

What to Do When a Source Doesn't Cooperate



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Sometimes a tough experience teaches a valuable lesson. When someone I knew was suddenly unavailable for input, I racked my brain to figure out how I'd offended, then finished my article without her. Months later, I received an invitation to a memorial in her honor. Lesson learned: If a source doesn't cooperate, don't take it personally. You never know what's going on in another person's life.



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For one story, I couldn't get past the office secretary. When I called the executive on his cell phone, he was furious. When I confessed I'd Googled to find his number, we both laughed. When I explained I wasn't doing a "gotcha" piece, he relaxed. We had a useful interview, and he even supplied some additional ledes for me. The take-away? Do your research and go around the gatekeeper.

For a different story, I had a tight deadline, and the public relations representative kept making promises, but not setting an interview. At first, I stewed. Then I changed focus and reached out elsewhere. There's never only one person to go to. There's always another source.

One time, the subject of my profile was taking over a prestigious appointment. He was candid that his long-term relationship with another man had ended. He asked me not to include that. If he were still with his partner, that would have been a positive for my article. Since the relationship had ended, it was irrelevant. Are you writing a friendly profile or an investigative story? Key the article to the assignment.

In the classic film "All the President's Men," about Watergate and the eventual resignation of President Richard Nixon, the journalists try endless avenues to get sources on the record. Their journey takes months as they investigate what began as a "third rate burglary" and eventually brought down a president. Don't get discouraged. Persistence pays.

When I first proposed a profile to a famous guy I've known casually over the years, he refused. He said his work should speak for itself. Some years later, I broached the subject again, and he was ready. Civility and professionalism are the best advocacy.



The person who won't talk to you today may be more willing tomorrow. If not, move on:

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