



## Chapter 3

### *How to Pitch Reporters*

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Reporters are the gatekeepers to accessing your audience via the media. It is important to know how to contact reporters, follow their busy schedules, and effectively “sell” your story to them.

In this chapter you will learn about:

- *News Story Pitching Guide*
- *Four Tips for Effective Media Relations*
- *Important Guidelines*
- *Timeline for Pitching a Story*
- *Sample Pitch*



# Media Lists and Release Strategies

## *Creating Media Lists*

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### •**Step 1: Decide on audience**

- Who is your audience?
- Who do you want to reach with your message?

### •**Step 2: Decide on media outlets**

- What outlets reach your target audiences?

### •**Step 3: Contact media outlets**

Who do you contact?

- **Local media.** Develop a “Quick List” of all local television planning and assignment editors, radio news directors, beat reporters and news desk editors at key print outlets. This list should include names and contact information (phone, fax, email and cell) for community and citywide press, as well as key talk show producers and reporters who cover your issues/events.
- **State, regional & national media.** You may need to invest in a media guide if you are doing media outside of your region or have a highly specialized target audience. Both hard copy and online media guides are available for almost any region in the country, but they can be expensive. If you create lists from national directories or get a list from another organization, always call through the list before your press activity to make sure it is current, as any printed list goes out of date quickly.
- **Study the media.** Notice the bylines of the reporters who write on the issues that are most important to you. These are the reporters who are most likely to be interested in the stories you pitch.
- **Prioritize your list.** Prioritize your list by lead time needed to place story and importance. For example, national print needs a significant lead time, as do magazines, but local television and radio require very little lead time. Make sure you get to the reporters who are most important to your story early. If you reach them soon enough, you may be able to make adjustments to make the story more interesting to them.
- **Include appropriate contact information.** Include as much information as needed for your specific media strategy. Name, address, phone and fax numbers, email addresses, etc. Give best times to contact, if known, and other information, such as whether the editor/reporter is bilingual, etc.

#### **Step 4: Keep list current**

- Contact information for reporters and editors is constantly changing and becoming obsolete, so it is important to keep your list current. Make changes and issue new lists regularly.



# How to Pitch Reporters

## *News Story Pitching Guide*

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### •Step 1: Develop media list

### •Step 2: Create pitch

- Phone calls:
  - Should be no longer than one to two minutes, unless editor/reporter asks for information during the pitch.
  - Caller should ask if person has a minute to talk, then give most important detail of news story, followed by why this information is news. Then tell the caller why this is a good moment in time to tell the story now.
  - End the call asking if the story sounds interesting to them, then confirm fax/ mailing/ emailing information.
- Emails:
  - Should include most interesting information (keep it short) in subject line.
  - Write a short pitch in the body of the email.
  - Send only short attachments, not a lot of graphics.
  - Should include contact information below name and next steps (i.e. "If I don't hear back from you by email within two days, I will call you.")
- Letters:
  - Should be no longer than two pages (one is preferred).
  - Gives most important information first, then asks reader if he/she is are interested in learning more.
  - Should include writer's contact information and next steps. (i.e. "I will call you next week...")

### •Step 4: Follow up

- If the editor/reporter says they are interested:
  - Discuss how they would like to cover the story, i.e. attend an event, do interviews over the phone, visit interviewees in their home/office.
  - Facilitate any interviews between the reporter and participants.
  - For events, call the day before and/or the day of the event and confirm that the event is still on the schedule.
- If the editor/reporter asks you to send them something to help them decide
  - Send the press release and supporting materials via email
  - Ask if you can call back in a day or two to get their reaction

- Call back when you both agree is a good time.
- If the editor/reporter is non-committal:
  - Ask if you can send some information over
  - Provide some interesting details, such as an anecdote from one of the profiles, if you have one.
- If the editor/reporter is not interested:
  - Ask if there is a particular reason why they're not interested. It may be that the event/moment does not work well with the outlet's schedule or resources (i.e. Spanish-language television stations don't have weekend news crews).
  - They may give you suggestions on how and when to pitch the story at another time.
  - Thank them for their time.



