How to Build a Beat

An intro to specialized reporting
Who Am I?

Veteran law enforcement beat reporter...

Started as a police reporting intern for outlets such as Newsday + The Washington Post.


Moved onto national law enforcement, first for The Marshall Project.

Now I am at NBC News Investigations
What is a beat?

Specialized reporting made up one or more related topics.
Let's name some beats

Have any ideas?
You are assigned a beat, now what?

Know the main players:

Government agencies and their spokespeople

Former officials who aren’t shy

Academics who study the topic

Community activists pushing for reforms

Lobbying organizations
Rule #1 – Don’t rely on the agencies you are assigned to cover for accurate information. Make sure to verify what they tell you.

Don’t be lazy. Cultivate sources outside the spokesperson’s office.

Learn local public records law to access documents and data.

Be persistent. Keep asking questions.
How to build sources

Attend public events: School board meetings, city council hearings, police departments hold community meetings.

Find officials to take to lunch who can speak to you “on background.” Make sure to get usable details “on record.”

Seek out former officials no longer working in government.

Give out your contact information like it’s candy.
As you grow, so do your sources
FOIA and local public information acts

FOIA = Freedom of Information Act is a federal law

Then there are local versions in cities and states
How do you write a request?

[EXTERNAL] New Request Created :: D004220-022422

DALLASTX Support <dallastx@govqa.us>

To: Weichselbaum, Simone (NBCUniversal)

Retention Policy MBX INBOX (60 days)
Expires 4/25/2022

"Hello,
Per Under the Texas Public Information Act I am making the following request:

• The dollar amount of settlements, jury awards, and similar payments paid out by the city of Dallas pertaining to the Dallas Police Department from January 1, 2017 through the date on which this request is filled regarding Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and/or Texas Labor Code Chapter 21
• Please include each paid amount, name of plaintiff or person receiving the funds, the date of payment, date of claim, and the case category and subcategory.

Please send these records in an .XLS file or similar electronic format.

If you deny any portion of this request, please cite the specific statute that you feel justifies each exemption.
On 12/08/2017, a Corporate Investigator with the Home Depot, Adam Konesey, reached out to Detectives and requested assistance with an investigation into an organized retail crime group. Adam stated they have been watching the group for several months and requested the Volusia County Sheriff's Office adopt the case.

On 01/03/2018, Detective Paul was assigned this case. Adam Konesey provided the following information;

In April of 2017, Home Depot stores began to contact Adam Konesey, in regards to large amounts of well and effluent pumps being refunded however they were not being sold, indicating they were being stolen at some point. The store managers stated they did not know where they were being stolen from however they knew for sure it was Home Depot's merchandise as they were marked as such.

Area stores began to notice and report large shortages of well and effluent pumps from their inventory. Many of the stores do not have Loss Prevention making it very difficult to determine where the thefts were taking place.

Throughout the investigation, two primary suspects were identified as Steven Proctor and Amelia La-Polla, who seem to recruit other suspects to commit the thefts and do fraudulent returns.
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Other ideas

Talk to reporters in other cities who share your beat.

Join media organizations:

Education Writers Association
Religion Newswriters Association
Investigative Reporters and Editors
The Society of Professional Journalists
National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association
National Association of Black Journalists
National Association of Hispanic Journalists
Asian American Journalists Association
Any Questions....
Contact info

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