

Pitches

Purpose, Audience and Media

A pitch is a strategic message that attempts to persuade an individual journalist or blogger to write the story described in the pitch. A pitch—whether an e-mail, phone call or social media message through a website such as LinkedIn—promotes, or “pitches,” a story idea.

Strategic writers often send a pitch instead of a feature news release (pages 54–55). A pitch promotes a “soft-news” story idea rather than a hard-news story such as the announcement of a new chief executive officer. Don’t use a pitch to replace an announcement news release (pages 51–53) that delivers hard news.

Before deciding to send a pitch, consider these facts:

- Written pitches generally take less time to read than feature news releases. Busy recipients will appreciate that.
- In a pitch, as opposed to a feature news release, the story isn’t yet written—so a journalist or blogger can feel a stronger sense of ownership of the potential story.
- Unlike news releases, a pitch generally is an exclusive offer sent to one particular journalist or blogger. If the story has relevance for several geographic areas, you can offer it as an exclusive in each area; that is, you can pitch the story to one recipient in each region. However, if the story has national significance, you should approach only one journalist or blogger. If the story has international significance, you could pitch it to one recipient in each nation.

The audience of a pitch is one individual. Ideally, you choose this journalist or blogger because you are familiar with her work and know that she’ll do a good job on the story. Don’t assume, however, that the journalist or blogger will write the story. The goal of your pitch is to persuade her to do so.

A recent survey by PR Newswire and *PRWeek* magazine showed that almost 90 percent of journalists and bloggers prefer to receive pitches via e-mail, as opposed to phone calls or social media such as Twitter or LinkedIn. Only 4 percent of journalists and bloggers prefer to receive pitches via phone calls. Only a third of journalists and bloggers say that multimedia messages improve their understanding of a pitch.

If you know a journalist or blogger well enough to pitch a story via a phone call, don’t call during times of day when you know she faces a deadline. Avoid phoning on heavy news days when common sense suggests that she may be particularly busy.

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- **Key to Success:** The subject line and first sentences of an e-mail pitch must hook the journalist or blogger. Those opening sections should clearly relate to an interesting, exclusive story.
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Format/Design

For e-mail pitches, follow the e-mail guidelines on pages 44–47.

Content and Organization

The subject line of an e-mail pitch must cut through the clutter of countless other e-mails received daily by your targeted journalist or blogger. The subject line must be clear and concise. It must show the recipient that the story idea fits the subject that she usually covers. Some public relations practitioners recommend calling the journalist by name in the subject line and including the word *Exclusive*—quite a challenge when subject lines must be concise. Such a subject line might read something like *For Jane Hardesty: Exclusive on Top Game Designer*. Such a subject line clearly shows the recipient that the e-mail message is not spam. However, the best way to ensure that a journalist or blogger will read your e-mails is to develop a good professional relationship with that individual.

Begin your e-mail message with a salutation, such as *Ms. Hardesty*, followed by a colon. (Addressing the recipient by name again shows that this is an individual message, not spam.)

Written pitches, like bad-news letters and sales letters, are unusual in that they don't use the first paragraph to tell the recipient the main point of the message.

Part 1 of 4: Start a Fascinating Story

Hook the journalist or blogger with the first paragraph. Write the first part of your e-mail as if it were the lead of the story that you hope the recipient will write. Journalists in particular are storytellers, so spark the recipient's attention by beginning an irresistible story.

Often, this first part will not mention your company or organization. That's because you want to direct the recipient's attention toward the story, not toward promoting your organization. Be concise but specific; journalists and bloggers love details. However, don't hesitate to tantalize the recipient by creating a brief sense of mystery. Make the recipient want to know the rest of the story. Avoid the overused "Did you know . . ." opening.

This first section generally is one brief paragraph. Don't make the recipient wait too long to discover the reason for the e-mail. Don't wait too long to make the pitch.

Part 2 of 4: State the Purpose of the Pitch

Tell the recipient exactly why you're writing—for example, "I think *California Business Today* should do a story on David Smith." (Smith, of course, was introduced in the first section.) If possible, praise a previous story that the recipient wrote; that story, you can explain, is why you think she's the perfect writer for a story on

David Smith. (Or, if the pitch is addressed to an editor, mention a recent story in that editor's newspaper section, magazine, newscast or website that was well done.) Give a little more information on David Smith. Continue to tell the story in this section.

This section usually is one paragraph.

Part 3 of 4: State the Terms of Your Offer

State that you're offering this idea exclusively to the recipient; that should help gain her interest. Then explain that, because of the exclusive offer, you'll need a reply by a specific date. In the same paragraph, offer help. List the best contacts from your organization and their phone numbers and e-mail addresses (be sure those contacts know you have included them). Offer to help set up interviews. Be diplomatic. Now that the recipient knows the idea, she can try to do the story without you. Don't provoke anger by suggesting that the story can be done only on your terms. Present yourself as an interested assistant.

