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11/29/2011

The Most Important Skill for a Photojournalist

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Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle shows her relief and lets out a huge laugh after the board passed her first budget, almost unanimously. It was a huge political moment for her and the county that has been in bad financial shape. A few minutes before this moment happened, another photographer had left the scene, thinking all the moments had been captured. But I knew she still hadn't shook the hands of all the board members. The last few provided the highest emotional moment of the day, a capstone to the eight hours I spent waiting to see if the budget would pass.

In a previous post about having a [strategy on assignment](#), I mentioned that sports photographers make for good news photographers, and vice versa, because capturing the moment almost always comes down to anticipation.

Let me use a football metaphor to move that ball up the field.

I would call anticipation the single most important skill for a photojournalist. The ability to anticipate carries over to nearly every single assignment. It's a determining factor in the success or instant failure for almost every photograph you will take.

Anticipation trumps such things as imagination, vision, patience and perseverance. All those are great to have, but if you are flat-footed when the moment happens, the simple truth is that you'll miss it.

One of the most sinking feelings you can have as a photographer is to realize, too late, where you should be standing and instead make eye contact with your competitor emerging from that doorway, gloating.

Anticipation comes through knowledge and knowledge comes through a host of sources. Past experience is valuable, but your own reconnaissance and an intuition of human nature can also prove vital.

What different forms can this anticipation take?

- **Anticipate which picture will tell the story best.**

You have to do this, even before the moment is readily apparent. This image goes by many terms; the "A-1 picture", "the money shot", or "the decisive moment." In a journalism context, you are trying to sum up all the storytelling elements into one picture. It helps to have an ideal in your head as a flexible goal to work towards. It also helps to understand the thinking of readers and editors – your audience.

- **Anticipate whom you need to focus on.**

Who should receive your emphasis - is it the famous newsmaker in the room, or somebody else? Should you photograph that person who is doing their best to be the center of attention, or is a press-hungry person manipulating you? You don't want to show up back in the office after a drive of two hours, as I did as an intern, to have the managing editor ask you pointblank why you didn't photograph someone who the reporter was going to include in the lead.

- **Anticipate when the best picture will emerge.**

This could be what month, what day of the week, or even what second of the day. Is it better at night or day, rain or sun, cold or balmy? Early morning or late night? In an hour, or a few minutes?

- **Anticipate where the main action will go or take place.**

Knowing the parade route or the location of the presidential palace can be instrumental in terms of predicting the flow of action. Is the celebration going to be right here or on the other side of the building? Maybe you should start moving those legs now...

- **Anticipate your positioning.**

You may know where the action is headed, but still miss the big picture because of your positioning. Just a few feet can make the difference in terms of whether expressions will show, or whether your background will help or hurt your image. Given a picture of a person receiving an award, for example, what is better, to have as a background their parents weeping with joy behind the recipient, or to show a plain white curtain?

- **Anticipate how you will capture the image.**

With what settings and what lens are you going to capture the moment? Do you need a teleconverter, a bigger lens or a remote? How will you switch your camera's settings when the person runs from the tungsten-lit building into broad daylight outside?

- **Anticipate the emotion**

Emotion is the currency of meaning. How someone acts or reacts tells us a lot about them and the situation. So with whom and where will the telling emotion emerge? If you have never photographed a given scene or person before, the answer might not be clear. You need have some sense of how a situation will unfold and who is likely to react with emotion. It also helps to have an understanding of human nature, as different people will react differently to the same stimuli.

- **Anticipate the personal preparation you'll need**

If you haven't eaten or need a bathroom break, you probably shouldn't go out into a wide-open field for hours on end. Will the situation lend themselves to hand warmers or suntan lotion? All these things can affect your productivity and ability to endure on assignment.

- **Anticipate the time you have.**

How much light you have left in the day, how long permission is granted, and how soon is deadline are all controlled by time. *In journalism, to be late is to fail.*

--- Alex Garcia

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