

## Developing a Column Personality

### SOUND LEADERSHIP

Who and what he is speaks loudly in the columnist's home town. Although he can develop a column personality more colorful than his native endowment, the likelihood is that he will be merely projecting traits previously undeveloped. Character is more important than rhetoric at the grass roots.

THE LOCAL COLUMN is the most revealingly personal thing in today's newspaper. It is more flexible than a by-lined news story. It achieves a more intimate relationship with readers than do the editorials. It has a higher acceptability than most advertisements. It has the strength and weaknesses of its conductor. In newspapers which stress objective reporting and largely non-controversial editorial writing, the personal column stands out as an unpredictable and potentially influential and popular department. Its conductor can be loved or hated, respected or disdained, admired or ardently disliked because readers think and talk of the writer as *him* and not *it*. And, if the column is handled with skill and planning, it will be exceedingly well read.

Columnists seem instinctively to create personalities, but not always their own. Sometimes they project caricatures of themselves, perhaps out of a feeling of false modesty, or because — since they face many readers on every publication day — they hesitate to own the humor or philosophy devised in a moment of inspiration. Away from their typewriters,

they would not speak with such grandeur of phrase. But out of its continuity, selection of topics, manner of writing, and warmly local spirit the personal column casts the shadow of the man behind the type-writer. Investigations have revealed that those columns are palest which present facts, humor, and opinion in an impersonal fashion. Even good jokes are dull stuff compared to the same material humanized by a popular local personality.

Hallam Walker Davis made this comment:

It is necessary for the column conductor to create a well-defined personality for himself before people will follow him regularly. Quite often he poses as being at least wicked enough to be interesting. Sometimes he assumes the role of woman-hater or of generally disconcerting and uncomfortable cynic. The best of columnists do not do this too much, but all of them do it in some degree. There is a bit of clownishness in the business, and the tendency to play the devil is strong. With this tendency to play-act, column writers often lost sight of their real selves and either do not know just what they are trying to do or else misrepresent it—quite like the modest scholars and gentlemen they are.<sup>1</sup>

The mere thought of starting a column is an expression of ego. One must believe he has something to say. He must have confidence in the soundness of his philosophy of life, believe he can find time to assemble column material, and think his writing style is passably interesting. He proposes to plan and execute columns for his readers' mental stimulation and nourishment. He assumes that his reading and contacts will permit him to know his people's current interests. And he must think of all or most of his readers—not of his business, club, and church intimates only. His attitude toward columning will partially determine his style, pace, and subject matter.

<sup>1</sup> *The Column*, p. 35. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Copyright, 1936.

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**NOT SO FAST!**

This advice may be given newcomers and new columnists in a small town: Take it easy; don't start pushing ideas and reforms too quickly. Columnists, no less than business and professional men, are likely to get cool receptions for a few months. This is native caution, and will pass. Even columnists of mellow experience usually pretend to be as beset by timidity, bad luck, and other ills as their readers. Minor forms of hard luck seem to draw reader affection, whether real or feigned. Big-shot roles suit few column personalities. Drastic ideas can be attributed to anonymous local readers and trial balloons to more distant correspondents.

If a columnist stands out in a crowd, physically or in print, he will likely be in some degree a "character." John Gould, author and columnist of the Wichita Falls (Tex.) *Record-News*, discussed this subject in a letter to the authors:

The initial requirement of a columnist, I think, is vanity. All the good columnists I know think well of themselves. Another is rasperinity.

A columnist must have a well-developed streak of meanness in him. I have known men of the shrinking violet type who have tried to write columns and I have also seen the job undertaken by sweet, gentle individuals in whom the milk of human kindness surged strong and plentiful. But none of these ever succeeded at the job. . . . A columnist should have a sense of humor plus ability to keep it in restraint. He should have an observing eye, a listening ear, a good memory. If he has public spirit and moral purpose, they can be helpful at times, but he should indulge them sparingly.

