

FIVE TOP TIPS FOR PITCHING TO THE MEDIA

How to get your story to the
right journalist



INDEPENDENT

International
Business
Times

MONEYWEEK

The UK's best-selling financial magazine

TimeOut

NME

tuff



ShortList



BBC
NEWS



SUMMARY

Pitching to journalists is the distinctive and enduring PR and media relations challenge. Planning, poise and purpose can ensure a successful pitch but every journalist and every media brand is different. The best pitches – with the best chance of success – acknowledge this.

Cision's regular media briefing events, where journalists are quizzed on what their personal dos and don'ts are, highlight what it takes to craft a successful pitch. This white paper brings together the five most essential pitching tips from the events we've been running over the last 18 months.

For information on our current UK event programme, please go to www.gorkana.com/events.

CONTENTS

- Pitching tip 1: Provide access **02**
- Pitching tip 2: Getting in contact **04**
- Pitching tip 3: Build lasting relationships **06**
- Pitching tip 4: Know what exclusivity means **08**
- Pitching tip 5: Have the right material on hand **10**
- Conclusion **12**



Ian Allison, senior fintech correspondent, James Billington, technology editor and John Crowley, editor-in-chief of the International Business Times UK.

1. PROVIDE ACCESS

The challenge for journalists:

“Good access to the hard-to-reach always makes for the strongest content,” is one editorial mantra.

For many journalists, PRs are the gateway to “hard to reach” people or places, whether it’s a top celebrity, a FTSE 100 CEO or an exclusive photo shoot around a new product.

How PRs can provide the solution:



The **International Business Times**’ senior fintech correspondent, **Ian Allison**, creates almost all of his content through meeting with, and interviewing, significant people from the world of tech. “Access is key!” he says. “The human angle of a story will often be the most interesting part. How was [a product] made? Who was the person that made it? What’s their story?”

Getting access to the talent at the heart of a story, whether by telephone or a face-to-face interview, is crucial says **Digital Spy**’s editor-in-chief, **Julian Linley**. “I also think there is still a disproportionate amount of interview time assigned to print,” he says. “Online can get stuff done and up in five minutes, while magazines could take a month.”

Becky Lucas, **GQ** engagement manager (now insight and strategy editor), adds: “A core bit of GQ’s identity is that we can get the best access to talent,

the best access at events, we can get backstage. What helps us cut through the competition is that we'll get to the biggest boxer (Anthony Joshua) in the world at the right time, and he's a friend of ours, and he's on the cover."

For news-driven content, CEOs of major companies are especially of interest. **BBC business** presenter **Dominic O'Connell** cites Sir Martin Sorrell as a good example for Radio 4's Today: "He understands the value of the programme and its audience, and is, therefore, accessible to the audience."

"If you can bring in the CEO of an interesting firm to meet us for coffee or lunch, then that's going to be very valuable," adds the **Wall Street Journal Europe's** EMEA editor, **Thorold Barker**. "If you have clients who you know will have an interesting story to tell, get them in before the story is there."

Dan Bird, account manager at Weber Shandwick, says - having attended a media briefing with the Channel 5 news team: "Its approach to news reporting is refreshing. Putting a diverse range of real people at the heart of every story is clearly an effective way to connect with its audience. "As global stories like Trump and Brexit continue to dominate headlines, focussing on the implications for ordinary lives will be both important and powerful."

MoneyWeek editor-in-chief and **Financial Times** columnist **Merryn Somerset Webb** says the key is to help journalists find a different way of looking at things: "It's new ideas, ways to connect the dots of all the news stories and the investment stories around us, to come up with a really good idea for our readers that is different to the ideas that you'll see elsewhere."



Top Tip:

Always make sure key stats, times, dates and locations are available up front when pitching, says **Time Out's** features editor (now editor) **Gail Tolley**. Images are also important - a link to a dropbox can be very useful.

2. GETTING IN CONTACT

The challenge for journalists:

One of the most common PR tips you'll hear is that you should sell a story to a journalist like you would to a friend down the pub but journalists, these days, are most often found at their desks competing to produce up-to-the-minute stories in an incredibly competitive market.

The PR pitch needs to be brief, relevant and, above all, to the point. "There's nothing worse than having a 15 minute preamble before you get to the 'can you get this in the paper for me?' conversation," says broadcaster and **The Sun's** former deputy editor, **Gordon Smart**.

How PRs can provide the solution:



Remember, times have changed when it comes to how national titles work, according to **The Independent** editor **Christian Broughton**: "Classically, mornings were great times to catch somebody for national newspapers, because they were on afternoon deadlines," he explains "Now it's the other way round - the mornings are really tight. You're more likely to catch someone with a bit of time towards the end of the afternoon."



Managing director, digital, at ESI Media, Zach Leonard (left) and editor Christian Broughton (centre) talk to Philip Smith about *The Independent's* move to digital-only media.

Email is the preferred way to be contacted for the majority of journalists. If a PR's pitch via email doesn't work, it's really unlikely to work by phone, advises **i's** digital editor, **Felicity Morse**.

