

Package planning

Teamwork can help turn stories into appealing packages

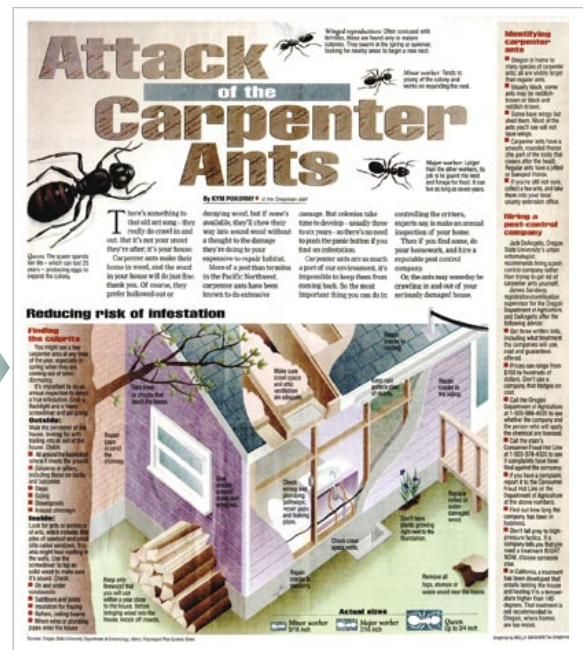
Most newsrooms are like factory assembly lines: the reporter reports. The photographer photographs. The editor edits. And then, at the last minute, the designer designs.

That assembly-line process works fine if you're making sausages, but it won't consistently produce reader-friendly pages. Lavish layouts rarely succeed when they're slapped together on deadline.

So how do you retool your newsroom to produce packages like *this*? By planning. If you institute a collaborative brainstorming process, you can shape stories *before* they're written.

A few years ago, Buck Ryan — journalism professor at the University of Kentucky — devised the Maestro Concept, a method of integrating writing, editing, art and design. Ryan proposed that each newsroom appoint a *maestro*, a visual journalist who could orchestrate the interplay between key staffers. And to streamline the process, participants would use a story planning form like the one reprinted on the next page.

How does it work? Suppose you've gathered information for a big story. Before you start writing, there's a brief meeting. That's where you, the editor, the photographer and the designer, with the maestro's help, explore the story's potential using a form like the one below to produce a package like the one above.



USING A PACKAGE-PLANNING FORM TO IMPROVE A STORY'S PRESENTATION

The story idea: Can you summarize the story in 25 words or less? That's a good test to see if your focus is tight enough — or if you're still struggling with a fuzzy concept.

Questions readers will ask: The first question every reader asks for every story is "Why should I care?" Try to answer this question in a useful, visual way — with a headline, a photo, a sidebar. Now: What other questions will readers have, and how can you best answer them? That list of sidebar options provides alternative ideas for reporting and design.

Photos or illustrations: Too often, photographers are excluded from story-planning conferences, then sent on assignment with hardly a clue what the story's about. But when photographers are included in this preliminary discussion, they can shape the direction of the imagery AND the reporting. By this point in the planning meeting, an attentive photographer should be able to suggest photo ideas — or, if the story is better served by illustrations, staffers can weigh those options instead.

STORY IDEA: Carpenter ants are a common pest — so here's a consumer guide to WHAT THEY ARE, WHAT THEY DO — and HOW TO GET RID OF THEM.

QUESTIONS READERS WILL ASK

1 Why should I care? They can cause expensive damage to the wood in your house.
 NOW ANSWERED: HEADLINE PHOTO/CAPTION SIDEBAR TEXT

2 How can you identify them?
 NOW ANSWERED: HEADLINE PHOTO/CAPTION SIDEBAR photo with bio box

3 Where do they invade your house?
 NOW ANSWERED: HEADLINE PHOTO/CAPTION SIDEBAR cutaway diagram

4 How do you get rid of them?
 NOW ANSWERED: HEADLINE PHOTO/CAPTION SIDEBAR checklist on exterminators

SIDEBAR OPTIONS

<input type="checkbox"/> FAST FACTS BOX	<input type="checkbox"/> GLOSSARY	<input type="checkbox"/> DIAGRAM
<input type="checkbox"/> BIO BOX	<input type="checkbox"/> QUIZ	<input type="checkbox"/> TABLE
<input type="checkbox"/> PREVIEW BOX	<input type="checkbox"/> Q & A	<input type="checkbox"/> TIMELINE
<input type="checkbox"/> OPINION POLL	<input type="checkbox"/> QUOTE COLLECTION	<input type="checkbox"/> STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE
<input type="checkbox"/> LIST	<input type="checkbox"/> RATINGS	<input type="checkbox"/> SCRIPT
<input type="checkbox"/> CHECKLIST	<input type="checkbox"/> MAP	<input type="checkbox"/> WHERE TO GO/ CALL/WRITE
<input type="checkbox"/> INDEX	<input type="checkbox"/> CHART	

PHOTOS/ART

LEAD ART: Cutaway diagram of a house showing WHERE and HOW the ants usually enter and build nests.
 SECONDARY ART: Closeup photo of ants: queen, worker, etc. (If we can't shoot photos, we'll use illustrations.)

HEADLINE/DECK

MAIN HEADLINE: ATTACK OF THE CARPENTER ANTS (sci-fi movie type?)
 DECK: The ants crawl in, the ants crawl out. But it's not your snout they're after — it's your HOUSE.

ROUGH LAYOUT

ATTACK OF THE CARPENTER ANTS!

STAFF

EDITOR: KYM
 WRITER: REED
 DESIGNER: MOLLY
 ARTIST/PHOTOGRAPHER: SHAWN
 EDITOR/HEAD WRITER:

DEADLINES

Mon. 5/3
 INFO FOR SIDEBAR(S):
 Wed. 5/5
 STORY — FIRST READ:
 Fri. 5/7
 FINAL STORY/ART:
 Mon. 5/10
 RUN DATE:

LENGTHS

10"
 MAIN STORY:
 5" each
 SIDEBAR(S):

NOTES:
 Pete: call agriculture department for ant brochures

Rough layout: While those ideas for photos, sidebars and headlines are being kicked around, the designer can sketch a layout that integrates all the key ingredients with their proposed shapes and sizes. Everything is subject to change, of course, but by the end of the meeting, all the participants should agree on this preliminary vision of the page. Remember, this is just a starting point — the actual page should only get better. After the meeting, this form is photocopied and distributed for future reference.

