

Creating News and Pitching Stories How to Become a “Go To” Organization for the Media

Media relations are essential for supporting your organization’s objectives in the following areas: advocacy, fundraising, brand-building, membership development, grassroots support, and public education. Here are some rules to help you set the agenda through the news media.

Rule #1

Your contact with a reporter has to contain NEWS – interesting or important people, places and things. Some criteria to consider:

1. Newness. Is it the **first time** something has happened? Figure out what superlatives describe the announcement. Biggest? Sweeping? Longest? (E.g., the passage of sweeping legislation, a first-ever report, new research findings, people coming forward to tell stories that were previously hidden.) The word “today” must describe the news or it is not news.
2. Significance/Impact. Does it affect a **great number** of people?
3. Dramatic human interest. How does it **affect people**? Is there a victim or a hero?
4. Bizarre/Counter-intuitive. Is it highly unusual? (man bites dog, college students identifying as “no gender”)
5. Pre-existing profile. Did it happen to or was it said by **someone prominent**? (E.g., celebrities and elected officials)
6. Ties into an existing story. Do you have an important response to something that is already in the news? Do you have a previously unexplored angle to something already being covered? This works if your take on things advances the story line or anticipates the next move. It can’t be piling on with lots of other interest groups or calling a reporter long after the train has left the station. (E.g., briefing a reporter on Massachusetts same-gender marriage case before it comes down when Congress is debating the constitutional amendment. This allows the reporter to discover an important new angle in an ongoing debate.)
7. Conflict. The confirmations of Roberto Gonzales and Condoleeza Rice got so much attention because of the controversy around them, not just because of the importance of their positions.
8. Local connections. What is the **regional angle**? Do you have local statistics? (E.g., If a piece of national legislation passes, how will people in our town be affected by the law?)

Rule #2

Build ways to create news into your program work. Some program activities are more likely to attract public attention than others. Here are eight possibilities to consider:

1. Release a report that contains new, interesting or counter-intuitive research. (“First-ever,” “ground-breaking,” “unprecedented” are great adjectives when true.)
2. Be the leading organization behind a new initiative that addresses a serious problem that affects lots of people. You must present both the problem and the solution. Leaders get quoted, coalition partners much less so.
3. File a lawsuit (or series of related legal actions in different courts). Something less than a lawsuit, like a demand letter that holds the government’s feet to the fire (e.g. call for a GAO investigation) sometimes can work.
4. Conduct an investigation or document a nationwide problem and release the results. This may include a story bank or poll results. Announce an action step to solve the problem you’ve uncovered.
5. Civil disobedience (if large-scale, unusual or colorful).
6. Bring forward “real people” to tell stories that have previously been hidden.
7. Respond to breaking news on your issues. Determine what big milestones and events are likely to occur and develop a strategy for responding and helping frame the issue at the offset. If an upcoming news hook may be unknown to the press, be the first to notify them and offer your perspective in advance. When news breaks, be immediately available to reporters for comment, and have a quick-witted prepared statement ready in advance. The early bird often gets the worm, especially in wire stories.
8. **Catch all**: Make journalists aware of something important.

Rule #3

Sometimes creating news is a stretch. Here are some additional “hooks” that may help refine or time your pitch:

1. Events on the calendar. “Back to School” is a hook for education initiatives. Mother’s Day can be a hook for a parenting story.
2. Anniversaries and Milestones. One year after the death of person X. Thirty years after the passage of landmark legislation.
3. Profiles and personnel. Papers may feature the stories of individuals, community leaders or charismatic spokespeople who have become news themselves because of their interesting stories.
4. Strange Bedfellows. When unlikely allies have come together to address a serious concern. (E.g., “liberal” women’s rights group praises the military for its child care system.)
5. Trends. Stories (often news analysis or feature stories) that suggest new opinions, behavior patterns or social attitudes. Three is a trend; find at least three examples to assert a new trend is emerging. (E.g., One high school cross-dressing for Spirit Week is an oddity. Three high schools doing it in the same month could be the sign of a trend.) Also, look for increases in numbers or severity of incidents. Can you show that the problem is getting a lot worse?

Rule #4

Do not call a reporter to pitch a story idea unless you are ready to provide **everything** she needs to write the story. This means:

1. Prepare a pitch script of what you will say on the phone or in the email. A phone pitch should be no longer than three sentences and the highlights of an email pitch should be in the first paragraph with more details below.
2. Have your backgrounders and one-pagers that describe the problem (and the solution) ready to go.
 - i. If publicizing comprehensive documents or reports, have a plain English executive summary and press release.
 - ii. Make sure your statistics and “social math” (e.g., “That’s enough people to fill Shea Stadium”) are accurate. Make sure your research is fresh, thorough and credible.
3. Have other interview subjects lined up (e.g., a “real person” who can tell a personal story. An unbiased expert such as an academic who can explain the law. The researcher who analyzed the data.)
4. Plan an action step that shows how you propose to solve the problem you’ve brought to light. (E.g., filing legislation, organizing communities, taking out tv and radio ads, electing or defeating slates of candidates, submitting a new curriculum to the school board, etc.)
5. Be able to answer: Why now? And, why is this important? Anticipate any other questions the reporter may ask.

Rule #5

Target reporters who will be interested in your news. Resources like The Yellow Book show which beats reporters cover and consultants can give you leads to friendly contacts. You should also read the papers that you would like to be in. Notice the by-lines of the reporters who are writing articles of interest. Target them for outreach.

Remember that reporters are in the business of finding news. They will appreciate good story ideas, even if they can’t follow through that day or week.

If your initial contact is not interested, ask whether she can refer you to another reporter who is more appropriate. If you have no idea who to contact first, try out your pitch on the news or general assignment editors. After all, the newspaper has many sections: a news reporter may not be interested in a Title IX story, but the sports reporter will be.

Rule #6

Making a pitch call may feel like telemarketing. It is important to recognize that you will be interrupting someone who is busy working (and possibly even on a deadline). But a few tips make the call easier:

1. Do not call reporters late in the day when they are on deadline. The best hours are between 10 a.m. and about 2 p.m.

2. Keep your pitch brief. You only have a few moments to capture their interest.
3. Be relaxed and calm, but show enthusiasm when the news is good or outrage when the news is bad. The reporter will be taking cues from you.
4. If you get an answering machine, leave a substantive message with a call back number. Call at different times to try to get through, but don't leave multiple messages.
5. Though it has been said before, the best pitch is one that offers real news and gives the reporter everything she needs to write the story.

Rule #7

Become a “go to” organization for the media -- Be a fast, reliable and credible source for news. Always be reachable -- give out your cell phone number and offer 24-hour availability. Always have the answers for reporters' questions and get back to them right away – respect their deadlines and help them meet them. This may mean dropping everything and not finishing another task you planned for the day, but it is worth it. You are building relationships and a reputation that will: 1) encourage reporters to call you to find out what's going on; and 2) help get their attention when you want to make a pitch.

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