



Copy Desk Brown-Bags at the *St. Petersburg Times*

Our newsroom program started after the 2004 ACES conference in Houston. ACES was the inspiration. Here's what we've learned since.

BE THE SPARK

No need to add to a manager's plate to start an informal training program. Anyone can organize it. A wire desk editor created Times U. Who's the person in your newsroom with the drive and energy? Is it you?

FIND A SPONSOR

While anyone can organize a brown-bag program, it's still helpful to find a well-placed ally – especially one who makes the schedules. In our case, an executive news editor played cheerleader to the program, scheduling new copy editors time for the brown-bags, and offering an hour of overtime to others. It's easier than you think to find an eager supporter, especially when you've offered to do the work. Don't forget to ask for a little overtime for yourself.

SEEK SPEAKERS

Even small papers are full of speakers: an ad rep or publisher on the demographics of your readers, a long-timer on newsroom history, a copy editor on headlines or cutlines or 1A design, a managing editor on the philosophy of the front page, a reporter on desk relations, an assigning editor on deadline ethics, a newsroom manager on career development. Mine your friends. Look up the ladder and down. Then reach into the community. Invite the subject of a recent big story. Call the mayor. And watch your co-workers get excited that folks are taking time just to talk to them.

FIND A GOOD TIME

The trickiest part of a brown-bag program for the copy desk is choosing a time that's best for the bulk of your crew. It takes a careful look at the schedule. Times U found its niche on Wednesdays at 2 p.m., an hour before most shifts were scheduled to start. (This is where it was helpful to offer overtime.) It later moved to Tuesdays, so that those with Wednesday off got a chance to more easily attend. We also expanded the program to take speakers to the bureaus, starting sessions an hour earlier so reporters and their editors could attend. During the summer, the sessions were weekly. Year-round, they became monthly.

SELL, SELL, SELL

You want people to come? Come up with a program title, and enlist a designer to create a logo. Every bulletin board, physical and electronic, should scream with an invitation. Reminders should be daily as sessions get close. Personal arm-twisting is essential. If there's a budget, make T-shirts as rewards for those who attend a certain number of sessions. Order bagels. On the day of the event, post arrows just inside the newsroom entrance. When we used just one technique, we got 10 people. When we used them all, we got 50.

KEEP IT UP

Creating a name and logo for your program isn't just about advertising it – it's also about sustaining it. Times U has taken its share of breaks, especially now as the desk is in the throes of pagination. But the "Times U" name lives on. And sessions are scheduled to start again soon.