

Is It News? Assess the newsworthiness of your story

Before you pitch a story to a reporter or send out a press release, it pays to honestly assess the newsworthiness of your idea. Your resources are not infinite, so you want to use them wisely on your best opportunities to garner media coverage. Reporters get hundreds of pitches and releases each day – yours will stand out only if it has real news potential. Also, wasting a reporter's time with stories that are not newsworthy is the best way to ensure that the reporter will ignore your calls and emails in the future.

So what makes a story newsworthy? There's no single answer. Decisions about what makes it into the newspaper or onto the evening news are based on a number of factors – timing, novelty, human interest, controversy, importance to the community – and can be quite complicated. Use the following check list to assess the newsworthiness of your story. Before you pitch a story, you need to be able to check off at least one box. However, the more boxes you can check off for your story, the more likely your pitch is to be successful.

Newsworthiness Check List

- ☐ Is my story brand new? Is this the first time this event/occurrence has ever happened in our community?
- ☐ Does my story contain an unusual or surprising twist?
- ☐ Does my story give a fresh local outlook on a national story?
- ☐ Does my story contain an interesting human interest angle?
- ☐ Is my story a *News You Can Use* item, with practical information of use to people in my community?
- ☐ Does my story fit into a story that the media automatically writes about, such as a holiday observance, an annual event or a political issue?
- ☐ Does my story contain unusual or rich visuals (important for television)?
- ☐ Does my story offer a new voice or a celebrity voice on an issue?
- ☐ Does my story shed light on a complex issue?

Rate your news:

Zero checks – No story. Time to rethink.

1 to 2 checks – Maybe, but what else can you add to up your chances?

3 to 4 checks – Solid pitch. Start dialing.

More than 4 checks – Headline news material! Remember to emphasize what makes your story newsworthy in order to capture a reporter's attention.

Credit: This information was developed in part by Spitfire Strategies (www.spitfirestrategies.com).

Just the Facts: Write an effective media advisory

A media advisory is a brief, one-page notice that alerts the media to an upcoming event. You can create and send out a media advisory before a press conference or public event – anything that you want reporters to have advance notice about and/or attend. These tips will help you to craft a media advisory that gets a reporter's attention and gives them the information they need to know about your event. The sample format on the following page will assist you in putting it all together.

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Press release rules for headlines and decks (sub-heads) apply. Just as with a press release, a media advisory needs a strong, attention-grabbing headline and a sub-head (also called a deck) that offers additional information that will convince a reporter to attend your event. For more information on crafting your headline and deck, see *Read Me: Write an effective press release*.

Use the lead to introduce your event. Immediately following the headline and deck, but before you give the nitty gritty event details, include a one to two sentence paragraph that introduces your event and explains why it is newsworthy. Is there a local or national celebrity involved? Are you launching a new or innovative program? Delivering a petition with 3,000 signatures to a policy maker? In the lead paragraph, highlight the most important feature of your event (the why). In doing this, you will also likely convey who is behind the event (your organization).

Including a quote is optional. If you choose, you can include a quote from your lead spokesperson. Do this only if it enhances the appeal of your event by sharing a key, newsworthy detail.

Highlight the event details. The rest of your advisory should clearly lay out the details of your event, including what is happening, when, and where. (Who and why will be covered in your lead paragraph and quote.) Follow the three Ws with a list of speakers or any other key details. Don't forget to including information about visuals or sounds that might be important to television or radio outlets.

Use letterhead and boilerplate to identify your organization. Consistent use of letterhead and boilerplate (two to three sentences at the bottom of an advisory that explain who your organization is) will help journalists to know the source of the advisory. They'll also save you from using valuable space in the body of the advisory to share that information.

Always include contact information. Near the top of the release, include a name and phone number of a person a reporter can easily contact for additional information.

