

## Sell the News: Pitch a Plan A Story to a Reporter

Perhaps you have been in this situation: You have a great idea for a news story — but the prospect of convincing a reporter to cover it is daunting. The following tips will help you to identify opportunities for pitching the Plan A campaign, select a pitching target, develop and deliver a pitch, and follow up successfully.

**MAKE SURE THE STORY IS NEWSWORTHY.** Reporters are busy, but they are always looking for a new or fresh angle on an existing issue. Reporters do not want to cover the same old story that everyone else is covering or that they themselves have already covered unless there's a new development. It's a good idea to track the work of the reporter you are targeting, gauge his or her interests, and note the kinds of stories he or she has done recently. Think creatively about ways to present your story.

**KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.** Delivering your pitch to the right person enhances your chances for success. Identifying that person depends on the medium, as well as the kind of story you are pitching. Find out if you know someone with connections to any of the reporters just in case you can find a personal “way in.”

- ▶ **Print Media.** Anglo-Jewish newspapers and other small community newspapers tend to have small staffs. The best person to receive your pitch is likely the news or features editor. At larger papers, you will want to find the reporter covering the appropriate beat for your story, or even consider a columnist. For Plan A, it might be someone covering health, education (for sex ed), or women's issues. Again, the best approach is to read the paper and track the coverage — after a few days or weeks, it will be easy to recognize who covers what. Beyond a single pitch or story, it's a good idea to know the reporters who tend to cover similar issues so that you can build a relationship with them.
- ▶ **Radio.** Consider pursuing news coverage at a National Public Radio affiliate or local news/talk station. For a public radio station, you may want to target a specific reporter who covers a beat related to reproductive health or women's issues. Some stations may have an assignment editor, and you can always go to the news editor. If there is a particular show that you want to target, direct your pitch to the show's producer. Be sure to listen to the program to which you are pitching beforehand, in order to get a good sense of the kinds of stories that are likely to be covered.

Daytime news coverage on music radio stations tends to be minimal. If you have a breaking story, you can pitch to the news director to include it in the station's regular news briefs. Keep in mind that many stations have weekend or late-night public affairs shows that explore news and community issues. These shows, generally produced and/or hosted by the news or public affairs director, are good targets to pitch an in-depth look at your issue.

- ▶ **Television.** Television stations are interested in breaking news stories with strong visual angles. Sometimes they also air investigative features that expose injustice or take a close look at community issues — so your work on Plan A could be a nice fit. If you know that news is going to break sometime soon, pitch to the futures editor. (Providing the media with advance notice almost always increases your chance of getting coverage.) If your story is already breaking news, pitch to the assignment editor. For a feature story that doesn't concern breaking news, identify the most appropriate reporter or producer by paying attention to the beats they cover. Then you can make contacts directly.

**CRAFT A CREATIVE PITCH.** Reporters are constantly besieged by phone calls, emails, and faxes from people trying to convince them to write stories. You need to stand out from the crowd. This means deciding on the best means of contact — usually email or phone — and developing a pitch that is attention-grabbing and brief.

- ▶ **Phone.** If you're going to pitch by phone, plan what you will say in advance. Most reporters will give you 15 seconds — maybe 30 — to make your case. Make those seconds count. Avoid overwhelming them with jargon. Use a striking fact, or mention the name of a prominent person available for an interview. If they're interested, they'll keep listening.
- ▶ **Email.** The same rules apply for an email pitch — except that a reporter can delete it without ever reading it. Create an interesting subject line and make sure the first few sentences of your email are attention-grabbing. Be short and sweet — one to three brief paragraphs will do it. Let the reporter know that you will call to follow up. Do not leave it up to a reporter to contact you.

Avoid sending documents as attachments. Many email accounts are set up to block emails with attachments. Even if the messages do get through, many journalists will not open attachments from unknown email addresses. Try to include anything that you need to communicate in the body of the email. If you are trying to share a lengthy document with a reporter, post the document online and provide the reporter with a web address to view the piece or fax it to them.

**PLAN A STRONG DELIVERY.** Whether you are pitching to the reporter by phone, or following up on your email pitch, consider your timing. Do not call a reporter in the late afternoon when he or she is likely to be on deadline. If you reach a reporter who sounds harried, ask when would be a better time to call back. Plan and practice your pitch and deliver it with confidence — but don't read it. Ask if the reporter is interested and offer to share additional information. A reporter will rarely agree to do a story

during your first call, so your goal should be to start the conversation. Be prepared to leave a brief, to-the-point voicemail (30 seconds or less) if you do not reach a live person.

**FOLLOW UP — BUT DON'T PESTER.** If you've spoken to a reporter, shared additional resources, and haven't heard anything, give a call or send a follow-up email. Ask the reporter if he or she is going to do the story or if anything else is needed to help reach a decision. Even if your pitch is rejected, ask if you can stay in touch as things develop. Your efforts now may pay dividends later. If your pitch is accepted, offer to help in any way that you can (identifying spokespeople, providing background information, etc.). After the story runs, send an email or note of thanks.