RESOURCES:
Pitching Your Nonprofit Story to the Media

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Four Tips from a Former Journalist to Use the Next Time You Email a Reporter

by Alex Gilliland | Sep 11, 2017, from M+R
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I used to work in newsrooms, fielding dozens of emails from PR people every day. Now, I’m the one pitching stories on behalf of nonprofits eager to break through — and I use every lesson I ever learned when I was on the other side of the fence.

I want to help you do the same.

Here are the four easiest ways to mess up a pitch and end up in the trash folder:

- Way too long
- Not newsworthy/not relevant/not relevant to the reporter
- Unclear/uninteresting offer
- Unable to deliver on what’s promised in the pitch

Pretty simple stuff, right? That’s because bad pitches are easy. The four keys to a good pitch take a little more explaining.

1. **Know why your story is newsworthy**

If it isn’t new, it isn’t news.

Why is your story, your expert, your issue something a reporter or producer should care about? Why is *this* the moment people need to hear about it?

You must be able to articulate this in one sentence before you even pick up the phone or write your pitch. To be newsworthy, you need to make some or all of these elements explicit, unavoidable, irresistible:

- New information — something a reporter hasn’t heard about yet.
- An expert — someone with unique and valuable insight into the subject.
- A report — new findings the reporter can apply to their work.
A hook — something happening right now in the real world that makes what you have especially relevant.

2. Know who you’re pitching

Journalists are people, too. More to the point: journalists are extremely busy people with a thousand demands on their attention. So if you want your pitch to break through, you need to know your target. Help the reporter connect the dots between what you have and how they can use it.

When you craft your pitch email to a specific reporter:

- Reference: Point out a previous piece they’ve written and identify how your story or your expert can provide additional insight.
- Relate: Mention an angle or an issue they’ve covered and how your organization or issue can enhance that angle/issue coverage.
- Relationship: If it’s not clear whether they’ve covered your issue, ask them if they’re following it and offer to talk/connect them with an expert so they can establish a solid foundation.

When a reporter or producer sees you’re familiar with their work or with the issue that they cover, they’re more likely to respond. If you pitch a reporter on an environment story when they cover automobile markets, they’ll be less likely to trust you. In some cases the distinction is small (environment vs. energy), but it matters to them. When in doubt, check their Twitter accounts and recent bylines to make sure you’ve got the right person.

(Check our M+R’s Twitter Media Lists of reporters in 14 progressive beats.)

3. Know when to stop

Again, the “reporters are busy” thing applies: Tell them quickly what you are offering and why they should care. Even if you have an extremely complex issue, save the novel-like pitches for a follow-up email when a reporter shows interest.

Your initial pitch should be no more than five sentences/150 words. Your initial pitch should be no more than five sentences/150 words. If a reporter is interested, they will let you know and then you can give them more info. At this point, out of our 150 goal we’ve already used up 43 words. Keep it simple and direct to avoid exceeding five sentences/150 words. Don’t add every bit of detail and supporting information. If and when the reporter replies, you can follow up with all of that additional background. But for your initial pitch, stick to no more than five sentences/150 words. Sometimes you can do less!

Brevity is the soul of wit, after all, and at this point we are already at 115 words. Once again, because it’s worth repeating: Your initial pitch should be no more than five sentences/150 words.

If a reporter is interested, they will let you know and then you can give them.

More,
Info

— — — —
In those 150 words, you should include a few links to relevant articles, reports, or videos if applicable. The first sentence should tell them why what you’re offering is important and it should ask them point blank if they want to speak with someone, see a report, etc.

- **Subject line**: Make it present-tense, action-oriented. If the president or any relevant political figures are involved, consider including that in the subject line. Try to answer the WHY in the subject line (Why should they care? What are you offering?). Or test out putting a direct ask in the subject line (e.g. “Polar bear experts in town this Tuesday – interested in meeting for coffee?” or “EPA budget hearing tomorrow – planning to cover?”)

