung, readers will be interested in dieting and exercising in order to lose those extra winter pounds. Not too coincidentally, most people are thinking ahead to “swimsuit season.” It’s also the time for daylight-saving time, graduations, planting gardens, arranging Easter activities, dealing with allergies and planning summer vacations.

During the summer, people will generally be interested in travel, leisure in their own back yard, picnics, sports, summer entertainment, grilling techniques and “beat the heat” ideas. June is the traditional wedding month, which means more bridal ideas, this time focusing on the “June bride.” Toward the end of summer, students start getting ready to go back to school.

In September, students, parents and teachers look for advice on readjusting to the demands of the education system. As the year ends, people also need advice on shopping and gift-giving, holiday crafts, cooking and dining. They’re decorating their houses for Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, trying out new turkey or ham recipes and preparing to entertain in a more formal manner than they may have done in months past. In addition, people look back at the year in order to identify high and low points that occurred.

The activities described above reflect general lifestyle interests, but you can apply the principle to specific sectors such as politics, sports, fashion, retail, etc.

In addition, your state or local tourism office is likely to have a calendar of events for the year. Make a point to read through the calendar; you may be inspired with an idea that you can piggyback onto one of the already established events. In addition, you will also have access to expert sources, that is, the planners,

vendors and participants. Writers can use these experts for articles, and PR practitioners can seek partnership opportunities for media placements or maybe obtain ideas for future events of their own.

An additional word to PR practitioners: Even if you can't make your client or company the focus of your story idea, pitch it to the media. Nothing will cement your relationship with the press like a good idea. You can also try writing letters to the editor that relate to the theme or an aspect of the event. Another tactic to try is donating relevant goods or services to the event and then interviewing users for a case study or a customer newsletter article.

### **Editorial Calendars**

An editorial calendar is the schedule of topics that a publication's issues will cover for the upcoming year or half-year. Technically, these calendars are designed to help the sales department attract prospective advertisers, but you can use them to tailor pitches, query letters and articles to particular issues.

Many magazine editors begin drafting their new editorial calendars near the end of the year, so that's the time to start collecting calendars for the publications you want to target and using them to create a plan of action.

If you want one-stop resources for editorial calendars, look for databases of calendar listings. The best known is Bacon's MediaCalendars, and as of this writing, the MediaCalendars subscription Web page states that an annual subscription is \$845, plus \$200 for each additional user password. Check the information at [www.bacons.com/orders/mediacalendars/subscribe.asp](http://www.bacons.com/orders/mediacalendars/subscribe.asp) when you're ready to order. Bacon's sales representatives also recommend that you call them to discuss needs and pricing. The number is 800-621-0561.

You can also find editorial calendars in the Wooden Horse Publishing database at [www.woodenhorsepub.com](http://www.woodenhorsepub.com). As of this writing, annual subscriptions are a little more cost-effective at \$149. Wooden Horse also offers subscriptions options for the day, week, month and half-year.

If you prefer to invest time rather than money, many publications post their editorial calendars on their websites. You'll find them in the advertising or editorial information section. If you can't find the calendars online, contact the publications' editorial or advertising departments.

Sometimes a publication that you're targeting will not have an editorial calendar. In those cases, study the back issues to determine editors' interests and see if there are any patterns to the topics they cover at particular times.

However, even if you do obtain editorial calendars, remember that these plans are not set in stone. Publications can and do change their editorial calendars, so check for updates regularly. One of my clients has me check the calendars of the

magazines she targets on a monthly basis, and I always find at least one or two changes.

Also, don't assume that editors will focus *only* on the topics listed in their calendars. If you have a topic that you believe fits the publication and will be of interest to its readers, go ahead and suggest it.

### **Timing**

While you're pitching seasonal story ideas, always bear in mind publications' lead time (how far in advance the editor works on content before it appears in an issue).

As you'll see, similar outlets can have widely varying lead times. The only way to be sure that you're working within particular outlets' time frames is look through media directories, check websites for submission guidelines and also contact editorial assistants or producers.

I did some research and found the following minimum and maximum lead times:

Monthly consumer print magazines have times ranging from two weeks to one year, and the online consumer publications usually have lead times of one to four months. Trade magazines (both print and online) require anywhere from two weeks to one year, and weekly consumer magazines range from one to three months.

Daily newspapers generally require only a couple of weeks though you may need to allow for much more time if you're pitching special sections such as the travel or magazine section. In fact, figure that you'll need three to four months for a newspaper magazine. Weekly newspapers prefer a little under a month of advance notice.

You can usually contact broadcast and online media within a couple days of your story. Television talk shows may need two to six weeks of lead time, and radio requires four days to one month. The Ad Council cites public service announcement (PSA) lead times of three weeks to three months for television and one week to two months for radio.

Your best bet is to find out about specific lead times before you need to contact media outlets with a story. Then you can figure out when and if you'll have enough time to contact particular outlets and what other options are feasible.

However, the great thing about most seasonal ideas is that they'll be relevant again next year. If you miss an opportunity now, just mark your calendar and plan for the future.

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