It is well for a columnist to have the courage of his convictions, but he is better off not to have convictions; just notions, and whimsies, and foibles. He should never get in the habit of taking himself seriously. This is even worse for columnists than for editorial writers.

There is just one reason for a columnist. It is to make the paper more interesting. He will do better at it if his offering follows no set pattern. There can be no routine, such as there is for bookkeepers, policemen, and bus drivers. The man most likely to succeed as a columnist is an erratic person, with a somewhat disorderly mind and a good supply of what is politely called temperament. He should not love anybody but his wife, and her in moderation. . . . The fact that he may be ignorant of a subject should not trouble him; most of his readers are as ignorant as he is, and some of them, unpleasant as the thought is to contemplate, even more so. And there is no profit in being agreed with by this multitude.

The columnist must be able to reconcile himself to the fact that it is hard to be clever every day or every week and there are times when he will be corny. Yet he must maintain a certain dignity and a sense of the fitness of things so he will not blast at trivial things seriously.

And, so saying, Mr. Gould demonstrates that he practices his preachments. His saltiness is illustrative of the kind of personality which succeeds without

"pull"; that is, without owning the paper or holding the top editorial position. It is axiomatic, of course, that a columnist's ideas do not conflict violently with those of the paper, institutionally. But most editors permit columnists to hold individual opinions in most fields.

If the publisher is also the columnist, he and the paper will be mutually identified and merged in readers' thinking. This is perhaps the happiest situation. If, on the other hand, the columnist is to be another staff member, he will be thought of either for himself and possibly by his column name, or as "Jones of the *Herald*." But if the guest conductor or regular columnist is not a member of the paper's staff, the column may be considered a thing apart. An example is the county agricultural agent's column.

While editors today select their columnists carefully in recognition of their potential influence, the variety of persons granted such privileges is amazing. We see columns by educators, ministers, and other professional men. We read politicians' reports to their constituents. Sheriffs, who like to lecture evil-doers, write columns of startling frankness. Professional bakers burn the rolls but perfect a paragraph. In California, a rural peddler gathers his items on his rounds. In Maine, a librarian rates new books for her patrons. And in Georgia an amateur poet does his column in rhyme. Summer tourists send letters back from interesting lands. Farm wives do Ernie Pyle-like reports on day-to-day happenings. And farmers think up cracks at the big-city folks while riding their cultivators down row on row.

The popularity of an outsider-columnist sometimes proves embarrassing to a less colorful publisher. But, on the other hand, a column done by an editor has fundamental strong points. A strong personality, projected through a column, implies possession of authority, resources, and prerogatives. Good colum-

#### DOTTED LINES

The appeal of printed forms has not been overlooked by columnists. Types include opinion polls, pre-election surveys, calls for ideas on civic improvements, informal referendums on local propositions, and completion of slogans and verse. Also, this is a convenient way to hand out literature which is too expensive for general distribution. Many persons who would not write a letter will fill in a form.

nists make strong talk. They take chances. They underwrite projects. Of course columns which merely entertain, or are literary or specialized, do not necessarily require strong editorial sanction. But the column which reflects a strong personality and exerts an influence on public affairs needs the editor in the role of conductor or the known backing of the paper. The paper's policy is involved.

Writing skills and mental tools cannot be separated from the effectiveness of a whole, independent personality. That is to say, a good writer must be, in many ways, an outstanding person. His qualities include not only sanction of his paper, but also honesty, sincerity, a deep respect for the human personality, generosity, kindness when kindness is indicated, a quick alertness to man's inhumanities — all these flavored with a certain acidity of speech, coupled with an ability to react quickly in print without screaming, scolding, or preaching. These qualities are not as stuffy as they may sound. Put it this way: Columnists ought to have some maturity and experience in living before they start making over their friends and community, and they need some authority of position and stability of backing.

We do not mean to imply that a column is the most important thing in a newspaper, nor that a strong column personality is going to lead every community to prosperity and fame. But a word in time saves many situations. A laugh may do it, or a tear. A "light" column is not necessarily light in its influence.

