

## Exercise 1: Answer

1. There is a lot of good information in the Semota interview, including the long trip to do a job, his recent business experience and his emotional attachment to the firm. But there's a lot of dense background history that should be avoided as it would bore readers.

There are some strong facts and details to include, such as the details of the debt, his age, etc. We also need to make it clear exactly what a steeplejack is. Many readers won't know.

Part of the appeal of features is taking readers into a world they are unfamiliar with, so the story of climbing up the tower is good material too.

The statistical information helps give context to the story, showing that the firm's experiences illustrate a larger trend. Again, we need to guard against too much detail as it will bore readers.

The economists' comments are also useful as context, but you can't let the article become side-tracked by their squabbling.

The experience of taking the children to McDonald's, like the quotes about the Rugby World Cup and the long drive to do a job, are all good anecdotes. We probably don't need to quote the child, however, as her comments are not particularly quotable.

We can even use the fact his wife did not want to speak.

2. As this is a feature, the headline can be more imaginative and subtle than a straight news headline would be. The article needs a standfirst that clearly states what the article is about and gives the byline. It should then have a strong opening anecdote, before settling into the story proper, giving context and having a strong ending. Attribution is in the present tense.

## Exercise 2: Answer

Here is a possible version of the feature.

## Highs and lows

*Like so many small family businesses around the country, Wellington firm Semota Steeplejacks is fighting a losing battle against the recession. **John Bloggs** reports.*

With work hard to find, John Semota, 45, recently travelled 400 kilometres in a day to repair three flags, just to earn \$352.

Clambering up poles and towers to hoist and repair flags has always been a hard way to earn a living, but Semota, the head of Semota Steeplejacks, reckons his business will soon fold.

“I find it hard to sleep at night now. Would you—knowing the business will probably close this year?

For him, the firm is more than just a job.

“It’s not ‘Oh, I don’t have a job, I have to go find a new one.’ We’re losing a corporation that is 75 years old. We’re losing our house. We’re losing our credit. We’re losing, other than our own physical bodies, everything.”

The family business began in 1936 in Dunedin by Semota’s grandfather, aged just 16 at the time. The firm moved to Wellington in 1964.

Even at high school Semota and his brothers wanted to join the firm. And he enjoys the work.

“I use rope wrapped around my body and around the towers or poles to climb. It was hard work learning the trade from my father. Yeah, some of the towers are, like, 300 feet high and narrow to a point, practically. It was hard doing that at first but you get used to it. Climbing a flagpole and doing the work we do, being out in the middle of the air, over hundreds of feet above the ground, it’s a rush.”

Semota Steeplejacks’ heyday was the 1980s and 1990s, thanks to the construction boom. The company peaked at six employees, all related, and was installing and maintaining flags and flagpoles for sports stadiums and ritzy homes. One year the company generated \$230,000 in annual revenue.

But then the recession hit. Construction work fell away and the company faced a double whammy of falling revenue and mounting debt.

And despite all the flags around at during the Rugby World Cup, that didn’t help either. “Very few people erected flagpoles or whatever for the cup, they just stuck some Warehouse flags on the car,” Semota says.

Nowadays, the debt is approaching \$340,000 and concerned creditors are starting to hover.

Semota did apply for a Helping Hand loan from the council, but it was rejected. “Our credit score was too low, thanks to several creditors’ complaints that we were a few weeks’ late repaying some debts.”

The stress has taken its toll. Semota, struggles to sleep through the night. His wife, Sarah, now the company’s only other employee, was too upset to be interviewed for this story. Their two young daughters have tantrums when told the family cannot afford to go to McDonald’s for lunch.

It is a similar story across New Zealand. Businesses with one to 19 employees, nearly all family-run, lost 7500 jobs between December last year and June this year, according to figures from Statistics NZ. That amounts to just over half of all private-sector job losses for the period.

And a recent survey by the National Federation of Independent Businesses reports that small-business owners are earning lower profits and making fewer plans to add inventory or spend capital than at any time since the organisation began asking such questions in 1973.

Bill Dunkelberg, the federation's chief economist, says the market is being "cleansed" of unneeded goods and services.

But another researcher says this ignores the broader civic and social role that companies like Semota's play.

"People don't understand that business has often been an organising point for a family," Paul Smith, a professor of business at Victoria University, says. "Everyone works in it. It's your livelihood and it's a meeting place where family members form their own identities and the stories that carry them through life." Growing up, Smith himself worked in his family's olive business.

But things are not looking good for Semota Steeplejacks and firms like it. The firm is based in a light industrial park. Of the park's six spaces, two are now vacant.

"Yeah, the park is no good these days," Semota says. "I hope and pray that we won't be next, but I think we will."