



Pointers on Pitching *From Both Ends of the Call*

Who knows as much about pitching public interest stories as the professionals who do it every week? How about the journalists who answer the phone?

THE DATE is set and the press release has been distributed. On your desk is the contact information for reporters whose coverage of your press conference (or rally, or report release, or whatever) is critical to its success. Are you ready to make the calls?

Before answering, you may want to compare notes with the “bipartisan” panel of experts assembled for this month’s issue.

Offering tips from the pitcher’s perspective are:

Kenan Block, Media Relations Specialist, and **Anne Tillery**, Partner, *Pyramid Communications*

Eric Brown, Communications Director, *Center for a New American Dream*

Susanne Frank, Vice President, *M&R Strategic Services*

Holly Minch, Project Director, *The Spin Project*

Daniel Silverman, Vice President, and **Mike Smith**, Senior Account Executive, *Fenton Communications*

And adding their insights from the receiving end are:

John Boudreau, Philanthropy Reporter, *San Jose Mercury News*

Jack Kelley, Senior Editor, *People Magazine*

Jim Motavalli, Editor, *E/The Environmental Magazine*

Andrew Murr, Los Angeles Correspondent, *Newsweek*

Margot Roosevelt, National Correspondent, *Time Magazine*

I asked each person three questions about the art of pitching nonprofit stories. Those questions and the panelists’ unabridged answers are inside.

Online Tips for Pitching

Thanks to Holly Minch and her team at The Spin Project, you can get more helpful advice on pitching by pointing your web browser at www.spinproject.org/resources/reporters/pitching.php3

You’ll also find some ideas about how to develop news hooks to strengthen the news value of your stories at www.spinproject.org/resources/news ■

Paul Begala’s 7 Rules for Highly Effective Pitchers

When Eric Brown was a press secretary on Capitol Hill, he learned how to pitch from veteran Democratic strategist Paul Begala. Here are the rules that help shape Brown’s pitches today at the Center for a New American Dream:

1. **Tell a story.** People (which includes reporters) are constantly looking for the story that will make sense out of all the data inundating them each day. Make it easy for them with your pitch and give them one.
2. **Keep it brief.** While we are often tempted to cram everything about our organization and our issue into our pitches, remember the over-worked and underappreciated people at the other end of your calls. If they want to know more, they’ll let you know. Quickly.
3. **Be Unique.** They don’t call it “news” because it’s been around for days and everyone knows it. Offer the fresh story, insight, or angle that elevates your story above the rabble.
4. **Be Relevant.** If you cannot find a way to make your message relevant to the reporter’s readers or to the producer’s viewers, don’t bother to call.
5. **Be emotional and evocative.** If you don’t sound like you care about the story, why should the journalist? And be sure to paint a picture with your words so reporters can see the story as well as you do.
6. **Practice the Three R’s.** Repeat, Rephrase, Reinforce. Don’t assume the reporter gets your message the first time. Find ways to say it a few times while avoiding the fourth R: redundancy.
7. **Forward march!** Whatever your issue, the essential message is often some variation of “We’re doing everything we can to make the future a better place for our children.” A good pitch is about looking forward, too. ■

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Newsletter edited by Carolyn Ramsay.



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3250 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 1400
Los Angeles, CA 90010



► 1. What are the most commonly made mistakes?

“Dear Sir or Madam...”

Public interest groups (and others) frequently make the fatal pitch mistake of sending out scattershot, one-size-fits all pitches to all news organizations without regard to audience, national or local scope. They ignore the constraints of the particular medium, whether it's TV, a news-magazine, a local or national newspaper.

Murr, *Newsweek*

You want it when?

The biggest mistake public interest groups make is that they call me up on a Friday, or even send a fax on a Monday to announce a Tuesday press conference in which they are filing a lawsuit, or unveiling an initiative, or committing some kind of news. Why bother? My publication comes out once a week on Mondays. Unless they involve breaking news, stories are scheduled at least a week, and often two weeks or three weeks in advance.

Roosevelt, *Time*

Hey, I called, didn't I?

Calling me and saying, “Did you get my press release?” ranks pretty high. It's compounded when the release has no possible connection to E, when the PR person has no idea what E is, has never read it or looked at it, and cares only about ticking off a box labeled, “called editor.”

Motavalli, *E*

But our cause is just!

Often, public interest groups think that reporters have an obligation to report on a story because it's the “right thing to do.” Ha. Reporters cover stories because their readers (and their editors) connect with them. Reporters will cover stories that are interesting but unimportant a heck of a lot

faster than they will cover stories that are “important” but dull.

Brown, *New Dream*

2. What are the key elements of a strong pitch?

First rule of pitching: aim at the right person.

Don't simply fax a news release to the assignment desk and hope for the best. Do a little homework—which reporter actually covers your issue? Who has written positive pieces in the past? Whether you are pitching an in-depth policy piece to a national magazine or plugging your gala event to the local TV news, it never hurts to call the assignment editor or the news desk: they will tell you who is appropriate.

Frank, *M&R*

Get to the point.

A pitch that clearly frames the story idea in the first or second sentence is infinitely more welcome than one that tiptoes up to it, or worse, buries it under paragraphs of writerly phrase-making. In almost every case, we know instantly whether an idea will work for us.

Kelley, *People*

Remember: it's a pitch, not a monologue.

Give them enough information up front to pique their interest, but let them interject with questions before too long, certainly within the first 30 seconds.

Silverman, *Fenton*

Give 'em time.

The smartest pitchers tell me about stuff that is happening months before the news peg actually comes up, and we can work together to figure out when and how this piece would work for a newsmagazine.

Roosevelt, *Time*

Offer an exclusive.

Sometimes telling everyone is the right idea, but with magazines like mine that come out only once a week, a press conference that's six days old is enough to send bored editors hunting elsewhere for stories.

Murr, *Newsweek*

Be a resource.

The easier you make it for the reporters, the better the chances they'll bite. Be ready to immediately provide quotes, background and interview opportunities.

The reporter/pitcher relationship is really pretty simple: you want the reporter to cover your story, in exchange you help make the reporter's job easier.

Block & Tillery, *Pyramid*

3. If you had to offer a single piece of advice...?

Despite pressure you may get to “call the media” every time your organization decides to go with Dress Down Fridays, just stop yourself and think it through from a reporter's perspective.

Frank, *M&R*

If you can let the reporters know that you understand who they are and how they work, this will go a long way to developing trust, and it lets the reporters know that you intend to use their time wisely and efficiently. If you can begin to establish this relationship, even in the first few seconds of a cold pitch, you have a much, much better chance for success.

Brown, *New Dream*

Figure out in advance why your fight, your issue, your point of view should be interesting to a wide range of readers and viewers, many of whom hold different points of view from yours.

Murr, *Newsweek*

Read, read, read the reporter's stuff, even if it's five minutes before the call and only the headlines. It's flattering, professional, and you won't look stupid if they just wrote on it.

Smith, *Fenton*

Accept that silence is, in fact, a response.

Kelley, *People* ■