People get ideas about the personality of a columnist from seeing and hearing him. However, his column personality may seem a thing apart until readers come to associate with him the qualities he writes into his topics each week. By his attitude and through the printed items he indicates the material he desires for his column. Meeting him mood for

#### CRUSADING

Nothing will project a column personality more quickly than engaging in rough-and-tumble reform. Occasionally a local clean-up is engineered by a columnist with notable results. However, many columnists believe serious campaigns should be an institutional project, not a personal one. Crusading makes enemies as well as friends. Once started in a column, it is difficult to drop. Probably a better idea would be to limit the columnist's personally-led drives to popular causes which can have quick, successful results.

mood, cooperative readers will supply humor, gossip, oddities, biting criticism, and town news.

Some columnists who could develop positive personalities take their work too lightly and write too carelessly. They fail to realize the flexibility of the medium — how it permits full revelation of their ideas, their sense of humor, their breadth of interests, human insight, sturdiness of character, tolerance, understanding, and capacity for indignation.

Inevitably, columnists create literary tones which readers will classify as highbrow, lowbrow, blatant, fainthearted, etc. And just as good reporters are known by their news sense, columnists show their ability to recognize a feature, implant an idea, and coax a chuckle. Over a period of months or years, they come to be regarded as cherished friends by hundreds of readers. Certain roving reporter-columnists have had followings of almost unbelievable size and warmth of affection. The stabilizing effect of such columns on circulation is obvious.

In noncompetitive fields, columnists may develop their personalities in print as leisurely as they wish. Then comes a competitor, or a radio newscaster. It suddenly becomes desirable that the columnist not be outranked by a commentator. The column is seen as an instrument more important than previously imagined. It can "talk out loud" on local matters not easy subjects for editorials but of importance in keeping public officials in line, apologizing for newspaper errors, explaining delicate circumstances, and consolidating business gains.

Readers appreciate consistency in the role a columnist elects for himself. If he poses as a "fine" writer, they expect him to turn out a steady flow of eloquent prose or verse. If he tries to be funny, he must not disappoint his fans. If he wants to stand as a strong personality, fearing no man, his readers will suggest many opponents and turn to his department

#### PROOF OF RESULTS

A columnist has "arrived" when his faithful following will respond quickly to a local promotion. At some risk, he may say "Meet me at the ball park Monday night and bring a teen-age person with you — the latter admitted free." If the difference in attendance caused by the column's appeal is noticeable and impressive, there can be no doubt of the public's response. But rather than put it on a personal basis, the columnist stresses the appeal of the occasion and why he will be there. He won't press his luck too far.

Columns in the smaller press have attained quite a metropolitan sophistication, but they don't yet call the town drunk a man-about-town. — Deep River (Conn.) *New Era*.

in expectation of impressive talk. If he is a promoter, a record of successes will help him. Only the hack, saying the obvious things and avoiding controversy, can safely forget the character he has become.

Column personality is indicated also by a writer's vocabulary, his style, evidences of enthusiasm, and basic points of view. Small-town readers do not demand high-sounding language and a flow of literary allusions. But since they read more each year, and listen to movie and radio wits and humorists, it is not safe to assume that their tastes are lowbrow and their discrimination negligible. It should be added, of course, that a writer in a predominantly agricultural community would not try to be the same kind of personality he would attempt to be in a factory district, a mountain country, or a suburban area.

But whatever the environment, the personal columnist conducts a sort of public bull session, in which he wields the gavel in a local Information Please. No burning local issue is without his attention. No local hero fails to get his praise. No public cause flounders for want of his support.

The building of a popular column personality brings many rewards. One of the greatest of these is public acceptance as an individual, coupled with respect for and appreciation of the newspaper concerned. Such assets are as good as money in the bank. They also bring responsibilities. And invitations. If a columnist does a bit of clowning — and clowns are supposed to have great human sympathy beneath the grease paint — he is likely to have invitations to serve as Santa Claus, to auction pies, and be an emcee at civic club minstrel shows. If he is known to have moments of profundity, communities round about will invite him to deliver commencement addresses.