- **Pitch**: No more than 150 words**

- **Get on the phone**: Always offer to hop on the phone to discuss

**Rules are meant to be broken and there are some instances where 150 words won’t work, but in most cases you’re better off keeping it short and to the point.

4. Know what else to try

Persistence pays off. If you don’t hear anything from an initial pitch, it doesn’t necessarily mean the reporter isn’t interested. Often, they’ll need additional reminders.

I’m not suggesting you John Cusack outside their office window with a boombox over your head. But following-up with a few more emails and phone calls is not pesky — it’s necessary. If you get them on the phone and they express interest, make sure to follow-up immediately and continue to check-in.

And sometimes, you’ll find you’re barking up the wrong tree, or up the right tree at the wrong time, or in fact this particular tree is maybe more interested in cats than dogs. (Also, sometimes your metaphors get away from you.) The point is, if you get in touch but the reporter isn’t interested in your current pitch, all is not lost.

- **Get-to-know-you**: Ask them what they are working on to determine which aspect of what you have could be relevant to them. Learn about their interests and goals, and think about how they connect to your issue. Cultivating a relationship can be valuable later when their beat and your issue align. Reminding reporters of your organization creates brand awareness so when the issue does rise to their consciousness they immediately associate you with that issue and reach out.

- **Exclusives**: You can also consider offering an exclusive when you have good information.

- **Briefings**: Or see if they’d be interested in an informational interview with no obligation that they write something.

The thread that runs through all this is that as you write your pitch, you should consider yourself in partnership with reporters.

Realize that not only must they sift through a lot of information, they are also often required to cover several stories per day. Figuring out whether something is worth their time is your job at least as much as it is theirs. Don’t take it personally if they don’t use your ideas, or never call you back, or block you on Twitter (okay maybe that last one is personal). Your job is to spread the word about the good work your organization is doing – to tell stories that often aren’t covered in our current news climate.

These are interesting times for PR pros and for reporters, but there’s an opportunity for some truly excellent journalism, and your organization can — and should — be a part of it!
10 Rules for Nonprofit PR pitches

From medium.com | By Teresa Ruiz Decker | Communications consultant and content strategist for social good.
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Reporters work really damn hard to make our communities and our nation better. Let’s make their jobs easier.

When I was a cub reporter at a local newspaper in Southern California, I was always fascinated by the reporters at the paper. Gritty, serious, funny, grumpy, upbeat, intelligent, relentlessly curious, brave, authentic and depending on the beat — a little jaded. OK a lot jaded in some cases, but that’s only because they have really hard jobs. They see and do the things that require a certain amount of nerve. They ask hard questions and sift through mountains of information daily to decide what’s worthy of a story for their audiences. They spend hours, days, or months researching. They’re also hitting the pavement looking for stories. It’s a lot of work!

So while I didn’t go on to be a journalist full-time, I never forgot how important a reporter’s job is and how much pressure they carry. Most importantly I have kept asking over the last dozen years or so how we as communications and nonprofit professionals can make their work easier.

Here’s what I learned wrapped up in 10 rules for non-profit pitching, which have always led to good relationships and stories for me:

1. Don’t pitch them your fluff
   
   Seriously, don’t do it. I know your boss wants a press release over some internal news they are excited about. Maybe you have a new board member or a new service or something else. That’s great but I need you to put on your real world glasses for a minute. Outside of your nonprofit if you shared this news with friends, family, or someone on the street would they care? Have you ever seen stories similar to this in the outlets you are pitching to? If you’re a prominent non-profit I think you have some more wiggle room here but smaller, lesser known nonprofits should focus on pitching stories that are newsworthy. If you’re not sure what newsworthy is exactly read or watch the publication more and look in their archives.

