

**SWMS Editorial Teleconference Series:**

## Damon Darlin, technology editor The New York Times

October 2009

Damon Darlin is the envy of many an editor. He's got some of the best reporters in the business working for him. What he doesn't control is edit space: he has to sell compelling big-picture ideas to other NYT editors. PR pros should keep this in mind. Darlin competes with the best thinkers in the edit business. In this document Darlin lays out the topics that are important to him, and even more valuably, how he weighs the impact of a given story. Cracking the NYT is never easy, but we hope Damon's honest comments will make it just a bit easier.

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### Highlights:

#### Hot topics

"[Wireless communications](#), mobile communications. I think there's going to be an explosion of products and services and much change in the way we run our lives"

"[Cloud computing](#). Those are also trends that we're going to be following — on the business side but also on the consumer side as well because that's — I think we're going to see a lot of changes in that area.

#### Come on by

"When you've got an interesting CEO *that's got something to say about the industry* and wants to come in and just chat with us, that's often a good thing to do as well."

#### New column soon: "Everybody's Business"

"Generally it won't be technology, but I'm looking for story ideas. It's more about how consumers can understand how business works and how they can benefit from that. "



Damon Darlin  
The New York Times

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#### What makes the cut?

- News. That still drives our business... throughout the day and throughout the week increasingly. We want stories that are for a general audience. This is probably the thing that is the hardest for outsiders to grasp... While we write about technology, we don't write about it in the same way that the trades or some of the blogs do... one that's devoted to just search engines alone or a trade publication that does just chips.
- We're looking more for a general interest audience, highly educated
- The third criteria - something that's entertaining. We serve that function as well, we want people to enjoy themselves as they read the story.

#### Do [Bits](#) and the Sunday business section have the same priorities?

No... for Sunday business it's a longer story with a strong narrative, so there the premium is on the storytelling and the entertainment part, whereas with Bits it's more on the news, and it is often entertaining. Increasingly our way to get the news out as quickly as possible is to do it on the Bits blog. Frequently it's for stories that won't quite make it to the paper but will still be on the Web site. For those, a slight variation of those stories might be there a little bit more narrowcasted, because they always figure people are coming in who have a little bit more of a narrow interest or are strictly focused on technology, so they won't be the general interest reader but will be a technology reader... so we can geek out a little bit there.

#### [Business computing](#) traffic at NYT.com is growing, rapidly

It is, and we have been thrilled with what we've been able to do there. The interesting thing is, The Times has never covered that area very well and one of the things we discovered (is) there's a feeling that enterprise computing and business computing is just a little bit too narrow for a general interest audience, but on the Web we've been able to develop a lot of stories there and cover an area that was just woefully under-covered.

We've hired [Ashlee Vance](#), who is very plugged in, loves this stuff, has the ability to explain it well to everybody, and we're gaining a large audience that way and we're very happy with what Ashlee's been able to do and this forum that we've created.



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The New York Times

([Here's an example](#) of Ashlee's work that Damon pointed to as one that also made the front page.)

#### **Pitching Damon directly is "Not the most effective way"**

The best way is to hit the beat reporter - because they know the beat... the things they're writing about already.

#### **Though he adds that you can:**

CC me, because then if it does catch my interest, I'll say, "Hey, Brad, this does sound interesting. What do you think?"

Cultivating relationships is a good idea. One way to do that is when you've got an interesting CEO that's got something to say about the industry and wants to come in and just chat with us, that's often a good thing to do as well because I enjoy talking to these executives and finding out how they're viewing the world, what they see in the economy, what they see, competitors are doing or what suppliers are doing.

#### **Everybody's Business**

I am going to be starting a column called Everybody's Business. It's one that [Ben Stein](#) had done, and I'll be doing those once a month. Generally it won't be technology, but I'm looking for story ideas. It's more about how consumers can understand how business works and how they can benefit from that. How they can take advantage of the way companies are set up to make money or clever ways to run your life.

#### **On the radar**

I guess the number one tech trend is probably cell phones and in the broader sense, [wireless communications](#), mobile communications. I think there's going to be an explosion of products and services and very much change the way we run our lives, and I'm fascinated with every variation of that.

