

Cultivating relationships with journalists

Ipsos MORI research found that relationships between organisations and journalists tend to be at their best when:

- ✓ organisations know what journalists want from a story
- ✓ journalists know what they can expect from your organisation
- ✓ relevant staff or groups take the time to meet journalists face-to-face
- ✓ Organisations are proactive – providing stories regularly, alerting journalists in advance of stories, phoning journalists to thank them for a particularly positive story or to discuss a negative one
- ✓ organisations are honest and admit when they've made a mistake.

Cultivating relationships with relevant journalists would greatly benefit WDM groups in terms of time management, a broader spread and reach of stories and a greater sophistication in the editorial coverage.

Interestingly, what isn't being acknowledged is that WDM's entry point to cultivate relationships with journalists is higher now than with many other organisations. This is due to the recession, public sector cuts, changes in people's lifestyles, increasing economic discrimination of particular groups in society such as women and ethnic minorities and others living on the margins of poverty. This continuing window of opportunity needs to be tested and capitalised on before it slowly closes.

What next?

- Always contact a named person. Let them know that you read/watch/listen to their work (so, as previously mentioned, do your research).
- If you want to contact more than one person on the same publication/show (news/features editor, commissioning editor, section editor, producer, researcher), contact them separately as their needs are usually different.
- Find out what type of stories they are looking for.
- Establish when their deadlines are for articles and press releases.
- Be aware of the publication/show's target audience.
- Cultivate relationships with 'relevant' journalists in your specialist areas (and this includes freelance journalists). Host roundtable meetings with journalists from specific sectors or under particular research/policy heading such as health, home affairs, politics, etc.
- Write articles and letters for publication.
- Get interviewed! You are experts in your fields.
- Pitch ideas – including to independent production companies who make over 50 percent of TV programmes.
- Invite journalists to your events. Host a roundtable event. They will come if offered an 'insight' and 'advance notice' of something 'new'.
- Email is the most productive way to contact all journalists. Avoid attachments where possible; put information in body of the email.

- When you have an idea, email a short briefing, possible contacts and your contact details. ALWAYS follow up within two days with a telephone call.
- Find journalists' contact details especially their email address, on the publication's website - or ring and ask.
- Have a named person in your group to deal with the press.
- Keep a media file on what type of responses you received and outcomes.

Pitching your idea - Part I (internal considerations)

With so many organisations competing for the media's attention it is important to identify who the key journalists are, what they want and how they want it. This knowledge will 'empower' you.

One way is through research such as reading/watching/listening to the work of the relevant journalists who cover the issues that are pertinent to you, your group and your target audience.

It is advisable to approach those who write and/or broadcast about your concerns such as poverty, in a fair and accurate way. Another is contacting them directly via email and/or by telephone with an idea (i.e. pitch), or by way of introduction. You can use the information you have gathered on their work to 'engage' them, in the first instance. For example, 'I like how well you cover issues such as financial inequality and your work seems well researched. I believe that WDM can facilitate you with future stories in the areas of [you fill in the gap] and can supply people for interview or provide additional information. Here are my contact details.'

Internally - how to shape and 'pitch' your messages

Part I

Topics of interest

What topics can you, or do you want to talk about? Make a specific and tailored list of topics you can speak, write and/or be interviewed on. Start with your main headings (i.e. policy or poverty) and break it down into possible topics to reach your target audience (i.e. who is disproportionately affected in your area? *How* does it impact on them? *Why*? What will make a difference at a grassroots level?). This will enable you to decide which media is best for you and how best to 'pitch' your story.

Example

Main heading – Poverty

Topics of interest

- ✓ Education
- ✓ Social class
- ✓ Politics
- ✓ Health
- ✓ BME communities
- ✓ Housing
- ✓ Welfare/benefits
- ✓ Particular campaign
- ✓ Rural affairs
- ✓ Gender
- ✓ Age
- ✓ Environment
- ✓ Big business

Why should I write about this?

You are very likely to be asked this question by a journalist when you approach them to write about something you think is both important and relevant to their readers. As with your core messages, you need to be prepared with your 'pitch'.

Is it newsworthy?

Five key factors are what are considered to decide if a story is newsworthy. When an editor needs to decide whether to run with a particular story, s/he will ask their journalist how well the story meets each of these criteria. Normally, a story should perform well in at least two of these categories.

- Timing
- Significance
- Proximity
- Prominence
- Human interest

Five key factors (summary)

Timing

Is the story topical?

Topics which are current are good news. Readers and viewers are used to receiving the latest updates, and there is so much news saturation that old news, particularly with the growth of online media, can be quickly discarded.

Significance

How many people are affected?

The number of people affected (or potentially affected) by the story is important. A protest march against G20 in London will garner attention as opposed to ten people in a small village protesting on the same issue. If you can show that despite there being ten people protesting, each person represents 100 people who are likely to be affected, that would be news.

Proximity

Where is it happening?

Stories that happen close to us have more significance. The closer the story is to home (domestically), the more newsworthy it is and of interest it will be. For someone living in USA, the closure of a local school will have little news value to them.

Prominence

Is there anyone famous or influential involved?

Famous people, or a well regarded public figure locally, will attract more coverage just because they are well known. If you get the flu it won't be a story, but if the Queen or Simon Cowell does, then it is.

Human Interest

Where are the people?

Stories increasingly rely on 'people' and their experiences to illustrate policies, causes, research or statistics. Human interest stories appeal to emotion and enable people to quickly connect and relate to an issue or cause. When you focus on human interest, the stories are less likely to date as quickly. Human interest stories need not affect a large number of people, and it may not matter where in the world the story takes place (for example the trapped Chilean miners). In this respect these stories often disregard the main rules of newsworthiness.