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Make the News: Pitch a story to a reporter

Proactive media outreach is critically important to a successful media relations strategy, but it can be a challenge. Perhaps you have been in this situation: you have a great idea for a news story...but the prospect of getting a reporter to write about it is daunting. The following tips will help you to identify pitching opportunities, select your pitching target, develop and deliver your pitch, and follow up successfully.

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Make sure it's newsworthy. Reporters are busy, and nothing annoys them more than having their time wasted. Reporters do not want to cover the same old story that everyone else is covering, or that they themselves have already covered. Track the work of the reporter you are targeting, gauge his or her interests, and note the stories he or she has done recently. Your story should be something entirely new, or take a fresh angle on an existing issue.

Example: News stories about affirmative action dominated education and legal news coverage in late 2003 and early 2004 when the Supreme Court was considering two affirmative action cases. Groups that wanted to stay in the mix were constantly looking for new angles on the story to pitch.

A civil rights group released a report on percentage plans, an alternative to affirmative action, that demonstrated that the plans harmed diversity. The group pitched the education reporter at the *Ann Arbor News* to do a story about the report findings. The pitch was successful because it positioned the report as an opportunity for the reporter to cover the affirmative action story from a fresh angle. New information plus a fresh angle equaled a story that featured the report findings and a quote from the group's spokesperson.

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Strong delivery will make or break your pitch. Whether you're pitching the reporter by phone, or following up on your email pitch, consider your timing. Do not call a reporter in the late afternoon when he or she is likely to be on deadline. If you reach a reporter who sounds harried, ask when would be a better time for you to call back. Plan and practice your pitch and deliver it with confidence – but don't read it. Ask if the reporter is interested, and offer to share additional information. A reporter will rarely agree to do a story during your first call, so your goal should be to start the conversation. Be prepared to leave a brief, to-the-point voicemail (30 seconds or less) if you do not reach a live person.

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Follow-up...but don't pester. You've spoken to the reporter, shared additional resources and haven't heard anything. Give a call, or send a follow-up email. Ask if they think they are going to do the story, or if they need anything else to help them decide. If they say no, ask if you can stay in touch as things develop. Your efforts now may pay dividends later. Also, if they say no, ask if they think a colleague might be interested. If they say yes, offer to help in any way that you can (identifying spokespeople, providing background information, etc.). After the story runs, send an email or note thanking them for their efforts.

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Know your audience. Your pitch will only be successful if you deliver it to the right person and outlet. This depends on the medium, as well as the kind of story you are pitching.

Television. Television stations are interested in breaking news stories with a strong visual angle. Sometimes they will also do investigative features that expose an injustice or take an in-depth look at an issue facing the community. If your story is breaking news, pitch the assignment editor. If you know that news is going to break in the near future, pitch the futures editor. Providing the media with advance notice almost always increases your chance of getting coverage. These two people at the television station assign the majority of news coverage to individual reporters.

For a feature story that doesn't concern breaking news, you need to identify the right reporter or producer who will be interested in your pitch. The easiest way to do this is to watch the news. Pay attention to the beats that reporters cover. Then you can pitch that reporter, or his or her producer, directly.

Radio. News coverage at National Public Radio affiliates and local news/talk stations is likely going to be your first choice. These stations continue to provide in-depth news coverage and have larger news reporting staffs, unlike most music stations. For a public radio station, you may want to target a specific reporter who covers a beat related to your issue. Some stations may have an assignment editor, and you can always go to the news editor. If there is a particular show that you want to target, direct your pitch to the show's producer. Again, it's useful to listen to the program that you are pitching so that you have a good sense of the kinds of stories they do and what they've already covered.

News coverage during the day on radio stations that play music tends to be brief. If you have a breaking story, you can pitch the news director to include the story in the station's regular news briefs. Keep in mind that many of those music stations have weekend or late evening public affairs shows that take a closer look at the week's news and community issues. These shows, generally produced and often hosted by the news or public affairs director, are good targets for a pitch involving a more in-depth treatment of your issue.

