Landing the Perfect Pitch

Six Guerilla Media Relations Tips

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Please.

Understand Your Target Medium

This may be oversimplifying things, but this is critically important to understand if you want to successfully pitch a journalist: Television needs pictures; radio needs sound.

"Yeah, yeah," you say, "My CEO has a head and he can talk, so there! Pictures and sound!" Nope, doesn't cut it. It's boring.

On television, the best reporting is when journalists can *visually* explain how something works. Someone just talking about how it works is called Radio. So if you want your product to be on television, tell the reporter what visuals you can offer. And "Nifty shots of our product box" don't cut it. Neither do still photographs.

Here's an example: A printer manufacturer some years ago had unveiled a new advance in inkjet printing that could one day put a combination scanner/printer on anything from a cellphone to your watch. I was interested right away because this was somewhat revolutionary – it's new, not being done anywhere else, and had a fun Jetsons-esque feel to it. But the only visuals the company could offer was their p.r. manager (not even a company executive!) in talking-head mode.

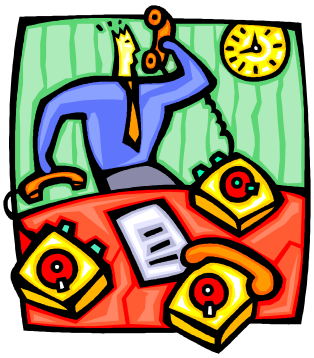
So I said no. Which I didn't want to, because I really wanted to cover the story, except it just would not have passed the bar of making it easy for people to understand visually. A couple of weeks later, they came back with a cardboard model that visually demonstrated how their inkjets worked and how they were able to shrink it down. The story ran nationally a week later. I understand their web site was down for a couple of hours from the traffic.

Same goes for radio. I rarely cover a story that doesn't involve sound. Even a simple story like when I interviewed Darren for a piece about the Mozilla community included sound of the geek dinner, people talking, keyboards typing, and so on. A story I did recently on e-publishing had the sound of an author reading to a small crowd and the beeping of her PDA.

I hope you're noticing that you don't need to blow your budget to come up with visuals (for TV) and sound (for radio). In fact, you often don't even need to come up with the actual sound at all, just tell us what sound is available – if the story is compelling enough, I'm more than happy to go and record the sound myself. But you do need to tell us *in your pitch* how you think sound and visuals can play a role.

One last thing: A minor point, but a sticky one for some journalists. Don't confuse "the press" with "the media." "Press" refers to the print medium (newspapers and magazines) only – i.e. a printing press. "Media" is a much more inclusive and welcome term, especially among electronic journalists. I know a couple of TV producers who will throw a news release in the garbage without reading it if it's called a Press Release. "Hmph," they'll mutter to nobody in particularly, "I guess it's not for us." I'm not quite that harsh, but many are, so best to use News Release or Media Release.

Pitch to the Best Person



If you want to see your company get media attention, the *least*-effective thing you can do is call up the newsroom and ask to speak to "a reporter." Rather, you should ask to speak to a specific reporter by name and, more importantly, the *right* reporter or columnist. Most reporters specialize in certain areas (called "beats"): business, rural issues, city hall,

technology, and so on. Trying to pitch the financial columnist on your company's fascinating new tractor equipment won't work.

I get at least 40 or 50 news releases a week from companies who clearly believe I'm the business reporter – at least, that's what I assume, because they're sending me their quarterly financials. I have given up replying to say "I'm the technology guy, not the business guy"; now, I just hit delete. A simple visit to my column's web site will show that I never, ever, cover business developments like new hires, awards a company has won (zzzzzzzz), or how you met your sales targets for the year.

How do you know who is the right person to pitch? Listen to the station. Watch their newscasts. Read several issues of their publication. In short order, you'll figure out what each reporter covers and what they consider interesting.

Part of this also means pitching to the right location. Many Americans seem to believe that I work in Toronto (I don't; I work in Vancouver). I think this is because the CBC's "head office" is in Toronto, so everyone must be there. So they send me invitations to attend events near Bloor Street, then call afterwards to ask why I didn't show up.

Pitch a real story.

Okay, let's talk about stories. Not every thing your company does is a story. To you, perhaps it is, but remember that you have limitless space on your web site and near-limitless budget for your glossy annual report.