Like all things, columnists mellow with age. Some mature mentally, become Rotary district governors, and take roles as elder statesmen. Others remain salty

humorists and sharp writers to the end of their columning. The projection of a successful man's personality through his column can be a wholesome thing — if he works at it and if his style is not bore-some. He can give a community much needed guidance. A column by the local editor-leader is a type-writer chat with his readers.

The older columnists often prefer the news item-comment style without humor, without paragraphs, without flights of fancy. Their readership may be large among the older citizens and small among the young. The nature of their work leaves a place for a variety column.

Even the smallest paper may find room for more than one personality. Editorials may be written by one staff member — short, challenging, highly localized. A personal column will dramatize another partner or key employee. Sports and women's columns are standard offerings. Contributing columnists may exploit special interests. Even teen-age opinion is becoming valued column material.

Newspapers thought of as people seem more strongly entrenched than those thought of as corporations, street addresses, or wire service franchises. The humanizing of the press to an even greater degree may be advisable to offset the popularity of nationally famous personalities serving rival channels of communication. Freedom of the press becomes a dangerously abstract term when the public fails to understand that it involves the right of people to be represented in news gathering by *persons* connected with newspapers. Unless Reporter Joe Doakes and Columnist John Doe have the right to print and discuss what's going on at the City Hall, freedom of the press is meaningless.

As a column personality, John Doe may step on sensitive official toes and perhaps get his news-sensitive nose punched. One small newspaper reach-

You go up in life, and you come down. And it's a toss-up on which trip you meet the nicer people. — Ada (Okla.) Times-Democrat.



A spendthrift is a mighty nice person to be around. — Merrill Chilcote, Maryville (Mo.) Tribune.

ing this author's desk recently carried unusually detailed accounts of city council meetings. Inside was a column which just as thoroughly digested the issues and commented on the roles of persons involved. Soon tempers flared over whether meetings should be so fully reported. Official acts were questioned. Officials issued heated statements. Libel actions were threatened. In a moment of pique, the columnist said he would like to see the mayor "end up in the clink." Later he explained that he was thinking figuratively but writing literally. In such controversies, both public officials and the newspaper people involved try to emerge without loss of face. A clever columnist will achieve reasonable ends without stretching his triumph too far. But one of the penalties of standing out as an advocate of the people is that some resulting enmities may outlast the incident involved.

Of all the small-city columnists who have a permanent place in the history of American journalism, none has a more distinct place than the late Ed Howe, brilliant cynic of the Atchison (Kans.) *Globe*. Not formally educated, he nevertheless attracted world-wide attention with his writing, received honorary degrees, and left valuable newspaper properties. He was painfully serious and just as painfully sensitive. Yet his genius was unmistakable, his insight into human motives almost uncanny. He knew the plain people of the country towns of Kansas and took a suppressed delight in making the best look less than righteous and the sinners look better than their reputations.

Many editors who share few reflections with their readers plead that they "have no time to think." Howe could have so pleaded. No detail of his paper was ignored by him; at various times he was editor, business manager, printer, advertising solicitor, circulation manager, and reporter — often holding

several of these jobs simultaneously. Yet he found time to think and to write.

Howe commented, however:

I did my best work on the dullest days; a circus day, or one offering some other excitement, made me entirely worthless. I'm that way now; if anyone is coming to dinner, the day is ruined for me. I cannot help it; I was born that way, and no amount of effort on my part will change it.

In Howe's lifetime it was customary for editors to write paragraphs. He wrote many which were widely reprinted. Typical of his incisive style were these:<sup>2</sup>

A good scare is worth more to a man than good advice.

A panic is a whipping administered by nature to bring us to a realization of our limitations and absurdities.

The greatest punishment is to be despised by your neighbors, the world, and members of your family.

