

The windup and the pitch: Reaching industry constituents through trade media

By John Knox

Though it's still relatively early in the season, major-league pitchers are starting to show their stuff. Just as a big-league hurler goes into his windup before throwing a fastball, PR people must go through a number of motions before sending a story idea off to an editor. Regardless of the industry you're in, the following steps will help when pitching the trades.

Determine your target media

Before each pitch, the catcher and pitcher must agree on how to approach the batter. Likewise, you've got to analyze which industry outlets will be the ideal targets for your story idea. Most industries have a major member organization (like PRSA for PR practitioners). The organization's journal will likely be the most widely circulated publication within that industry. As such, it would be a logical target for a story idea. However, also consider more specialized publications, magazines and newsletters from various state trade associations and industry Web sites.

Think about doing an informal survey of industry colleagues to find out which media they receive, which they actually read and which they find most valuable. Another useful technique for determining industry-appropriate media is to meet with advertising representatives to find out the supplements, special issues and conference programs they will be publishing in the future.

Many trade media have only a few staff writers, so they're often receptive to bylined submissions from clients (you will probably have to ghostwrite in this

instance) or credible sources within your organization.

Developing the right story

After deciding which media outlets to approach, you'll want to be sure you've got a story topic that will be of interest to that publication or Web site and, by extension, its readers. At the same time, you'll want to advance messages from your organization or client. How to accomplish this? Consider mining your organization's standing meetings for developing content for customer newsletters, white papers, sales collateral or other marketing communications.

These meetings are often rich with ideas for potential news about the organization; often that material can be the seed of a story for the trade media. After the meeting, talk to experts in the organization to develop the story idea further. As you follow up, remember to seek input for potential charts and other visual materials, which are always popular among editors.

Other people who might be able to help identify potential interview subjects and story ideas are your associates and organizational officers. Also consider talking to new personnel, who bring fresh ideas with them into the organization, and customers. Some of these ideas will be excellent fodder for stories to pitch. Finally, review the organization's archives. Often a previous article or placement will generate an idea for a new story or update on an ongoing issue within the field.

Pre-sell your idea

It's important that you get to know what kinds of stories the person you'll be pitching likes, as well as how and when he or she wants to be contacted.

You can increase the chances of acceptance of your story idea by making it easy for an editor or reporter to warm up to the idea. For example, you may see an editor at an industry conference and casually mention your story idea. Then you can follow up with a short phone call after the conference ends and send a written pitch letter following your phone call if the editor is interested. At that point, the letter may serve more to confirm what the story will be than to suggest a new idea.

Pitching editors and reporters over the telephone is one of the most difficult tasks in media relations. Phone pitching requires a lot of preparation.

Most journalists are extremely busy and will give you limited time to make your case, so it's critical that you master the art of the 30-second pitch (see sidebar). Develop a bulleted fact sheet that outlines your key message points. Be sure to practice — and use your watch.

Five key elements should constitute the pitch:

- Identify who you are and why you are calling.
- Ask if this is a good time to talk. If it isn't, ask the journalist to suggest when you should call back.
- If it is a good time to talk, let the editor or reporter know you are familiar with the publication and recent stories therein that relate to your subject.
- In a sentence or two, explain the angle and why people would care about the story. If you can, quote an interesting statistic.
- Ask the editor or reporter if he or she is interested.

In addition to the 30-second pitch, be prepared with more information you can tell the journalist if she likes what you're offering and says "Tell me more."

Writing the pitch letter

When it's time to finally send your pitch letter, use e-mail, but remember that reporters and editors receive hundreds of e-mails a day. Include a short pitch along with your contact information so your e-mail stands out from the rest. (See the elements of a pitch letter in the sidebar.)

Following through

After the pitch letter leaves your office, wait a few days and then call the person to whom you sent your material. Make sure the information was received and confirm his or her interest. Then offer to set up an interview with, or get commentary from, one of your sources. Be sure to offer any additional elements needed to round out the story — photos, customer references, analyst references and additional sources, if necessary. You need to be able to provide these elements on the spot, so have the information ready in advance.

You may not reach the journalist by phone, even after trying several times. In that case, leave one message and do not keep calling. Assume they received your message but that other stories are taking priority.

Your goal is to become a resource for the media. You can do this by letting them know you exist and by cultivating

The 30-Second Pitch sounds like this:

Reporter: "Pat Richards."

PR pro: "Hi, Pat. This is Dale Washington and I'm calling to suggest a story idea. Is now a good time to talk?"

Reporter: "Yes, but I only have half a minute. Can you make it quick?"

PR pro: "Absolutely. I know you cover diversity issues for *Education Journal*. I'm calling on behalf of the National Association of Teachers of English as a Second Language. We're seeing a marked increase in the number of requests from the business community nationwide for tutoring in factories. In fact, hiring of counselors is up 21 percent over two years ago, and that ties directly to U.S. Census figures that show a huge increase in the Hispanic population. I see that your June issue has a focus on vocational instruction and I thought your readers would have an interest in this. Does this seem like something you'd want to know more about?"

Reporter: "That is kind of interesting. I would like to know more about it. Do you have something you can send? My e-mail is..."

PR pro: "Yes, I can send you a more developed story proposal later today and then I'd like to follow up with you, say, next week. When's a good time?"

Reporter: "I'm on deadline on Tuesday. Wednesdays are usually pretty good."

PR pro: "Great, please look for my e-mail and I'll call you at this time next Wednesday." **T**

Elements of a pitch letter

- Short and to the point.
- Demonstrates relevance to the readers of the media outlet.
- Ties into some current, relevant news peg.
- Incorporates a suggested lead for the story.
- Notes the resources, contacts and background materials you can provide.
- No more than one page, if possible.
- Uses bright, active verbs and simple, declarative sentence structure.
- Stimulates ideas rather than laying the whole thing out. **T**

—J.K.



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