   If your news doesn’t pass the newsworthy litmus test, offer up a big push to your boss in other ways:
   
   • Your newsletter
   • Your social media
   • Your websites (internal and external if you have it).
   • Maybe a special email blast to all employees.
   • Don’t forget your board also likes to see good news too.

   If your boss keeps pushing (I’ve hand many bosses who do this) let them know you can send it and remind them you’ve been working really hard to become a source of high quality stories. When the big stories come you want reporters to actually read your emails so being selective about what you pitch is a good thing. If you must, then send it and let the reporter know it’s an FYI for their community news section if they have it.

2. Look up reporters’ names
This is really about knowing your audience and personalizing your pitch emails. Resist the urge to send out email blasts to lists. Instead look up who you are talking. Is this the right reporter for the story? What is their beat? If there are several people at one outlet you are writing to that’s OK, just know their names and address them as such. This helps build a solid media list for your nonprofit.

3. Introduce yourself (first paragraph)
If you’ve never emailed these reporters before tell them who you are in one sentence. I usually say something like:

“Hi XX, My name is Teresa and I am the communications person for NAME OF NONPROFIT here in NAME OF CITY.”

I do this because I want to build a professional relationship with them and become a source of quality stories. People like to talk with other people, not ambiguous organizations so identify yourself clearly. Speaking of clarity...

4. Introduce your non-profit (first paragraph)
One line, on what your nonprofit does in real people language. That’s it. No missions statements here please.

5. Tell them why your news is meaningful to their audiences (second paragraph)
This is the “why” should they care part. In 1–2 sentences tell them your news and why it’s important to their audience/ your community.

6. Make sure your contact information is prominent (third paragraph/closing)
This can be in your signature or closing. Bold it and let them know when they can reach you if there are restrictions. I usually say “call me any time at XXX-XXX-XXXX” about this story. I indicate I will connect them with the person to quote.

7. Now, copy and paste your press release inside of the email (final paragraph)
Copy and paste the whole press release in the body of your email. You can attach it too, but remember many reporters are working from their phones. Opening attachments is a pain in the ass on your phone isn’t it? It is for them too. So make it easy by sticking the whole thing in your email.

8. Ready to send? Make it error free and time it
Before you hit that send button, review your emails carefully. These people are professional communicators for a living, so make sure your email is the best it can be. Now think about the timing. You should be sending your stories in advance so reporters have plenty of time to read and take the information to their editorial meetings. I try to send a week in advance of when I hope to see a story. I try to avoid sending my emails on Monday mornings (email overload) but after that I feel like it’s all about testing and research. If you Google “best time to pitch to reporters” results are all over the map. Some people will say afternoons are best because reporter inboxes are less crowded, while others will say mornings are best to catch them before an editorial meeting where they pitch to editors. The news I pitch isn’t super timely or breaking news, so I typically send on Tuesday-Thursday, afternoons. I’ve sent on Fridays and had fine results too. It usually takes 1–3 days to hear back from reporters so give it some time before you follow-up.

9. You got a response! Good, now be accommodating
SUPER accommodating. Remember you are asking something of them. I make myself available and tell all my internal people who might be interviewed to be ready at any time. I’ve noticed TV crews need a lot of flexibility because they are evaluating stories by the hour and sometimes minute. Try to give them whatever they ask for and do it with some positivity. We are nonprofits with good missions and good people, let’s give them the best we have to offer.

10. Follow-up and a thank you
I know this might feel unnatural to some people, but I try to always follow-up on my pitches with a thanks when my story gets picked up. It’s nothing long winded — just a quick note saying thanks and how much we liked the story. If their needs to be a correction, ask for the correction NICELY and don’t make it a big deal if it doesn’t have to be. Instead focus on the positive, thank the person for their time and for running something. Tell them how awesome it was to see the story and how your team reacted too!

As you work your way through your thank yous don’t forget to update your media list. Many times you will find your story is passed along to another editor or reporter than who you originally sent it to. Add that person to your roster and makes notes on them. Don’t forget to save those clips too!