The other trend, of course, the one that's been going on for a while is search, and the way that Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and other companies use [cloud computing](#). Those are also trends that we're going to be following, on the business side but also on the consumer side as well, because I think we're going to see a lot of changes in that area.

#### **[Sam Grobart](#), [Vindu Goel](#), [David Gallagher](#)**

Sam handles personal technology... and David and Vindu do more general news.

It's pretty much divided up just as catch as catch can when news stories come in. Each of us work with a certain bunch of reporters just to make it easier for the reporter, but we are on the phone constantly with each other. Every morning we set up a little IM chat room and we confer throughout the day and exchange brief messages on who's doing this? Should we cover that? Where should this go? Should this be for the paper? Should this just be for the blog? So we're talking constantly.

#### **Second-tier vendor coverage**

It is very difficult for us to get to those, because it's again that general interest. Why would my mother be interested in that or why would, my college roommate be interested in that story if they're not in that business? It's a high hurdle, but if they're [doing something interesting](#) or have some innovation we're certainly fascinated with it. I mean [VMware](#) was one that we looked at long before it became a name.

There has to be a hook. The Times isn't going to serve as a marketing platform for a B2B company. It just doesn't work that way. The audience is too diffuse... but if it's an interesting tale about how a company is run or a fascinating technology that is new, yeah, then we're eager to do that. But if it's, "Hey, I've got a new B2B service that..." it's hard to hold my interest.

I know that I can't sell it. Think about it from the point of view of a reporter. The reporter wants to get the story on the front page of the paper. He wants to get the story in Sunday Business or he wants to get it on the front page of the Business section, but the story's got to be compelling for an audience that reads those pages. If the story is pitched to be on the inside, it's not motivating the reporter. It's going to drop down in his list of priorities.

The reporter's got so much to do nowadays. We're, as everybody is, in a recession. We're short-staffed. We're overworked. News is now coming seven days a week. It's hard for those guys to keep up with all the things that are happening and the priorities just drop and the reporter is incentivized just like everybody is in any company and they want to get display page sort of stories.

**Sam:** Number one, it's got to be newsy. Number two, it's got to be written for a general audience and, number three, it has to be entertaining. If you have all three of those things you'll probably get a hearing. Am I right?



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The New York Times

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**Damon:** Definitely, most definitely. I mean it could work with two of three, but three of three, it's a slam-dunk. We'll jump all over it.

#### Online vs. print

Bits has a large audience, probably on a monthly basis far larger than what our subscriber base is for The New York Times paper edition. Just Bits alone and then the Web site itself has something like 20 to 25 million readers, unique monthly visitors. Bits and the Technology section is a big portion of that.

#### Beats

- Ashlee is covering enterprise computing, also Microsoft and that sphere.
- Miguel Helft covers the search companies, the search advertising companies.
- Saul Hansell was our Bits writer, and he's now back to doing radio technology reporting for the paper and for Bits. He is – he's covering telecommunications, particularly the policy implications of telecommunications.
- Jenna Wortham covers that as well focusing more on the handsets and some of the apps as well and also the Internet services.
- Brad Stone covers Internet companies.

#### The Sunday Business Section

Tim O'Brien is the Sunday Business editor and we pitch stories to him... he's got real estate and I've got an army, and so look for stories that he's interested in. Tim's always looking, again, very much for a strong narrative. That there's a lot of storytelling there. It's more akin to magazine writing. Personalities are important, broad trends, company profiles that really sink in and explain, what drives a company, what makes it work.

Dave Joachim is the weekend Business editor. He's an editor who makes sure all the trains run on time.

Bruce Hedlum handles media and I handle the technology. We meet with Dave and we plan the section. Those stories you want to go to me or to Hedlum. Dave is not the best person to go to directly with a story.

#### Video

We would not run the company video on the site unless it was [an intrinsic part of the storytelling](#). However, with the company's permission we could use portions of that video to tell the story because we're trying to do more video now.... We're eager for that.

#### Steve Lohr

Steve is back doing [more tech stories](#), and he is a brilliant fellow, senior reporter. He has a unique position of having the latitude to pretty much do what he wants and so he's got more of a broad technology portfolio.

#### John Markoff

John is now working for the Science section. John wants to do [pure technology](#).

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