Newspaper. Small newspapers tend to have small staffs, so the best person to receive your pitch may be the news editor if the paper is very small. At larger papers, you will want to find the reporter covering the appropriate beat for your story, or even consider a columnist. Again, the easiest way to do this is to read the paper and track the coverage – after a few days or weeks, it will be easy to know who covers what stories. Beyond a single pitch or story, it's a good idea to know the reporters who are likely to cover your issues so that you can build a relationship with them.

Online. Online outlets are an evolving medium. It is important to review the content and style of the online outlet you are targeting to help you shape your pitch. In most cases you will be emailing your pitch, which means you will need to keep your thoughts very concise. Keep in mind that many online outlets now include and want photos, video and/or audio.

KEY POINT: Always be knowledgeable about a reporter and/or outlets prior work

Sometimes you will pitch a single story to a single reporter. Other times, you will do a broader media push and pitch multiple reporters from varying outlets at the same time. In this case, it's a good idea to develop a media plan to guide your outreach.

Example: Looking again at the civil rights group discussed earlier, the group took a close look at its media options when planning media outreach around the release of the percentage plan report. The story was not great for television, as it did not have a visual angle. Radio was a possibility as the issue was a hot news topic that African-American stations in particular were likely to be interested in. The civil rights group pitched and secured interviews on National Public Radio and several African-American public affairs shows. For pitches to newspaper reporters who look for new ways to cover ongoing stories, the group focused on reporters that were already covering the affirmative action debate and offered the report as a fresh angle on the story.

Craft a creative pitch. Reporters are constantly besieged by phone calls, emails and faxes from people trying to convince them to write stories. You need to stand out from the crowd. This means deciding on the best means of contact – usually email or phone – and developing a pitch that is attention-grabbing and brief.

Phone Pitch Tips.

- If you're going to pitch by phone, plan what you will say in advance. Before you make the first call, think about the three main things you want them to get out of your conversation (besides your contact information).
- Most reporters will give you 15 seconds – maybe 30 – to make your case. Make those seconds count. Avoid overwhelming them with jargon. Use a striking fact, or mention the name of a prominent person available for an interview. If they're interested, they'll keep listening. But if you can't capture their interest quickly, you'll lose them, and the story.
- Since about 90 percent of your calls will lead to voicemail, keep your messages brief. Speak clearly and get to the point immediately. Practice your voice mail message before you begin making calls so that you can shorten the message time, but still get to the most important information.
- Don't forget to say who you are, who you represent, how to reach you and why you're calling.
- Explain why you think it will be of interest to them and their readers, viewers or listeners. Consider having multiple hooks to get the reporter's interest.
- Try to make follow-up calls in the morning when reporters are less likely to be on a deadline to finish their stories.
- Try to anticipate the media's questions. Even if you've sent information in advance, it's unlikely that the journalist had an opportunity to review your information, so anticipate questions that are already answered in the materials you provided as well.

- When you reach reporters and they ask you to re-send the information (and they will), send the follow-up information with a note attached, "Per your request" and briefly summarize key pitch points in a short paragraph.
- Remember that reporters receive many calls from people like you each day. Some are friendly and receptive to a phone pitch, and others can be impatient. Whatever the response is on the other side, rest assured that you have done your job and move on to the next call.

Email Pitch Tips.

- Same rules apply for an email pitch – except that reporters can delete it without ever reading it.
- Create an interesting subject line and make sure the first few sentences of your email are attention grabbing. Don't write a novel – one to three brief paragraphs will do it.
- Let the reporter know that you will call to follow up – don't leave it up to a reporter to contact you.
- Do not send documents as attachments. Many email addresses are set up to block emails with attachments. Even if they do get through, many journalists won't open attachments from unknown email addresses. Try to include anything that you need to communicate in the body of an email. If you are trying to share a lengthy document with a reporter, post the document online and provide the reporter with a Web address to view the piece.

KEY POINT: Don't exaggerate facts or the importance of your issue.

