



April 3, 2014
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BEHIND THE NEWS: AN INSIDE PERSPECTIVE ON PITCHING STORIES TO THE MEDIA

Local nonprofits attended a forum on strengthening media relations on April 3, 2014

BETHESDA, MD – While there is no guaranteed method for gaining media attention, nonprofits can practice several techniques to make their pitches more marketable for media coverage, or achieve even a simple mention in a news story. Before contacting the media, nonprofits should do their research. With current trends of media covering sensational news, it's important for nonprofits to frame their pitch. Originality makes a story stand out, but accuracy is key.

"Inaccurate information is annoying, even unacceptable," said Ellyn Wexler, former Arts & Entertainment editor for *The Gazette*, the *Washington Post's* chain of suburban newspapers in Maryland. Wexler currently freelances for *The Gazette* and teaches feature writing at The Writer's Center. She advises local nonprofits to include the date and event in the subject line of the email so it doesn't get "lost."

The forum, sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, was led by Mia Cortez, publications manager at The Writer's Center.

Jpeg attached: Joe Frandoni & Mía Cortez, credit: Kelsey Hutchinson, Arts & Humanities (size: 500 KB)

Vital Practices

- Spend some time reading/watching the media you're pitching. Know what kinds of stories they tend to cover and if that makes sense for your organization's media plan.
- Get to know the reporters that cover organizations like yours. You don't want to pitch a youth orchestra's concert to the sports editor or an art exhibit to the health reporter.
- Get to know deadlines and use them to your advantage.
- Get to know each local publication - everybody does it differently.
- Make contact early.
- Know the reporter's angle going in. It is within the rights of the person being interviewed to ask what angle the reporter is taking. Having that knowledge may prompt you to share information that you would not have otherwise, so be ready to go beyond talking points.
- Ask to review the quotes they plan to use before it goes to print.
- Remember the 5 W's: who, what, when, why and where. Let the reporter take it from there.
- Get familiar with AP style. It's the newsroom bible!

Pitches: Dos & Don'ts

Pitch: A writer's description of a potential story to an editor. A pitch is informal and can be delivered verbally or sent via email.

Do:

- Have an angle. Most media organizations don't want the same story everybody else is running. Say you have a special angle that will appeal to the audience of the publication you are pitching to. Personalize and offer an exclusive.

- Tell the editor why this event/performance merits coverage. If it's an annual or recurring event that has received coverage in the past, say what will be different about it this time.
- Make sure potential interviewees are ready and available, are expecting a phone call or media contact and will help tell your story effectively. Provide photos and photo opportunities.
- Include a strong visual component with your pitch - kids rehearsing for a community ballet, volunteers making decorations, etc.
- Write pitches with a strong human story that typifies the mission of your organization, a teen violinist who became a better student because of the discipline music has taught him/her, a retired teacher who has found a second career teaching adults to read.
- Frame it as a local angle on a national news story.
- Follow-up. Ask when would be a good time to call. Generally 1-2 email follow-ups are enough, unless the story has been scheduled and you haven't heard from them.
- If your pitch is rejected, ask why! They may provide helpful tips for next time.

Don't

- Send a pitch to a reporter/editor at one media outlet that's addressed to someone at a competing publication.
- Nitpick on corrections. Name misspellings or incorrect data should be corrected on their website immediately, so let them know. But don't burn your bridges by pointing out small typos.
- Ignore your website. Make it media friendly! Reporters should be able to easily get to your information. A virtual press room with a media kit (logo, mission, staff bios, etc.) is ideal.

Press Releases: Dos & Don'ts

A press release, news release, media release, press statement or video release is a written or recorded communication directed at members of the news media for the purpose of announcing something newsworthy. Typically, they are mailed, faxed or e-mailed to assignment editors at newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television stations or television networks.

Do

- Keep it to one page
- Keep an **info checklist**: Time Date Location Contact Info Website
- Keep a **subject line checklist**: 5 W's Relevant Easy to quickly identify and find in an inbox
- Include high res images, generally larger than 500 KB
- Include cutline and photo credit
- Jazz it up, but don't puff it up. Attaching multiple high-resolution color images that can be used at a moment's notice is a big plus. Bios are useful as well. But hold the adjectives and prose and just give the facts.
- Consider placing an embargo on your release. Give details ahead of time, but say it can't be published until a specific date. This gives the reporter time to research the story and give it a fair shake for your ideal publication date.
- Check for typos before sending.

Don't

- Send images that may be too small for print or web use. Generally, 500 KB min.
- Lock information into a graphic-heavy PDF, where text cannot be copied and/or takes too long to load.
- If you must send a PDF, such as in the case of a formal invitation, also send the information in a Word document in a simple, clean format.