

Tips for Successfully Pitching Your Story to the Media

Rebecca Huels, Senior Communications & Events Officer, PRHC Foundation

(With much-appreciated input from Lauren Gilchrist, Reporter, Peterborough This Week)

Most of us working in the not-for-profit sector know that editorial coverage is an extremely cost-effective way to inspire interest and support within the community.

While media coverage is cost-effective, however, it's certainly not free. To do it well requires a significant investment of time to strategically plan and execute – more than you might think. Succeed, and the pay-off is well worth the effort.

Here are my top 10 tips for getting your organization's story told through the media:

1. Put yourself in the media outlet's/reporter's shoes. When approached with a story pitch, reporters are asking themselves three questions: Why now? Why is this news? Who cares? Keep your pitch short (30 seconds or less) and make sure it includes answers to these questions.
2. Keep in mind that newsrooms get hundreds of press releases and story pitches every week. Take the time to do a bit of research and learn which reporters in town cover what beats. If you have a health story, find the local reporters that cover the health beat. Targeting your pitch to the right reporter will increase the chance that your story will not get lost in the paper shuffle.
3. Go even further. Call up that reporter and invite him or her out for a cup of coffee. Bring your press package with you to that meeting. It's easier for someone to turn you down over the phone than in person.
4. Whenever possible, offer an exclusive. No media outlet wants to put the time and effort into developing a story for you only to see the same story on the pages or airwaves of their competition. If you can't make it exclusive, customize it. Find different ways to carry the same message. It's a lot more work but well worth it in the long run. *Important: This applies to special interest stories, not breaking news. When it comes to breaking news, send your release to everyone. The only thing that can jeopardize a media relationship more than giving bad information is leaving them out of the loop!*
5. Arrange for compelling visuals. Good photo opportunities are the key to a successful pitch. Whenever possible make sure you have a variety of exclusive options available for the various photographers to shoot. (Why? See tip #4)

(more on reverse)

6. Don't send the story to everyone and hope they run it. Every media outlet has a specific target audience in mind and they choose their stories accordingly. If you know their audience in advance and design your pitch accordingly, you'll have better luck and will probably get more coverage than if you keep your pitch generic. But regardless of each media outlet's target audience, a great story is a great story. It's unlikely that a media outlet is going to turn down a "knock-them-out-of-the-park" type of story regardless of their key audience. That means ensuring your story catches their attention fast and gets bumps to the top of their "must print" list. *Extra tip: If you really want to know a media outlet's target demographic, ask the advertising reps.*
7. Put a human face to the story and keep it local. Compelling human-interest angles of any kind are always news.
8. Keep an eye on what's happening in national news. Alerting your local media to a national story that has local repercussions is a great way to get coverage. Add a local face to the mix (see tip #7) and you've got a story that will be hard to pass up. Move fast, though - national news becomes old news very quickly.
9. Don't take it personally if your pitch gets turned down or the story doesn't get printed. Feature stories and "softer" stories can and do get bumped by breaking news. If your pitch does get turned down, follow-up with the media outlet to find out why. Was there a lot of breaking news that week? Has this story been told before? Ask what you can do to get your story out there.
10. Cultivate good relationships with your media contacts. Apply the same rules that apply to friendship. Stay in regular touch with them, not just when you want something. Return their calls quickly. When they need something, go out of your way to help them get it in a timely manner. Besides being good manners, when it comes to relationships with the media, what goes around tends to come around.