

PITCHING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S STORY TO THE MEDIA

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Selling Your Story to the Media

Press releases and op-eds are generally not enough to get your story sufficiently covered in most media markets. Simply, you will need to deal directly with the reporters in the media to get them interested in the your story.

Please bear in mind, however, that no matter how "good" a story you may think the subject matter is --- not all stories make the front-page or even get the degree of mention you want and this is especially true when you are dealing with the same media outlets repeatedly.

Media calls

After media advisories and/or press releases have been distributed, media calls provide the communications professional with the opportunity to "sell" the story to a reporter, editor, or producer.

For many individuals, making media calls is the least appealing part of their job. However, with thorough preparation and existing media relationships, media calls become easier and more successful.

Before you make follow-up calls to the media, you must be completely prepared.

- Compile and organize all necessary information that the reporter might need;
- Confirm the participation and schedules of all spokespersons;
- Brainstorm a pitch and/or news hook with your staff or your spokesperson;
- Draft two or three key points to focus on as you pitch your story; and
- Understand any other current relevant news stories and how your story might relate and help place such news into context.

While making media calls remember the following tips:

- Never call when you know a reporter is on deadline --- always know the deadline of the publication you are calling;
- Ask if a reporter is busy and if this would be a good time to talk with them. If the answer is yes proceed with your pitch, if the answer is no then ask when it would be best to call back. Don't expect the reporter to necessarily return a call to you;
- Keep a log of media responses. Keep close track of each reporter's response, particularly if you need to call them back and what additional information they might need, if so requested;

- Reinforce how and why your story will appeal to the reporter's readers, listeners, or viewers and why it would be important; and
- Bend over backwards to respond to a reporter's requests, whatever those requests might be as long as they are within reason.

Follwing up on a story

Sometimes, getting a reporter interested in a story is only half the battle. Often, getting a reporter to write or cover a story requires consistent, thorough follow-through, research, and support and pitches over and over again until youj peak their interest in a specific topic or story line.

For example, you might try to pitch how your organization has landed funds from a major corporation to do training on new cutting-edge technology devices. A reporter might find the concept interesting, yet may not be sold on covering it. It is your responsibility to be creative and close the deal by helping put the story into context, providing creative insight and showing how the story relates to their reader or viewer.

To do this you might locate a student with an interesting story to tell - perhaps a student who is just coming back into the job market after raising children - who is willing to be followed around by a reporter for a day, or at least be interviewed.

Be smart though, choose such interviewees with care and put your best possible interviewees forward.

You might locate teachers to discuss how this program, for example, has changed the outlook of their students but don't expect that just every teacher can handle a media interview.

In fact, we highly recommend you never allow a spokesperson to be interviewed until you have given them a minimum of one hour of training in media interviews skills.

Or you might compile outside research supporting the success of similar programs and secure a ***third party spokesperson for the reporter that can help place things into an independent context*** and come from a source other than your own stable of interviewees.

By supplying a reporter with this information, they may not only find the story more interesting and realize their efforts will be minimal to researcha dn write the story, they just may cover the story even more in depth than you expected.

Developing a 'hook'

One of the most challenging aspects of a media relations specialist's job is to generate coverage.

While your organization may not provide you with newsworthy information on a daily basis, it is up to you to be creative and find interesting opportunities and new avenues for conveying information about your organization to the media.

To do this, you must find and then develop with care a "hook," an aspect of the story that makes it interesting or distinctive so that the reporter finds it interesting enough to cover.

When trying to convince a reporter to cover a story relating to your program, it's essential that you convince that reporter that your story will grab their audience's attention and most likely keep it.

A reporter WILL NOT just cover a story for you 'because it is the right thing to do' or because you think or feel 'you are the 500-pound gorilla' in the media market. Media specialists who begin to think "their story should always be on the front page or receive the most positive of coverage" are destined to be sadly disappointed. And also remember even the best of stories can and do end up with sometimes less than the best of headlines.

BE SMART and professional --- you can't expect every reporter every time to want to use your story --- just go on to the next pitch and DON'T ever think about rewarding or punishing a reporter for using or not using a story --- you will never win with the fellow that "buys his ink by the barrel and his paper by the roll!"

Whether you are conducting a major event, releasing a report, or just trying to gain recognition for a particular program, award or person you must convince the media that your story is relevant to their audience.

Monitoring the media consistently will assist you in finding hooks that appeal to that media.

Questions to ask to create a unique 'hook'

Ask yourself these questions to help you create a hook:

- What audiences will this story appeal to?
- Why will an audience care about this story?
- How will this story affect the lives of these audiences?
- How will it make their lives better or worse, or explain something that heretofore they didn't understand?
- What current national events or issues relate to this story (i.e., pending state or federal legislation, political or community conflicts, national movements/ trends, holidays or seasons)?
- How have similar stories been covered in the past by this media outlet and others?
- What perspective does this particular media outlet take on this issue in most cases, or what perspective did they take on this story in the past?
- What perspective did their competitors take on this story?
- Why would they not cover this story?
- Am I the right person to "pitch" this story to them?
- What will make them receptive to this story idea?

With the answers to these questions, you can begin to weave a finely tailored news hook for your story.

You should remember that hooks will vary depending on which media outlet you pitch.

For example, your hook may be very different for a national publication and a local publication, or for a newspaper or television news broadcast.

Often times, the easiest stories to get placed are those that have a "hook" to other big events in the news. Exploiting these opportunities is essential for success.

Tips on “pitching” stories to the media markets

- Use regional angles to localize national stories. For example, show how your organization has grown and changed over its own history, and how it has had a positive impact on the community. Focus on one of your programs that is making a difference in your community.
- Be creative, yet get to the point. Reporters are often in a rush and have limited time to listen to your story over the phone. ***It's important to list priorities of what you want to say before picking up the phone. I operate under the rule that I have 60-seconds to connect with the reporter.***
- Use statistics and other data that reporters can readily understand and use. Data can be powerful ammunition to back up your main points. Avoid using more than two numbers in a sentence and try to express data in percentages : 52 percent, two out of three, more than half, etc.
- Be prepared and stay focused. Draft a set of two or three key points in a script format before calling reporters, jot down a few critical notes, and practice, practice, practice before making the calls.
- Know when reporters have covered your organization's issues in the past. Mentioning a recent story the reporter has covered is often an easy way to lead into a pitch. For example, "I noticed you wrote a story recently concerning the skyrocketing costs of college tuition. Do you know that many of our students, for a fraction of the cost of a private university, are earning credits that they can apply for transfer to a four-year school?"
- Suggest additional resources. Tell reporters which organizations they might visit or provide names of those who have agreed to talk to reporters.
- Avoid calling reporters during their deadlines, such as before top-of-the hour news broadcasts. Find out the deadlines for your local newspapers, radio and television stations in advance.
- Remember - pitching a story to television or radio media is different from pitching to print media. To interest a television reporter, the story must be visual. For example, if you are releasing information about the impact of a new high tech training program, make sure that photographers have access to the student using the equipment.

Finally, when a reporter does a good job covering your story drop them a note, an e-mail or call and thank them. The more rapport and credibility you build with a reporter the more likely you will get more attention when you pitch your next story.