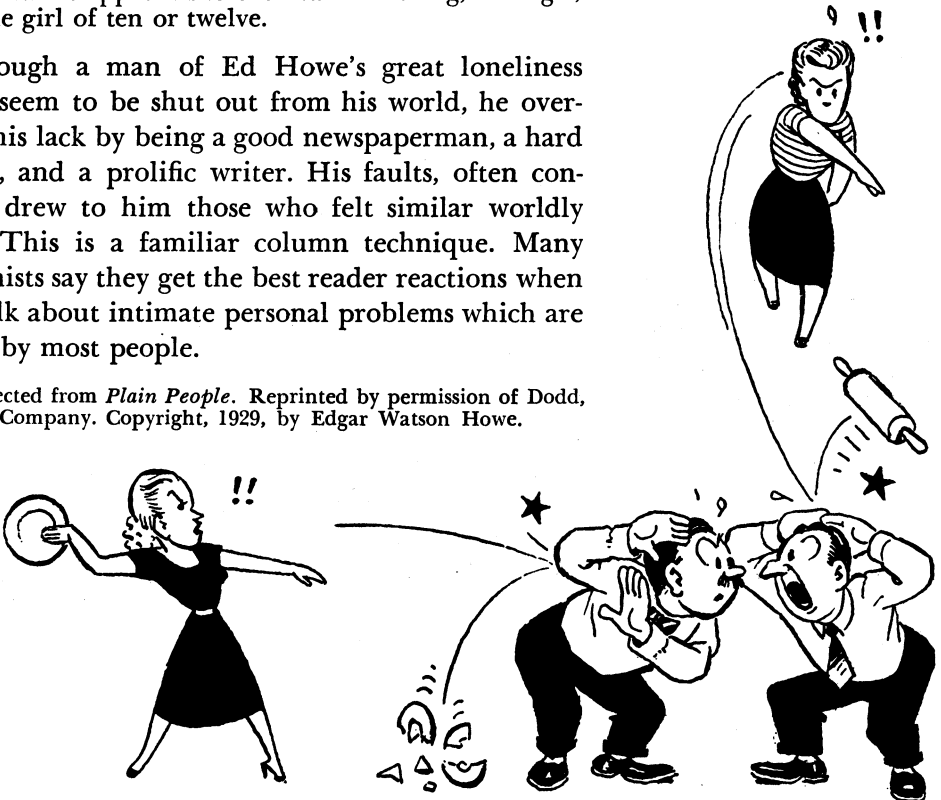
Men hustling to do better than competitors they hate have done more for the world than the souls who dream of universal love.

The nearest approach to the beautiful thing, an angel, is a little girl of ten or twelve.

Although a man of Ed Howe's great loneliness would seem to be shut out from his world, he overcame this lack by being a good newspaperman, a hard worker, and a prolific writer. His faults, often confessed, drew to him those who felt similar worldly urges. This is a familiar column technique. Many columnists say they get the best reader reactions when they talk about intimate personal problems which are shared by most people.

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<sup>2</sup>Selected from *Plain People*. Reprinted by permission of Dodd, Mead & Company. Copyright, 1929, by Edgar Watson Howe.



Ed Howe died in 1937. He is remembered as the Sage of Potato Hill. His sometimes scathing wit vividly describes his section and his era.

But while the elder Howe projected a personality which was by nature salty, in a column which was too sparkling to be ignored, it is to a son, Gene Howe of Amarillo, Texas, that we turn for a good example of a deliberately planned newspaper presence. With more genius than he admits, Gene has kept readers alert and often flabbergasted for more than two decades. His column is the "Tactless Texan" department of the *Amarillo News and Globe*. Howe went to Amarillo in the early 1920's and made good despite his Kansas taint. He did it by outbragging the Panhandle residents and by championing even the howling dust storms as somehow beneficial to health — crediting what he called Vitamin "K."

