

Steve Watkins: I'm 51. Married. BS in Journalism. Masters in Mass Communication. Worked as a beat newspaper reporter, congressional press secretary, higher education fundraiser, and ran my own magazine publishing company for several years until the recession took its toll on me. I've interviewed more than 15,000 people during my career. Just finishing up my first book. Storytelling is my life's calling. I've walked across Spain twice (total 1,000 miles) on the Camino de Santiago. Just because I've done that doesn't mean walking the GRR will be easy. It won't be easy at all. And that's part of the beauty and intrigue of the story, I think.

First of all, what I'm basically proposing is that you guys allow me to be your Storytelling Ambassador for somewhere between 140 and 160 days next year. That's it in a nutshell.

It's not easy to describe, but when I was on Camino I discovered this incredible formula for storytelling. I knew I'd write a book, but I also wanted to build an audience larger than what existed at that time on my communications platform. Basically, I used my platform over 40 days, and told the story in real time about what it was like to experience pilgrimage. I left nothing to the imagination and told the story in its entirety. The beauty. The pain. The sadness. The cultural complexities. Everything. Thousands of people came along and told me they'd never experienced anything like it. For many, they told me it was the next thing to actually being there. Those were some of the greatest compliments I've received in my communications career. When I arrived at the end, some 5,000 people sent congratulations. It was incredible and helped build a great audience. We release the book in mid November.

I'd like to use the same approach on this trip, plus some more things. I want to tell the story of the adventure of walking the GRR and blend in the culture, people, history, etc. Mostly, I see this being done via video I'd provide you on a regular basis. Three-minute stories, if you will, several times a week on video.

Im fine with booking periodic civic club speeches along the way.

I'm fine working with hometown media along the route.

Not to get carried too far away, but I think it's even worth a discussion about documentary filmmaking. I've got a few contacts as I'm sure you guys do.

This is cool for several reasons: first, while many have canoed the river, I can see no account of anyone walking the GRR. I think it would be a first. Secondly, are you familiar with Bill Bryson's famous book, ***A Walk in the Woods*** about the Appalachian Trail? It's a best-seller in multiple categories. The only thing I can find REMOTELY close for the Mississippi River is a book called Roadtrip with a Raindrop written by Gayle Harper a few years back. It strikes me mostly as a good coffee table book with a few stories and lots of photos - nothing like what I'm talking about. I'd like to write the equivalent of Bill Bryson's book for the GRR. It would really be a major work. Years ago I studied a book about the birth of the Corps of Engineers and its work along the river. It's called Rising Tide and was completely fascinating.

It's also cool and would work well, I think, for this simple reason. This country is in a moment when we need more stories like this. We need people out there actively telling us good news about our country. We are hungry for it and I believe that. This is an incredible opportunity to contribute to that greater good. And this is an EXTENDED story that actually lives for several months in real time.

So how do we partner together to do this? I guess the possibilities are wide open.

It would be great to have some form of sponsorship and assistance to get through the trip. I would also like to work with your firm to help build an audience along the way, ultimately for book selling. I think we could create a snowball effect that would ultimately develop its own momentum, because the story has all the elements people love: adventure, heartland, everyday people, adversity, and on and on. I've seen this sort of thing work.

I want to do whatever I can to contribute to your mission and really be a strong storytelling advocate ambassador for the MRPC and GRR. I think we could make the effort as big or as small as we choose.

Anyway, that covers some things in a nutshell and it's the basic starting point for a vision. When an idea gets in my head and it feels right I get pretty passionate, and so far, this feels right.

### **Action Items**

1. I'm a big promoter and would want to do everything possible to draw attention to this in advance. So what limitations would there be in terms of perceived relationship? For example, could I say ... "In partnership with the GRR and MRPC ....."?
2. How would you feel about me wearing the logo in some "official" capacity?
3. I'd love to have at least one conference call per week where you guys prepare me for potential interviews and storytelling opportunities in the distance to be traveled that week. Just a weekly strategy session.
4. I have a pretty good relationship with my camera, but am not equipped to create a documentary. I realize that's a big deal, but if it's to be considered, it has to be done on the front end. Any interest in that discussion?
5. Whatever means that can be created to offset costs are welcome. Certainly any accommodations that might be provided along the way would be great. I have mixed feelings about sponsorships and don't know if that's something to get into or not.
6. I'd love to have you guys coordinating traditional media hits.
7. I can create the social media sites and communications platform and would love to have your firm strategically pushing people toward the sites on some regular basis.
8. I'm happy to attend whatever meetings you think would be helpful.

I'm sure I'll think of more in the days ahead, and I'm also sure this is something that would evolve and grow as the walk progresses. If I think of more ideas, I'll send them your way. Please do the same.

Steve