On *The National*, we have 21 minutes. That's it. On my radio columns, I get three minutes once a *week*.

Thus, the fact that you might be "the leaders in innovative products and services" is all very nice and I'm sure you are, but that's not a story, it's a positioning statement.

If you (as many companies and p.r. firms, sadly, do) try to pitch me weekly on fairly boring and non-newsworthy stories, over time I'll learn that you're simply not a reliable source for a good story. Sure, you're just doing your job, but remember that you're doing a disservice to that job if you bring me so many mediocre pitches that in time I simply tune you out.

There are a couple of p.r. people whose calls I always take. I usually don't hear from that often, but when I do I know it's because they've given their story its own litmus test before pitching it to me. They've got some ideas for interesting visuals, it's a revolutionary technology, and the topic is something that most people watching or listening will "get."

Real stories have two key components:

1. First, they are **timely:** If I agree to do a piece on your product, I'll want it to run the day it launches or, even better, just before it does, so I have a bit of a scoop (the media is a competitive business, after all). This may require you to give me details before they're public, and ask me to hold the story under embargo. Which I will.

2. Second, they are **interesting to my mom:** My mom is reasonably tech-savvy and has an engaging curiosity. But honestly, she couldn't give a rats-ass about how you've reduced latency on Cisco switches using a new IPsec standard. In other words, how will your story actually affect the day-to-day lives of the average Canadian? If it won't, don't pitch it. For instance, I rarely cover new handset releases from the cell phone companies – mostly because they're not new or interesting. I cover *revolutionary* applications of *new* technologies, not *evolutionary* upgrades in *existing* technologies. The fact that your company's cameraphone now does 1.5 megapixels instead of last year's 1.2 megapixels is simply not a compelling story to my viewers. On the other hand, if it's the first to incorporate live videoblogging and instant direct-to-web video uploading, well now you have my attention.

Finally, it's good to understand what happens behind the scenes once you've piqued a reporter's interest – they now have to pitch your idea too! Each morning (for a daily show), all the reporters gather for a story meeting where they pitch the stories they think are interesting to the other reporters, editors, and producers. So if you want to get on air, arm the reporter with some tools to make *their* pitch easier. If they don't fully understand why your product or service is important to the average consumer, what problem it will solve for them, etc., your idea will never make it past that story meeting.

A last bonus tip: Most story meetings happen around 10 AM for daily shows, which gives reporters only an hour or so to go through the previous day's emails, faxes, pitches, ideas of their own, etc. and decide what to take to the story meeting. If you know the reporter and genuinely believe you have a story that's timely, revolutionary, and you can explain it in 15 seconds or less (seriously), giving them a call around 9:15 or 9:30 is probably a good time. But – and this is a big but – be absolutely sure you don't waste this on a story even the slightest bit unsure about. That hour is the most valuable time in the reporter's day, so if you miss, don't expect them to take your call that hour in the future.

Availability Ailments

This one might sound like a no-brainer, but it's stunning how hard some companies make it to reach a spokesperson. There are two most common ailments:

Non-Reachus Flackus. Reporters use the web a lot to find a spokesperson. And yet, an embarrassing number of companies make it tough or impossible to find a media number. Make sure a small "Media Info" (or similar wording) link is *on every page*. Remember that search engines like Google will often take us to a page *inside* your site – don't assume we've come through the front door. If you don't have such a link on your site, stop reading now and add one.

On that page, put direct phone numbers to your media contact people, recent news releases if you like, downloadable hi-res photos or videos that visually explain how your product works (not your CEO/talking head, er, talking).

Your window of opportunity to capture a journalist's attention with your web site and get them to call you (which is, of course, the goal) is measured, literally, in seconds. If I can't find a phone number on a company's web site in 15 seconds, I give up and go elsewhere. Usually to that company's competitor.

And once the media calls, let them speak to your senior executive. I usually won't include a company in the piece if the only person they're willing to offer is the marketing manager or the p.r. firm. Nothing against p.r. people (heck, I used to be one!), but our audience feels like they're being spun a lot more than when the President or CEO is speaking. I'm happy to let the p.r. person give me all the background and arrange all the interview details, but at the end of the day, I want a senior executive on the other end of the camera or microphone.