Newsworthiness Exercise

This exercise is to help you identify if your idea clear and to see what its main selling points are. More importantly, it will let you know if you have a story to pursue.

One

Come up with an idea/story that you want to promote

Two

What is the 'angle'? The angle is the 'point or theme of a news or feature story'. The angle is found in the lead of the story. For example, just saying that the story is about poverty is not enough. You have to root your idea. To do this, break it down to a locality, identify a particular group who will be affected (older people), identify how they will or could be affected and then identify 'why' we need to read/hear about it. If it is an issue/cause/campaign, then it is about why you need to raise the profile of the cause, the primary aims and what makes the issue/cause/campaign (and your part in it) unique.

Three

Select two categories from the **Five Key Factors** list above that your story contains. For example proximity (it is a local story) and human interest (who will be affected).

Four

Which media outlet(s) would the story be relevant for and why? Local newspaper? BBC community news online? Community Care magazine? ThirdSector magazine? A mixture of all of them?

Five

In three minutes, verbally 'pitch' your idea to your group, making sure that you say what the story and 'angle' is, who it is targeted at, the two factors that make it newsworthy and the media outlets who would be interested in it.

One person needs to keep time. Other group members need to note whether the idea is clear, whether it is newsworthy according to the 'Five Factors' chosen and if the media outlets are suitable to reach the target audience. For example, the idea may be more 'visual' and so more suited to TV such as a demonstration on the grounds of a stately home. Also determine if it is something you would read or listen to. Also make constructive suggestions that will strengthen the story.

Pitching your ideas- Part II (external considerations)

Before you approach a journalist with an idea or 'pitch' there needs to be (internally) a clear purpose/goal behind why you want it published (**as noted in Part I**). The notes **below** will help guide you to that point in more detail, and will help you to determine whether an idea has any substance to pursue further. This is why it is best to devise the 'pitch' before sending out a fully written article speculatively (aka 'on spec').

Preparation

Select a topical idea

- Refer to your topics of interest list.
- Use your forward planning calendar.
- Tie it in to the relevant top line policy and news agendas such as mental health, education, redundancy, youth crime, etc.
- Link it to a major running story (i.e. unemployment, recession, health, poverty), or something that is controversial or provocative.

Identify a clear theme (angle)

- Are there any particular research trends you are aware of (i.e. particular groups who are disproportionately affected by poverty in your area).
- Is it thematically about equality, poorer health outcomes, social justice, financial exclusion?

What are you trying to say?

- Be clear about why you are writing an article and what you want it to say.
- Have a clear professional definition of what you mean by anything that may appear as jargon. This is essential to gauge how to pitch the idea and develop a range of stories.

Who do you want to hear it?

- Are you aiming to primarily reach policymakers, older people, community groups, etc?
- Will it also reach your secondary target audience?

What do you want the article/broadcast to do for WDM?

- Raise its profile generally?
- Attract more funding?
- Showcase your individual/unique approach to economic justice?
- Flag up a particular piece of project/research work?
- Launch a new service/campaign?
- Demystify/break down barriers in thinking towards poverty, social justice and the environment?

Where is the human interest?

- What is the possible or definite impact and on whom?
- Who are you writing about? The idea will need a clear human as well as social or political context.

Where is the 'evidence'?

- If you don't have a human interest element you will definitely need to have some evidence-based information to reinforce your story or line of argument/exploration.

Drafting a written pitch to be emailed for consideration

- Address email to a named person (commissioning editor, researcher, producer or news/features editor).
- Provide a short introduction as to who you are and why you are targeting them and their show/newspaper section.
- Come up with a snappy headline which explains your story in a nutshell.
- Explain the story in one paragraph (no more than three sentences).

- Explain **why** it is relevant to the publication/show's readers/listeners including its topicality.
- How you visualise the piece/segment and/or its format (i.e. how would you approach the story, or recommend the journalist approach it). For example, will there be any case studies or fact boxes.
- Provide your contact details and suggest a follow up (i.e. you will be in touch in a few days to discuss it further).
- The pitch shouldn't be more than one page of A4 (attachment) or four/five paragraphs (within body of an email).
- You can also convey this information directly to the journalist, in a shortened form, over the phone. What you will often find is that they ask you email them the idea, which you will be able to do very quickly as it has already been completed.

Being commissioned to write articles

It is cost effective to write articles yourselves, where possible. It also gives you more control over the material and reinforces your organisation's brand identity.

Trade magazines and specialist sections in national newspapers like to show that they are in touch with their 'target audience' by having access to a wealth of experts in their field. They provide added value. Some specialist publications (i.e. Community Care) have contributors' guidelines so you are not writing out of context. Many pay a fee that goes to your organisation or group.

Usually the pieces you write will be first person-led (i.e. your experience of setting up a project, securing funding, launching a campaign), a comment piece (about working with young people or the value of financial inclusion), a jointly written piece with a colleague or partnership agency, or the findings of a piece of research that you have completed or commissioned.

Tip

Always make sure you receive your commission from a magazine or newspaper in writing. If it is a verbal commission, then email the commissioning editor (and cc it to yourself), listing what was discussed and verbally agreed. Print off and keep a copy to save any confusion later.

You must be clear about the deadline date, word length, angle (what the piece is about), format it is to be delivered in (word document), whether it is to be faxed or emailed and to where, when it will be published and how you should invoice for payment (if relevant).