# How to Pitch Reporters

## *Four Tips for Effective Media Relations*

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### **Tip 1: Be available**

Effective media work requires that you be available when the media wants to talk to you. When contacting the media make sure you do the following:

- Return phone calls promptly. When media are seeking a comment for a breaking story, they frequently go down a list of contacts. Those they reach get quoted; those they don't reach are not part of the story.
- If you can't call back personally, have someone else call to find out what they need. There may be no urgency, and it will let the media person know you are interested and available.



### **Tip 2: Simple and clear message**

Try to avoid jargon and overly technical expressions. Reporters are not specialists and often don't know much about your issue. Don't be distressed if the reporter asks very basic questions. This is your opportunity to explain from the beginning and to ensure the reporter understands the issue from your point of view.



### **Tip 3: Establish relationships**

Establish friendly relationships with the media. People in this profession work on intense deadlines. If they seem rushed, ask if there is a better time to call. They will appreciate the fact that you recognize they are busy and will be more open to listening to you.

If your pitch fails, engage them in conversation about what they would need to cover the story. Try to get the information or angle they need. If that's not possible or practical, thank them and ask if it's ok for you to call again from time to time as developments unfold.

Never get angry or be abrupt. Reporters control the flow of information and the better you can understand what they need and establish friendly relationships, the more likely you are to be covered.



# How to Pitch Reporters

## *Important Guidelines*

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### **Quick Tips for Effective Pitching**

- Talk your pitch. Don't read or sound scripted.
- Know your facts.
- Have your materials ready to fax or email.
- Be aware of deadlines—don't call daily reporters late in the afternoon.
- Use your first thirty seconds on the phone wisely—reporters are very busy and will not listen for long.
- Be clear and concise

### **Key Steps for Pitching Reporters**

1. **Prepare a press release, media advisory or calendar item before making the call.** Have this handy in case the reporter asks you to fax it.
2. **Put a human face on your story.** If possible, be prepared to talk about someone impacted by the story.
3. **Make bullet-point notes for your phone conversation.** Jot down two or three of the most important ideas you want to convey. This will help you organize your thoughts without reading from a script.
4. **Contact the reporter and tell him/her about the story idea.** Remember to be clear and concise and to convey your important points right away.
5. **Offer to fax or email the press release or calendar item.** If the reporter sounds interested, fax the fact sheet ASAP with the press release to give the reporter some background information.
6. **Ask if the reporter is interested and/or follow up** in the next day or two to find out if the reporter has had a chance to review the materials and is interested in doing a story.



# How to Pitch Reporters

## *Timeline for Pitching a Story*

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*Below is a general timeline to follow when pitching a story around a specific event or media moment.*

### **One to two months prior to your event**

Place a PSA on your local radio and cable access stations. Call public affairs shows in the area.

### **Three to five weeks prior to your event**

Call faith-based institutions to ask if they'll run the news item in their weekly bulletin or make an announcement during services.

Place the calendar item in the local newspaper. If you have a past participant willing to be profiled, pitch a feature story.

### **Two to four weeks prior to your event**

Place the calendar item in the local newspaper. If you have a past participant willing to be profiled, pitch a feature story.

### **Week of event**

Call the news desk at the local TV station to let them know about the event and to get it on their schedule. Be prepared to send them the calendar item or the advisory depending on how much information they want. Call print reporters to give them a heads up about the event and to gauge their interest.

### **Day of event**

Call the newspaper and local TV and radio stations to remind them of the event and to find out if they will attend. Have your media materials ready to send to reporters who may be interested in doing a story but can't attend the event. Make sure your spokespeople are available.



# How to Pitch Reporters

## *Sample Pitch*

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Hi, my name is [name] and I'm calling on behalf of the Illinois Asset Building Group. I'm calling to suggest a story idea. Do you have a minute?

Next week, a new report will be released that looks at how families in all 50 states are doing when it comes to financial security.

Unfortunately, Illinois receives one of the lowest ranks in the nation, largely due to [reasons].

This is a very timely issue because [reason].

Does this sound like something you'd be interested in?

Can I email you the press release? I also have a fact sheet on the program I can send you.

Is it okay if I follow up with you in a couple days to see if you're able to cover the story?

Thanks for your time.