Headquarteritis: Headquarteritis is a particular nasty ailment in which very insecure company officials insist that all comment must go through a single person at HQ.

I did a piece on DNTO recently that involved a particular brand of gum. (Oh what the hell, it was Juicy Fruit. ☺). It was a light-hearted short documentary about how it's hard to find stick gum any more – that everything is going chicklet/blister pack. So I called Wrigley, wanting to do a short and fun phone interview from their Canadian office (I am a Canadian journalist, after all) about this. It was, as some people might call it, a "sweetheart piece." The P.R. manager, though, didn't see any humour in it, was terse, and told me that I was "not allowed" to speak to any of their Canadian officials. Hell, she wouldn't even give me Wrigley Canada's phone number (which is in the phone book!) and said she would get them to call me. They didn't. My guess is she never called them.

But I'm obligated to do the story with or without the company's input, so I simply reported that happened (that Wrigley wouldn't even give me the time of day for a nothing story). And I suspect they

came off to the more than 500,000 listeners looking much worse than had they simply let me speak to someone locally.

You don't need to (nor should you, probably) give every employee permission to speak on behalf of the company – there is a healthy compromise. Shaw Cablevision, for instance, won't even let their p.r. people speak on the record; all comments have to come from either the President or another senior executive. To their credit, though, those people are usually reachable and do indeed return our calls quickly.

The Art of the Pitch

Okay, pitching. Let's say you have a compelling story and you believe it has passed the litmus tests I wrote about earlier:

- ✓ it's ***timely***
- ✓ it has an ***impact*** on most people's lives
- ✓ it's ***understandable*** for the average viewer/listeners
- ✓ it is ***active***: has interesting visuals (TV) or sound (radio).

Now, you're ready to pitch.

Sadly, this is where a lot of deserving companies screw up. They fire off a news release (remember: not a "press release") that is watered down with corporate speak and meaningless quotes, like:

> "We believe this partnership will prove profitable for our stakeholders," said Judy Boringperson, CEO, President, Chief Technologist, and Chairman. "We're very excited."

Sending off a news release is not a pitch. I'm sorry to report that most news releases are simply tossed away. One newsroom I know (not CBC) has its fax machine positioned directly over a recycle bin and nobody – literally, nobody – reads them.

If you think you have a good story, you should try to reach the right journalist personally. Each journalist has their own preferences for first-contact. Here are my preferences: Email me first a personal email that explains why the average Canadian should care about your story. Don't send me the news release and certainly don't send any attachments (remember, when you work in an organization with a couple of thousand people, technology tends to be a bit behind and slow).

Here's an example of a great pitch that I received yesterday (identifying details redacted):

> Hey Tod,
>
> Noticed that you did a segment last week about computer security, and commented on how easy it was for critical corporate data to just "walk away" (i.e. bluesniping, the rise of PDA thefts, etc.) So true!
>
> Thought you might be interested to know about our *(product omitted)* which we're going to release at CES next month. *(Details about it were here.)* We've actually been working on it for some time but, for obvious reasons, kept it a bit of a secret!
>
> I'm going to be in Vancouver next Thursday and Friday and could drop by to show you how it works if you like, perhaps leave a loaner with you for a couple of weeks so you can put it through its paces. I've also got some b-roll animation of the *(omitted)* process. I'll need you to embargo it until CES but would be happy to work with you in the meantime if it's of interest to you.
>
> My cell is *(omitted)* – call any time.

So, by the way, I probably will do a piece on this technology. Let's take this pitch apart and find out why it was so effective.

- ✓ **Quick-glance subject line.** I couldn't reproduce the subject line here because it will give away what their product is, but let's assume for argument's sake that they were launching new socks. Her subject line was: *PITCH: Socks That Literally Get Up And Clean Themselves* It's easy to identify as a pitch (with "Pitch:" at the

front) and the headline is curious, and makes me want to learn more. If your subject line reads: *news release* or *great story here, todd, cover it*, I'll probably just delete it without opening it. Call it harsh, but I get too many pitches each day to weed through them all. (It also doesn't help that, in that second case, you spelled my first name wrong.)