"Do your research, find the right person and be relevant when pitching," adds **CQ's** online editor, **Conrad Quilty-Harper**. The subject line should tell a journalist exactly what it is that's being pitched to them otherwise they're unlikely to read on.

"You don't need to bother with small talk," says **Time Out's** features editor, **Gail Tolley**. When you email your idea over, make sure you get straight to the point.

James Longman, who spoke at a media briefing as **BBC News** correspondent and is now in ABC News London Bureau, says: "Email me, don't phone me – and make sure that it feels like something which is tailored for me. You can find my email on my Twitter account. You don't need to use generic email addresses."

He continues: "Make sure that you're sending me something which is about a real human, rather than statistics or an expert who's said something."

Ian Allison, **International Business Times** senior fintech correspondent, says: "I'm always happy to field phone calls. I quite like talking to PRs about stuff, because I find out things that are happening that maybe I haven't looked at."

He adds: "Stuff that's very specific to me – which is blockchain, obviously, and that kind of stuff – I'm not going to prioritise necessarily, but I am going to look at in detail."



Top Tip:

"Don't make your pitch too gimmicky and be sure to send it to the person who is covering the issues you're trying to hit," says **BuzzFeed's** head of buzz **Tabatha Leggett**.



Tom Cheal (left) explains LBC's agenda to PRs at a recent briefing

3. BUILD LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

The challenge for journalists:

Journalists receive hundreds of emails a day. Just like in any other profession, they will be far more likely to read and reply to the ones from people they already know personally or have successfully worked with beforehand. They need to have faith in what you are promising to deliver.

Having an established relationship with a journalist you're planning to pitch to will not only improve your chances of being noticed on a busy day, but will build trust around the brand you represent and, more importantly for the longer term, the PR team or agency you work for.

How PRs can provide the solution:

There is no magic formula about what's going to work when it comes to building a strong relationship with PRs, says **Simon Hamer**, business editor for **BBC Radio 4's** Today programme: "The key is tone."

"An email from somebody who pretends they know me when they don't. That always drives me nuts," warns **The Sun's** travel editor, **Lisa Minot**. "That, or something that says 'Dear editor of the Sunday Mirror'."



So much of a successful working relationship with PRs comes down to trust, according to **Tom Cheal**, deputy managing editor at **LBC**. "We're really looking to establish good relationships and see that there's always been an appreciation from PRs for what we do and how we approach stories," he says "that always opens a door to getting people on air."

Andrew Wrobel, head of editorial at **Emerging Europe**, believes strong relationships between PRs and the press are necessary and mutually beneficial. “Both journalists and PRs have their own objectives and responsibilities,” he explains. “If I am asked to send quotes back for approval, I do that. In return I can be sure the person on the other side will, for example, help me find an interesting interviewee when needed.

For **Phil Hilton**, **Shortlist Media**’s editorial director, the perfect PR/ journalist situation is when he talks to someone who has already gained his trust.

He says: “Good PRs come to you specifically for your title, they’re not going to lots of other titles with the same thing, and they don’t approach when their idea is not appropriate.”

He adds: “The trick is to say anything that seems informal and send something that looks like it’s crafted just for me.”

Conversely, there’s a list of don’ts which PRs should not do when trying to establish a relationship with key contacts.

As **Vanessa Richmond**, **Ideal Home**’s editor, says: “A really persistent PR recently hassled me about a particular brand of bed linen and towels. I looked up the towels online and they were like £120! Who in their right mind would spend that? I mean, I wouldn’t. So it’s not going to go in the magazine.”



Top Tip:

“Be confident when pitching,” recommends **Huffington Post**’s editor-in-chief (now head of digital at ITV News) **Stephen Hull**. “Know that you’ve got something useful for us, keep respect and don’t plead for our help. We need you as much as you need us!”

4. KNOW WHAT “EXCLUSIVITY” MEANS

The challenge for journalists:

The word “exclusivity” takes on different meanings for different titles. For some, it is a story that will only appear on their pages and nowhere else. For others, it’s about getting the story first – whether it’s a day, an hour or even a few minutes before their competitors.

PRs need to understand what this term means to the title they are pitching to before getting in touch. Much of this comes down to honesty. Journalists know you want to get your story into as many titles as possible, and often will try to come to a compromise with what you’re selling (if it’s strong enough). But, woe betide the PR who tries to pull a fast one.

How PRs can provide the solution:



CNBC International’s news editor, **Katrina Bishop**, explains its rules on exclusivity: “If, for whatever reason, you won’t give us the first interview, then unfortunately we will have to turn you down.”

“There’s no sense of animosity there and we usually use that as a springboard for when we can next speak. But, if you want the person on CNBC that day, it has to be a first.”

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A trio of CNBC International’s editorial team at a media briefing event - (left to right) social media editor Cristy Garratt, digital managing editor Phillip Tutt and news editor Katrina Bishop

PRs need to be honest and consistent when it comes to where a story has been sent to, says **Investment Week's** group editorial director, **Lawrence Gosling**: "I have no problem if I'm told a story has been offered elsewhere first – it's honest. But if I'm told it's been offered to us first then find it has appeared elsewhere, for me that's a lack of integrity."