This section usually is one paragraph.

Part 4 of 4: Describe What You Hope Will Happen Next

Mention that you'll call in a few days (name a day, if possible) to see if she is interested and to determine what help you might offer. If your pitch offers a truly good story idea, the recipient often will phone you before your deadline. End with a thank-you for the recipient's time and consideration.

Follow-Up Telephone Calls

Survey research shows that journalists and bloggers will accept follow-up calls about well-written, appropriate, exclusive pitches. (Recall that journalists and bloggers do *not* want follow-up calls about standard news releases; see page 49.) Often, your follow-up call will reach only voice mail. If so,

1. State your name and why you're calling: *This is Sharon Jones, and I'm following up on Wednesday's exclusive pitch about the new dinosaur fossils in Oregon.*
2. Concisely remind reporter of the top benefits/most compelling facts.
3. Remind reporter that this is an exclusive offer—but that you need a response by the specified deadline.
4. Repeat your name. Clearly state—and then repeat—your phone number.
5. Close with a thank you and the hope that you'll hear back soon.

If the journalist or blogger does answer the phone,

1. State your name and why you're calling: *Ms. Manning, this is Sharon Jones, and I'm following up on Wednesday's exclusive pitch about the new dinosaur fossils in Oregon.*

2. Then ask if journalist or blogger has one minute for you. If so, ask if she's had time to consider the story idea and if she has any questions.
3. If reporter resists, remind her that this is an exclusive offer.
4. If reporter still resists, thank her and politely conclude the call.

Telephone Pitches

As noted earlier, some journalists and bloggers will consider newsworthy story ideas over the phone. Often, telephone pitches work best when the recipient and the public relations practitioner know and trust each other. Some public relations practitioners, however, are willing to fight the odds and phone journalists or bloggers they don't know. Such calls are known as cold calls.

Like e-mail pitches and letter pitches, telephone pitches generally are exclusive offers. Successful phone pitches share a basic strategy:

1. Thoroughly understand the needs of the recipient and his or her particular medium (a radio show, for example). Be familiar with the medium's target audience and its recent content.
2. Know the daily deadline times of the journalist or blogger you plan to phone—and don't call at those times.
3. Come right to the point. Tell the journalist or blogger you're offering an exclusive story. Concisely explain why the story will interest the recipient's audience.
4. Be well-informed and ready to answer questions about the story.
5. Accept *no* for an answer. Don't damage your relationship with the journalist or blogger by insisting or by asking why she isn't interested.

TIPS

1. Don't rely on your e-mail program's spell-checker. Be sure to proofread the pitch yourself, and have others proofread it.
2. Sell the story, not your client or organization. The pitch's recipient has no interest in promoting your cause or your products, but she does want a good story. Keep the focus on information that will appeal to the recipient and her audience.
3. Play fair. Journalists and bloggers will never forget it if you hide bad news or if the story is old news already covered elsewhere.
4. Never waste a busy journalist's or blogger's time. The story you pitch must truly be a good story for the recipient's audience.
5. Be sure to include your direct phone number in the pitch.
6. Make that follow-up call, unless the recipient contacts you first. Do your best not to call a journalist or blogger on deadline. Find out what times the medium's daily deadlines are to avoid calling during that time.
7. Be ready to respond quickly if the journalist or blogger calls. Don't make her wait for interviews, photographs or any other needs.

PITCH (E-MAIL)

To: JaneQHardesty@CalBusinessToday.com

Subject: For Jane Hardesty: Exclusive on Top Game Designer

Ms. Hardesty:

David Smith hates moonlit nights. In the shadows of his bedroom, the ideas come too quickly—and some are so terrifying that they pin him to the bed. He tries to reach for the notepad, but his hand trembles. “Will I remember this in the morning?” he wonders, torn between hope and fear.

I think the story of David Smith would be ideal for *California Business Today* magazine. David is an award-winning game designer for MGS Interactive Games. Your recent series on California’s creative geniuses has been consistently excellent, particularly your recent story on playwright Cheryl Turcot. As the creative force behind such best-selling games as *Night Terror*, *Are You Sleeping?* and *StarkLight*, David Smith would be a natural for your creative geniuses series. His best ideas come in dreams so frightening that I sometimes don’t want to hear about them. You should see the ideas we reject (unless you’re prone to nightmares, we could discuss those).

We’re offering David’s story exclusively to *California Business Today*, so I would need to know fairly soon if you’re interested. I can assure you that David would cooperate fully with any writers or photographers you would assign. We also could help you arrange interviews with members of David’s staff or with anyone else who works for MGS Interactive Games. We even have copies of some of his bedside notes. Please just let me know how we might help. My direct phone line is 555-498-8871.

I will call Wednesday, Sept. 21, to see if I might be of any help on a possible story on David Smith. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Angie Perez

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