

# The Broadsheet

Newsletter of the New Mexico Press Women

## May 2013 - Extra

### K.C. Compton: It's important for old-school journalists to be 21st Century computer savvy

At her keynote address during NMPW's annual conference, K.C. Compton, senior editor for *Mother Earth News* and who has been a member of NMPW since she began her career, spoke both humorously and seriously about her Gulp! and Go career. But she had even more to say about how traditional ("Old-school") journalists have to get in sync with 21st Century media. Unfortunately, she ran out of time before she ran out of ideas. Fortunately, she agreed to provide us with this addendum to her talk.

Thank you, K.C.

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Though it may be anathema – or at the very least exceedingly foreign – to those of us who are old-school journalists, the future appears to belong as much to data as to content. And if that sentence is incomprehensible to you, you might want to take some time to deepen your understanding of social media, keyword target phrases, search engine optimization (SEO) and analytics that go bump in the night.

I resist this. After all the years I spent learning to write clever, eye-catching headlines and snappy leads, I am having trouble adjusting to the idea that I now have to write "How to Grow Heirloom Tomatoes" as my headline and work "heirloom tomatoes" and similar terms into the story's deck and body copy just to make Google happy. This is the brave new journalistic world we now occupy.

It isn't that content has become unimportant. We still have to include all the useful information people expect to find in our magazine or newspaper articles. It's just that our cleverness now has to extend to ways to use several media platforms to deliver that content to the people who want it, in the format they like. The days of just writing an article and sending it off to the copy desk are gone forever.

According to IBM, humans create 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every day. About 90 percent of the data in the world today has been created in the last two years. This number doubles every three years or so. Never in history has more information been available, but managing that data to transform it into "news you can use" is the trick – and it's a mighty

challenge. We no longer are simply writers and editors. We are content managers and data miners whose job is to see to it that the articles we write and edit are information-rich and geared toward the way people now look for and receive that information.

At the NMPW conference, one of the members I've known practically since the beginning of my career said, "Maybe you're spending too much time on Facebook." This might be true, particularly given that it seems to be the way I get to keep up with my kids (Seriously? She can't just pick up the phone and call her mother?) and grandchild, but it also is my job. I tweet (not enough, actually) and pin to Pinterest (could be better) and post on Facebook (got it covered), and I have a Klout social media score of 60 – which means people read what I've posted and they pass it on.

The only reason any of this matters is that I have a job. I like my job. I want to keep my job and remain professionally viable for many years, despite being long in the tooth and frighteningly close to that pasture to which we all get turned out eventually. And the way to do that is to master social media and to understand data. Who is your audience and what are they looking for? What are the many, many ways you can give them what they want?

This truly has been the secret to Mother Earth News' stunning success in recent years. We are, by industry measurements, one of the most popular and fastest-growing magazines in the country, and it's all because we've become masterful at giving people what they want. Do they want to know how to grow heirloom tomatoes and how to save rainwater? Will they be looking for "How to Grow Heirloom Tomatoes" or "Secrets to Growing Heirloom Tomatoes?" The difference might seem like splitting hairs, but just one little alteration like that can bring hundreds more readers to our website. Therefore more page views and more ad dollars. And more of my salary, thank you very much. OK. I'm in.

For a freelance writer, a deep awareness of this mining of data is now essential. If you go to an editor with a query that says, "I want to write a story about basil" (Oh, believe me – we receive queries that are about that specific), you won't get far. But if you write, "I'd like to do a story on growing basil in cooler climates and to focus on three new varieties that are great for somewhat shadier areas. Using the search terms 'growing basil in cooler climates,' I found XXX number of hits and 'Genovese', 'Spicy' and 'Globe' each returned XX hits," you'll be much more likely to get an editor's attention. (PS: I totally made that stuff about basil up. I have no idea if people are looking for basil that grows in shade. But they might be.)

The new data-driven world probably means an end to the days of a freelance writer being able to create a career as a generalist. More and more specific seems to be the way things are going now. At each of our magazines, we have a group of writers we rely on, and each of them is a true expert in his or her field. People are looking for authorities who can help them separate the important from the noise. As a writer, that's your job. Know your stuff, go deep. Find a niche and drill down, then package your proposals and your presentation in such a way that anyone reading them knows that you know, and that you care enough to find out what readers want to know.

And keep your eye on the basics all the while – grammar, spelling, syntax – while patting your head and bouncing on one foot. I know, I know. It's all a bit much sometimes, and there are many, many days when I just want to write, dammit. But then I start thinking about that paycheck and suddenly, SEO starts looking like sort of an attractive idea.

The Internet abounds with instruction on how to do target keyword research, as well as many other topics that can help build your skills for the 21st century. I urge you to devote some time each week to learning and practicing. When asked the secret to standing out from the competition, comedian Steve Martin replied, "Become undeniably good." It might sound simple, but that's the way you keep those checks and bylines rolling in.