For titles like **GQ**, exclusivity is the watchword, according to **Conrad Quilty-Harper**, online editor. It can often be the difference between an editorial team saying yes or no to a pitch. He explains: "If we can get our hands on a new album or artist video 24 hours before our competitors, there's a better chance we'll say yes to covering them."

Strictly exclusive stories won't always be necessary, says **Sophie Warburton**, style editor at **The Daily Telegraph**. "But if it's not exclusive, we'd need to have a different type of access, different peg and different imagery."

Gail Tolley, **Time Out's** features editor (now editor), continues: "Exclusivity is pretty important to us. I think it depends on the topic. We've had huge success in video in being first at places, whether that's a bar which is also a ball pit, it's really popular if we can get in first. I think our readers really love that."

James Longman, **BBC News** correspondent (now at **ABC News**), says: "I won't react to an email which I feel has gone to thousands of other journalists, even journalists inside the BBC. The Victoria Derbyshire programme cares about real stories and want to story to be exclusive."

Becky Lucas, **GQ** engagement manager, adds: "It helps make the decision a lot of the time on whether we're going to run something or not. If you can give us exclusivity on a video clip for 24 hours, we may run it. If you can give us exclusivity to the new album, we'll write a piece on that person – which we did for Rag'n'Bone Man."

Sarah Raphael, **Refinery29's** editorial director, says: "Being able to present a different angle, to show the audience a side of a story they don't already know, to be the first to present a story is really important. As a publisher, there's so much competition. And, if you're able to either be the first, or to say something that people haven't heard before, that puts you in a really good position."



Top tip:

"If you've given the same quotes, photos, stories, book excerpt or FB Live interview to a bunch of other people, it's just not important to us anymore," says **Good Housekeeping's** site director **Kristine Brabson**. "Try to think about how to differentiate your pitch."

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Training in an old prison cell anyone?! We're at
@HotelCourthouse 4 today's briefing w. @Drapers
#GorkanaDrapers https://t.co/SUzAcVol7

Courthouse Hotel

Keely Stocker, editor of Drapers, answering questions about the B2B fashion title's audience and content

5. BE AT THE READY WITH STATS, COMMENT & VISUALS

The challenge for journalists:

As you know, journalists have very little time on their hands. If they do reply to your pitch, they're likely to have questions. "Can you give us some stats to backup your idea?"; "Is your CEO available to answer my questions?"; "We'll need some high-res images featuring X, if this is going to work."

Journalists need PRs to be ready to respond with that they need at a moment's notice, especially for journalists working to a daily deadline. Saying your CEO is not available until later or that images will be ready tomorrow could be the difference between a story making it onto a page and it being spiked.

How PRs can provide the solution:

Design and visually interesting material is of high priority and can make a difference as to whether a title picks up a story, says the **New Statesman's** special projects editor, **Will Dunn** (former editor of **Stuff**): "For print magazines, it's so useful to have big high-resolution images and a lot of stuff gets into print because we have the pictures on time and designers can spend more time on it."

A vital issue for broadcast journalists will be the availability of spokespeople and/or filming opportunities on a particular story, says **Jim Grice**, head of news at **London Live**. These are the factors that will be used to decide how

and if a story is covered. He explains: “We work in a visual medium, so will need to see something additional to help tell a story, whether it’s an interviewee or a location where we can film.”



Titles often want to be reactive to current news, events and things happening in the industry they write about, according to **Drapers** editor **Keely Stocker**. “PRs who pitch in interesting topic ideas that are being discussed by readers should give examples,” she says “show evidence of a trend and be willing to hand over contacts/provide guests who will talk on a theme.”

Many journalists, like **What Car?**'s editorial director, **Jim Holder**, will look for a roster of experts to back up a story, whether it’s a lawyer who is a specialist in a specific sector, an advice bureau, or an expert who can talk about disaster stories.

Ideal Home prides itself on delivering top quality picture content. Its readers want great photos, design ideas and a window into other people’s homes. As such, the magazine only accepts submissions that come with great imagery.

“This all stems from the redesign that we did last year,” says associate editor Ginevra Benedetti. “The things we learned from all the readership groups we spoke to were that the things they wanted us to strip back on the lifestyle content. They just wanted more pictures.”

She concludes: “You could have the most amazing product ever. But unless the photography is good, we can’t feature it.”



Top tip:

Always make sure key stats, times, dates and locations are up front when pitching, says **Time Out**'s features editor (now editor), **Gail Tolley**. “Images are also important – a link to a dropbox is very useful.”

CONCLUSION

Individual journalists work differently and the demands of their different publications – from print to online – ensure they have different views about what makes great stories for them. However, as this white paper shows, there are key themes and tips for PRs and communicators to be aware of when pitching to the media.

Some are enduring truths – such as the value of lasting relationships – and some have evolved – like the assets needed to accompany a press release – as the media continues to change in the 21st Century.

One thing is certain: however the media progresses, the essential factors which affect how you pitch a story will remain in place. Media will remain competitive, journalists will continue to be time-poor and the need for great stories will endure.

SOURCES

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