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Maximizing Media Attendance: Hold a successful news conference

It is appropriate to hold a news conference when you have significant hard news to release and wish to convey that news to a broad audience. However, in order to be successful, news conferences must be well-organized and present newsworthy information in a clear and concise manner. The following tips are designed to help guide you in planning a news conference.

THE LOGISTICS

Pick a good location. Your location should be convenient for the media to access and, when possible, relevant to the news you have to announce. There should be enough space for the anticipated number of reporters, as well as any invited guests. Remember to obtain a permit in advance if needed. Have signs to guide people to the news conference area.

Hold it at the right time. Timing is very important for news conferences. The best days of the week for coverage are usually Tuesday through Thursday. News conferences work best in the late morning or early afternoon (between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.) so that reporters can meet their deadlines. Avoid competing with other events happening at the same time of your event; contact your local Associated Press wire bureau to find out what is on its "daybook" – a listing of events happening in a particular area on a particular day.

Make it visual. You should consider the visual impact of your event – especially for television cameras and photographers. You may want to display a banner behind the speakers and/or place a sign on the podium that includes your organization's name/logo and email address and or phone number. Visuals should be easy to see, self-explanatory and reinforce your main message.

Make the location media-friendly. In addition to choosing a location that's easy for media to get to, your venue should have the equipment and setup that make it easy for the media to cover it. The setup for the news conference should include a podium for the speakers to use when delivering their comments. Depending on your venue, you can provide chairs for the audience or they can stand; however, be sure the media has an unobstructed view of your speakers. If your news conference is indoors, remember to leave an unobstructed space for television cameras at the back of the room.

Have an audience. If space permits, invite your members and allies to attend your news conference so they can be part of your work and also help share your message.

THE MEDIA

Invite the media. Send out a media alert via email and/or fax three to four days before the news conference. Make sure to include wire services (such as The Associated Press and Reuters) that have daybooks. Place a reminder call to your invited media one or two days before the news conference.

Prepare take away materials. You should have a press kit to hand out to media at your news conference. Contents of this press kit could include fact sheets, a press release, biographies of the speakers, copies of any prepared statements, graphs, charts, or other

information that will help the media to understand the topic of your news conference. Avoid overwhelming the media with too much paper – include only vital information that a reporter must have to write his or her story.

Greet the media. Have a sign-in table where you can welcome the media and have them fill out a sign-in sheet with their contact information. This sheet will help you track which media outlets attended your news conference and provide easy access for any follow up or future news conferences. It is important to have everything ready at least 30 minutes prior to the start of your news conference. The media will often arrive early to arrange equipment and review the press kit.

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THE PROGRAM

Use a moderator. You should select a moderator for your press conference who can introduce the speakers and facilitate Q&A with reporters. The moderator can also control the process and keep reporters on the subject. If a reporter goes off subject, the moderator can return the focus by saying such things as, "That is an interesting point, but we are here today to discuss . . ."

Prepare your speakers. Usually, you should select no more than two to three people to speak about your issue at the press conference. Each speaker should relay a specific part of the message – reporters do not need or want to hear multiple speakers repeating the same things. Speakers should be well prepped, be trained to stay on message and practice prior to the news conference.

Have an agenda. Start on time – no more than five minutes late. It is unprofessional to keep the media waiting. The moderator should introduce the speakers and then each speaker should talk for no more than five minutes. Keeping the speakers to a short amount of time will help ensure they stay on message. The moderator should then facilitate a short Q&A session with journalists. The entire news conference should not last more than one hour, including the time for Q&A.

Arrange individual interviews after the conference. Reporters often want one-on-one interviews with speakers after the Q&A period. This is a chance to clarify or cover information not brought out in the Q&A; however, speakers need to continue to stay on message and keep their answers short and direct.

Conduct follow-up. Distribute press kits to key media who were unable to attend. Make sure someone is available to respond to questions that reporters might have after the news conference ends. Send thank you notes to VIPs that attended.

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