

THE ART OF THE PROFILE

Although business stories often require more details – especially numbers – than other journalistic forms, they essentially employ the same elements. Good business writing borrows from other forms of writing and requires solid reporting, focused organization and, perhaps more than in other forms, attention to detail. To succeed, a company profile must be based on in-depth reporting – all on the company, its industry and its financials. We will specifically discuss some tips for reporting and writing engaging company profiles, but most of these rules apply to all forms of business writing.

Company Profiles

Company profiles are similar to individual profiles in that they introduce readers to this particular character in the drama of the business story. But they are based more on financial information and numbers, rather than quotes and personal information. The financial information is the backbone and heart of the piece, the other details provide color and context.

- **Where to go to get information for a company profile:** First, ask the company for its history. Seek out details about its founding (family-owned, privately held and if publicly traded, when it went public). Seek information about its early life. Has it changed businesses or lines of business? What executive changes took place? How has the board of directors changed over the years? Companies sometimes even publish histories of themselves, and this can be a good place to start – though, obviously, these histories are often quite positive, with few warts. Go through press releases the company has issued over the years to get its internal take on things. Obviously, read everything your paper has written about the company. Check Google and other search engines for what others have written about the company. Check clippings of trade publications in its industry – the picture of the company that emerges often will be very different than what is reported in the general press, specifically on its place in the industry.

When you have the personal outline of the company established, start pouring through the company’s Securities and Exchange Commission financial documents and proxy statements, readily available on Edgar Online. Read between the lines to see changes over the years, and compare data. If you are writing about a privately held company for which you don’t have the “treasure trove” of SEC documents, look for other documents – litigation filed against the company, liens against its property, cases against it at the SEC, Federal Trade Commission or Internal Revenue Service. Think of any place the company and public documents may have intersected, and then go searching for those documents.

Also, don’t forget about “the good stuff” – what industry awards the company may have won, what patents it might have secured, what honors its executives have been given. These not only will help you write a comprehensive profile of

the company, but will provide “carrots” in your interview with the top brass, allowing you to play “good cop” at some point in your interview. It also will show that you are being fair – company profiles should never show bias in either a negative (cheap-shot) or an overly positive (cream-puff) direction. You are seeking to show the company as it is, based on all of your reporting.

- **Interviewing:** After you've read the histories, the news clippings and the documents, only then should you start to interview. Early on, schedule an interview with the CEO, as this is often the most difficult interview to schedule given their busy schedules. Timing for conducting this interview is partly your personal preference, but many veteran business journalists prefer to leave this until second to last. That avoids letting what is often a charismatic, press-savvy CEO to color your idea of the entire company early on, and allows you to gather more information before you talk to him or her. (Yet you don't want his or her voice to be the last one in your head before you start writing, so it's good to make it the second-to-last interview.) Though, some journalists still prefer to start at the top, figuring their impression of the company and the quotes gleaned here are among the most important they will get during the interviewing phase.

In any case, talk to as many company insiders as you can, individually if at all possible. If you can get a company directory (often from former employees), use it to find names of rank-and-file employees and talk to them. Then go to suppliers, customers and competitors, though take the latter group's quotes with a grain of salt. Talk to people in different cities, especially for national companies, as each will have a different perspective. On the personal side (i.e., the top brass' spouses, children, ex-spouses), it can also be useful to tap those close to the company insiders you'll be interviewing, though include only what's relevant to the story. And it can be a good idea to run those quotes by the company officials they describe – not for “permission” to use them, but as a fair heads-up. Also, often they will comment on their comments, giving you great fodder for your profile.

- **Other ideas:** It's important to tell a tale when writing a profile. You'll not only want the hard facts, but also good dialogue, setting, conflict and resolution. For dialogue, observe the individual at, or get transcripts to, key meetings. These can serve as somewhat of a "soundtrack" of the company. And you must help readers picture the setting in their minds, so that means visiting the company, watching what they make and hearing the sounds of the manufacturing, for instance, to be able to help the reader imagine each detail. Leave your newsroom and go to the corporate offices, or wherever the company interacts with other companies or people. This will help a great deal in writing the profile.

COMPILED BY:

Jodi Schneider, Economics and Finance Editor
Congressional Quarterly
jschneider@cq.com