

Pitch Your Stories By Phone

To get a story in the media, you can't rely solely on the written word; you can't merely send a fax or a press release. You also must "pitch" your stories through phone calls to selected editors and reporters. As difficult as it may seem, "pitching" your stories in this way is necessary to getting media coverage. Phone calls humanize and personalize your stories, so if you have a newsworthy story you believe in, get on the phone and tell the media about it. Set aside time right after you have sent off your media alerts or press releases to make phone calls to those journalists you really must reach. Making "cold" calls to people you don't know can be difficult, but most reporters and editors don't and shouldn't mind getting them; they depend on and encourage citizens to phone in story tips. Here are some tips to make this task easier.

1. Call at the right time. If possible, call a week before your story will break to give reporters time to prepare for it and inform their editors. Call when the reporter is not likely to be "on deadline," usually early in the day the first few hours of their work day. Even then, always ask journalists if they have time to hear about your story. Don't ask if they got your release; even if they did they may have forgotten or misplaced it. Assume they know nothing about your story and say something like this:

"Hello I'm Joe Blow from the Citizens Energy Campaign, and I have a good story for you about our campaign to cut energy costs. Is this a good time to talk?"

2. Be Prepared: Know Whom You're Calling and Know Your Story Don't make anonymous calls to the media and try to explain your story to receptionists and desk clerks. Call directly or ask by name for the reporter or editor who should have your story. Then, be able to present it in 30 seconds. Tell the story the way the media might tell it to their audience. If necessary, write a script that quickly gets into the heart of the story. Emphasize the newsworthy elements--the conflict, the unprecedented angle ("It's the first..."), the significance of the story to the writer's readers and its connection to other issues in the headlines or news peg. You might say:

"Our group is fed up with the recent increase in utility costs granted by the state commerce commission. So we are starting a petition campaign to get lower costs. But this is not just another petition drive; this time we're starting at shopping mall in the communities of the utility commissioners. We want them to feel the heat from their own neighbors. We kick off the campaign Saturday at Ridgewood, near the home of commission chairman I. M. Connected."

3. Make Your Calls Near a Fax Machine. Even if you already mailed or faxed media alerts or press releases to reporters and editors, be prepared to fax additional copies after your pitch call. Journalists often lose or misplace your releases in the newsroom clutter, and it's easier to send a fresh copy when the story is on their minds.

4. Be Ready With Specifics. Have detailed examples, statistics, and stories to back up your pitch, and be prepared to give out numbers of people who can be interviewed to tell these stories. Know your issue so well that you can answer most questions then and there.

5. Be Persistent But Don't Be A Pest. Most journalists can not promise to do your story at the time of your call. When they say they will "look into it and do what they can," that's about all the commitment you can get. If you push further, you can alienate the journalists and drive them away from you and your stories.

6. Offer To Do More To Make Their Job Easier. Journalists often have too much to do in too little time; they are more likely to do stories that are easy for them to research and report; offer to do whatever you can to make this job easier.

7. Be Pleasant And Upbeat--Not Frantic, Moralistic, Or Nagging. Your story may have serious ramifications and be emotionally stirring, but don't let that infect your pitch. Journalists like enthusiasm, but they do not like sermons with their story ideas.