Publisher Gene Howe's screwball column, which has mellowed only slightly through the years, carries in the heading an outline cut of cross-eyed old Ben Turpin. Howe calls himself Erasmus Rookus Tack, but readers affectionately refer to him as Old Tack. His capacity for clowning has declined somewhat because of his extensive travels, but his columns are mailed back from whatever resort, hunting ground, or city he happens to visit.

"Gene Howe's column is as carefully calculated as the arch of a lady's eyebrow," wrote Jack Alexander in a *Saturday Evening Post* article, "Panhandle Puck." He declared that Howe fishes for reader reactions, favorable or unfavorable, and is a master of the extravagant apology. Howe feuded with Charles A. Lindbergh and Mary Garden, dabbled in local politics when it pleased him, and staged lavish Mother-in-Law Club conventions.

Anything capable of lifting an eyebrow is likely to be written up in Old Tack's column, including sex, both human and animal. To be in fashion, he

A lot of people are late for church because they have to change attire; and a lot of others because they have to change a dollar. — Fredericksburg (Tex.) Standard.

established his Big Bull ranch and declared for monogamy in Hereford breeding. To be helpful, he found wives for bashful cowboys and offered rewards to find lost dogs for frantic housewives. He posts big rewards to help solve disgusting crimes. He predicts the weather and brags about it shamelessly when he is right. What his reporters find difficult to include in their stories, Howe frankly unveils in his column. He delights in printing scoops on big wedding announcements and on political maneuvers. His gestures are never ordinary. When he helps people, which is often, he is generous and resourceful. When he asks readers to help him, an outpouring of checks large and small is not unusual.

Many people have sworn to quit reading Gene Howe's column, but most of them have failed. Too many people quote him, swear at him, laugh with him. He is disarmingly subtle when he chooses, but more often is apologetically frank. His pose grows expansive with trouble; in times of drought or disaster his pride of region knows no bounds.

Gene Howe, like his father largely unschooled at public expense, tunes his column on a fairly lowbrow tone but personally he seeks the company of younger, successful friends. In this way he appeals to average citizens but maintains contacts and influence at official levels and in financial circles befitting a successful publisher.

The results? Researchers have reported in amazement that "nearly everyone reads Old Tack." The 95 per cent readership recorded in one survey was no surprise to Panhandle people. The Amarillo columnist, unlike old Ed Howe in many ways, has demonstrated the success of his own formula for making his personality known and felt throughout the circulation area of his paper. His methods might be resented in some regions, but in his own he is perhaps the best-known resident. He manages, at surprisingly

A pessimist is a guy who sizes himself up and gets sore about it. — Ronald Furse, Plattsmouth (Neb.) Journal.

There's a simple way to keep up with the Joneses. Just slow down and in a few years you'll meet them coming back.—R. M. Westerfield, West Union (Iowa) Union.

regular intervals, to start readers' tongues talking and arguing about Old Tack. Many of his promotions and antics have been worth space on press wire reports.

On the solid side of his personality, Mr. Howe is known as a shrewd judge of people, a sound business executive, and an effective worker in game conservation. In Amarillo, long known as a "newspaper graveyard" because so many papers have bucked the *News* unsuccessfully, his personality is fused with that of his newspapers. Like the A. P. franchise, his column is a valued asset.

But Howe's newspaper policy exploits even further the idea that newspapermen should be talked about. His paper has developed a local columnist on almost every page. He talks about his writers, backs them in their own promotions, and at the drop of a suggestion sends one to Europe and another to Korea to report battle experiences of native sons. Such localization and personalizing of his paper and its news is a formula he believes is applicable in any small and region-conscious community.

Of course many smaller papers have prominent editors who do not write columns. The distinction we have noted is that there are a great many who either deliberately seek to be known as column personalities or who, through much writing under a column heading, become identified as much with their columning as with the paper generally.

When a column personality is planned and projected, the writer usually recognizes his unique ability to dramatize not only himself but promotions to which he gives his support. He backs projects confidently because he knows the high readership of his column and the capacity he has developed, as a columnist, to rally support for his ideas. Some outstanding successes are reported in the next chapter.