

Ensuring your story gets picked up: how to pitch it to journalists

You have researched your story and written your press release, but how do you make sure it gets picked up and used? Journalists are notoriously busy and can be short-tempered if they are up against a deadline. But if you pitch your story well you will be making their life easier and will become a valued contact. Remember they have pages and airtime to fill and need your stories too.

Before you pitch your story

Know your media

Top complaints from journalists include people trying to pitch them stories that are completely irrelevant for their paper or programme, or receiving calls just before a deadline. So make sure you do your research first. Calling at the right time and understanding what kind of stories they like and who they are trying to target will improve the chances of you being listened to and your story getting covered, so:

- Read and watch the media you are planning to target.
- Make sure you know who their target audience is, the geographical area they cover and the kinds of stories they are interested in.
- Find out the best time to contact your local outlets. Don't call just before a paper goes to press or a programme goes on air (unless you have really important breaking news!).
- Find out when papers go to press and on what days they are researching stories for the next week.
- Find out when local broadcast media have meetings to decide what stories they are going to cover. Making sure you get your story to them beforehand will increase your chances of coverage.
- Research and target the most appropriate contact. If in doubt, read or watch the media outlet or call the newsdesk to find out who to speak to.
- Develop and maintain personal contacts with certain journalists. This can be key to getting a story covered, but can also work in your favour if a negative story emerges.
- Invite journalists/ editors to visit your agency. The better they understand the work you do, the better informed their coverage will be.
- Keep your contact details up to date and ensure you let media know if your details change.

Prepare

Make sure you can answer any questions that will be thrown at you, general questions about your agency and your network as well as specific questions about your story.

A key part of your media work should be to improve the public's understanding of what you do; create the right impression, correct false perceptions, inform and challenge. This is more than you will be able to include on that first pitch to a journalist, but you should have all the info to hand if they ask questions. Make sure you have clear information ready on:

- what your agency and/or wider network is
- what it does
- what it cares about.

Similarly make sure you will be able to answer any questions you may get asked:

- have all the stats at your finger tips
- have a spokesperson
- have a client who is happy to talk to the media.

Pitching the story

When you first speak to a journalist about a new story, put yourself in their shoes. They may be busy, up against a deadline and inundated with irrelevant calls. You will need to convey quickly why they should listen to you.

- Make sure you are presenting your story to them in a way they will understand and relate to. Some of the things they may be looking out for are:
 - Is it topical or timely?
 - How relevant is it to their viewers, readers or listeners?
 - Where is the WOW factor? Is your story unusual?
 - Is there trouble, tragedy or triumph over tragedy?
 - Or a human interest angle?
- Don't assume prior knowledge and be sure to include all the key points. Keep it simple, though – don't try to sell in too many different stories or angles.
- You will need to explain your story clearly and succinctly, and cover what is in it for the journalist. It is worth practicing your opening gambit.
- Offer support material, stats, spokespeople, pictures etc.
- If they want extra information you don't have, get back to them as soon as possible. If you can't, let them know: respect their deadlines.
- Remember, don't speak 'off the record'. Be prepared for anything you say to be repeated in print.

Afterwards

- Update your media contacts database.
- Make a note of what went right (or wrong!).
- Assess coverage.

Making the most of opportunities

Tried to sell in a story, but nobody was interested? If you think it's a good story, it may be that the timing was wrong or that a bigger story was breaking that day. Keep an eye out for other opportunities; you may be able to piggyback on another story about a similar issue.