13 Tips for Pitching Your Story


GOAL: Getting your name/website in the media

There are many ways to get your organization mentioned in the media and into the public eye. While some are more difficult than others, the following tips will separate you from the herd and earn your nonprofit some much deserved attention.

1. You are the experts. Keep an eye on the news and when news breaks involving your area of expertise, have a local and national media contact list ready [phone numbers/e-mail addresses]. Be ready to instantly provide expert commentary/perspective. TIP: Be accessible.

2. Being an expert is not enough. You need to be able to convey your information in a media friendly way as opposed to being overly academic, technical or full of unnecessary jargon. If your comments and anecdotes are not concise, catchy or descriptive enough, they will not be used. TIP: Use mock interviews to “coach” your expert. Pretend you are explaining the issue to your mother or next-door neighbor rather than your colleague in the field.

3. Look for the “people” angle. Does your founder, or the people on your staff, have any amazing stories or compelling personal reasons for being involved in the non-profit? Do the people you help have dramatic stories about how their life was changed by your non-profit? TIP: Keep a current database of stories of the people you help who are willing to talk to the media.

4. Nice often is not enough. While many media outlets are looking for heart-warming stories, they are a dime a dozen. It helps to have an extra twist; look for a news hook, a
current trend, a good back-story, an ironic turn of events, a celebrity connection or anything else that elevates your story pitch above the run-of-the-mill. TIP: Think visually: Can your story be illustrated?

5. **Clearly identify what is unique about your organization and what you are doing.** For instance, is it the only group doing what it does in the country? State? Your community? Is it a model for other non-profits? Is it the biggest? TIP: If you can’t claim a superlative, try to put what you are doing into perspective. Is what you are doing fit into any kind of trend?

6. **Timing is everything.** Learn to strike a balance between persistence and contacting the media only when you have a good hook for your pitch [such as a news angle, trend, upcoming event]. TIP: One exception is when you are proactively compiling your media contact list [see Tip #1]. Use that as an excuse to introduce yourself and your organization to the media contacts.

7. **Think unconventional.** Pitch to alumni magazines, alternative publications, talk radio and online publications. Don’t hesitate to write a letter to the editor or post comments on reputable blogs related to your field. TIP: Know your media and what kind of stories they are interested in so you can tailor your pitch to their interests and needs, thereby not making pitches that will go nowhere.

8. **Milk your connections.** If you have influential board members or celebrities who are interested or involved with what you are doing, ask them for help. Potentially they could publicize your non-profit, attend events [often a media draw] or reach out to their additional connections. TIP: A celebrity doesn’t have to be a movie star or supermodel. Who is big in your community? If you rescue animals, is there a local NFL player, TV reporter or firefighter hero who is a pet lover too and willing to lend their name or time to your group?

9. **Create your own story.** Keep a blog on your website, post that expert Q&A once you have it perfected [see Tip #2], post your own video on You Tube or even start a myspace page for your group. TIP: Send your newsletter to the media; it’s a quick no-pressure update that just might spark a story.

10. **Be clear and specific about your results.** How much money have you raised? How many people/animals/etc. have you helped? How much have you been able to improve a certain situation? TIP: Keep your statistics updated and handy.

11. **Similarly, be clear about why there is a need for what you do.** TIP: Put yourself in the shoes of readers or TV viewers and ask the question: Why should I care?

12. **Urge the media to include a reference or link to your website in their story.** While helpful, this still shouldn’t be a deal-breaker, since the curious can easily Google and find you themselves. TIP: Make sure your website is ready. Can it handle the expected traffic? Is it inviting to the audience you are trying to reach? Is it user-friendly?

13. **Set realistic expectations.** Don’t expect to always get an in-depth story, or to get repeat features in the same media outlet. TIP: A small mention, a photo or an expert quote can be effective in getting the word out, and is much less labor intensive for your organization.