

Magazine Dreams

Wannabe writers learn how to pitch and package their story ideas

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A fledgling writer named Megan approached the microphone to pitch a story to a panel of critics -- three teen-magazine editors. With great earnestness, and at great length, she said the piece she'd like to write would explore how the shootings at Columbine High School have stifled teenagers' self-expression in speech, dress and other behavior at schools nationwide.

"What's your news hook?" asked Taffy Akner, not one of the editors but the moderator of the evening's session on "Breaking into Teen Magazines," held last Monday at Studio Theater in Manhattan. "And, by the way, do you know what a news hook is?," she asked the 40 or so other aspiring magazine writers in the audience. "It's the 'Why now?' element" of a story.

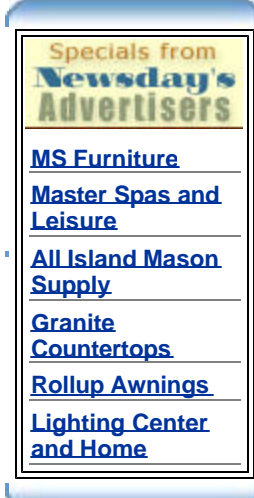
"What's your catchy title?" asked one of the editors. "How about something like 'Teen Clothing Rights' or 'How to Protest'?"

But don't make it "preachy," said Kristen Kemp, a former teen magazine editor who now writes for the likes of Self, Glamour and Marie Claire. It has to be "more fun and upbeat," she said. Such as, "You Go Girl -- How to Protest."

Such was the finessing and focusing during the "pitch slam" portion of the event, sponsored by MediaBistro.com, a job site and boot-camp-style training organization for those in the media and those who want to get there.

Besides plenty of advice on how to get a foot in the door -- submitting clips of published work and writing pitch letters -- the evening offered something far more valuable to those looking to break into the highly competitive field of consumer magazines, where most writers work on a freelance basis. That would be face time with editors: the chance to say or do something, hopefully impressive, either at the session or at the bar across the street to which the editors and many participants adjourned.

What's at the root of getting a magazine editor to even read your pitch? It's about buying her a drink and "reminding her of it the next day when you send her your story ideas," said Akner, MediaBistro's education director and a former magazine writer who grew up in Dix Hills. Indeed, Chandra Czape, deputy editor of CosmoGirl, said, "I rarely accept a pitch from someone I don't know."



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Still, publications for teens may offer an easier entry point than others for young writers -- those with clips and good ideas -- given their closeness in age to the readership, a demographic that is increasing fast, according to a new report done for the Magazine Publishers of America. The teen market profile, found at www.magazine.org, says that the number of teenagers in this country grew by almost 17 percent from 1990 to 2000, rising from 27.5 million in 1990 to 32 million a decade later. And, it says, eight out of 10 teens read magazines.

While jobs for writers and editors overall are expected to increase by 10 percent to 20 percent over the next eight years, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, those who will be in demand most, the bureau says, are the ones in the less glamorous but more lucrative areas of corporate and technical writing.

So young people bitten by the media bug need to continue to seek out internships, nuts-and-bolts advice and meet-the-editor opportunities. On the docket at MediaBistro are low-cost sessions on magazine writing basics, fact-checking and health writing. In the fall you can check out www.cen.com.org -- the Web site for the Center for Communication, a non-profit media forum in Manhattan that offers free sessions for students interested in communications careers, with a small fee for non-students. And then there's the Learning Annex -- it has a session in the city July 26 on "How to Write for Women's Magazines."

One of the story pitches the other evening came from Faran Krentcil, a 2003 graduate of Duke University who talked up an idea for a story about various types of boarding schools -- an idea that was well presented and well received. She already has a couple of magazine clips under her belt -- mostly on dating and boys -- and, "at this point, any clip you have is good," she says.

A public relations account executive by day, she speaks with magazine editors regularly, pitching ideas to promote her clients -- this, apart from her own story ideas. Her advice for freelance writers is to "have the magazine memorized." That way you can target your idea to specific areas, such as, say, the Beauty Patrol section in CosmoGirl or the Total Girl section in Elle Girl magazine. And that makes it easier for editors to see the possibilities.

No two ways about it. "A magazine never adapts to fit your story idea. You have to adapt the idea to fit the magazine," said Czape, from CosmoGirl. "If you can't see where it would fit, it can't go in there."

She also advised would-be writers to go after entry-level staff jobs, such as editorial assistant or fact-checker. To save on the freelance budget, magazines often ask such insiders to extend their workdays well into the evening to write pieces.

For help along those job-search lines, you can check out a group Czape started with a friend: Ed2010.com, a face-to-face and online community to help young editor-wannabes break in and get ahead. Besides finding more events to attend, you can get a 60-minute mentor who'll answer every question you can fit into an hour. And you'll find the latest job opening rumors in the "whisper job" section.

Another way to build your pile of clips? Those weekly freebie newspapers you may barely notice stacked up in some merchants' entryways. With next to no staff, they rely on outsiders who are willing to write for peanuts -- or less. You also can take on volunteer writing projects with nonprofits you care about.

Yes, it's called "giving it away," says Laurel Touby, founder and cyberhostess of MediaBistro. "It's the sad truth," she says. And people who don't want to accept it may not be cut out for this business. You go

into this line of work, she says, "half for your own peace of mind and half for the money." And "money rarely follows this profession." What you do get are opportunities for self-expression, plus the chance to educate and communicate with people.

"The people who are determined are the ones who succeed."

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