- ✓ **It's short.** I can digest this easily and quickly. Very important when under deadline, or when I'm coming up on our 10 AM story meeting.
- ✓ **It's personal.** I've met this person so already there's a connection. It's written in an informal tone. It's one professional offering help to another, not a company informing me of a development. Big difference.
- ✓ **It references my work.** When I know that a p.r. person has seen or listened to my segments, they immediately move to the top of the pile because I know there's a good likelihood that they understand the kinds of stories I'm interested in. She even mentioned a specific piece and tied her story to it as a follow-up.
- ✓ **She gets right to the point.** There's no long dreary news release where the actual news is buried in amidst boring quotes and corporatespeak. It's quick – "We have a new thingamabob, and I think you'll like it."
- ✓ **She gives me lead-time.** Because I already know this person from previous pitches and stories, we trust each other enough to know that I won't break an embargo (i.e. I won't do the story before the date we agreed to) and she's going to let me have it as an exclusive, which helps.
- ✓ **I'll get a hands-on demo.** Especially for technology journalists, we need to use it, see it, play with it, etc. There is a hell of a lot of vaporware out there and unless I can touch it or install it on our testing computers, I probably won't believe it's real. If you can loan it to me for a few weeks, even better. Remember, I ***want*** to like it and find cool, unique things about it because that makes for interesting content for my segment.

- ✓ **She offers video.** She's thinking about the visuals which, as noted in an earlier piece, are very important. (B-roll is the term used for broadcast-quality video with a time script that shows the product in use, animations of the manufacturing process, etc.) This also helps me in the story meeting, because I can use it to convince the assignment producer that the story will be interesting to watch.
- ✓ **She's reachable.** If I like the story (which I do) I've got a direct cell phone number for her. It's an "easy buy."

In this case, I called her right away and said I was interested. Depending on how well her "thing" (sorry) performs in our testing, there's a very good chance it'll see national airtime.

So what happens if you hit all those points and send the perfect email pitch and still nothing happens? Step two: Send it again, with a short note at the top saying "Not sure if you got this. Shit happens in email and sometimes our over-aggressive spam filter knocks it out before I see it.

If still nothing, it's usually okay to call my direct line (604.662.6080) and ask if I saw it. If I did and didn't like the story, if I'm not under deadline, I'm usually happy to explain why – in most cases, it's simply not that compelling a story, or you're asking me to cover an event or product launch that's already happened (and, therefore, no longer news!).

But remember that each journalist has their own preference on pitching. I'd say most prefer this *Email, Email, Phone* method, but there are some diehards that will only respond to faxes, some that never check email, and others who always let their phone go to voicemail – then never check their voicemail. Just learn what your "target" preferences are and you'll already be ahead of the game.

Oh, and one more thing: Two no-nos… Don't ask us to give you an advance look at the story before it goes to air (contrary to CBC journalistic policy) and no, we can't make you a tape of the item – you're welcome to use a media clipping service like Bowden's to do what you please with it.

Final Random Notes

Just a few tidbits that didn't really fit elsewhere that I thought I'd throw in here.

Ask first to add me to your email list. Sometimes I'll speak briefly with one p.r. person or a marketing manager and suddenly I'm on their mass email list. In most cases, I get content then that's irrelevant to me (such as financial results which I don't ever, ever cover). I no longer reply and ask to be taken off. I simply block all future email from that domain.

I know that sounds harsh, but it was getting to be more than 100 mass emails a day and in most cases, even when I asked to be taken off, I wasn't. So read that again: If you put me on your company's email mailing list without my permission, I will block you from my email account and, if I think you're being abusive with it, I can request that your company's entire domain is blocked from every CBC.ca address.

Save the gimmicks. Every November, all the tech companies and p.r. firms send me little attention-getting packages. Samsung sent me a really ugly tie with an iron-on stencil showing their new line of printers. Motorola (I think) sent me a little square of chocolate in the shape of a cell phone.

I'm sure that used to work when no p.r. firms were doing it, but now everybody is doing it. Save your budget. Most of them go into the trash right away. What I want is a compelling story, not a tie.

Get an RSS Feed. Yes, I was late to the RSS party, but I'm a believer now. :-) Each morning, I hit my Bloglines account to check in with the companies who publish an RSS feed of their news releases. It's a fantastic tool for journalists and I've done national segments on companies after seeing something they released on their feed. Many

p.r. flacks will say "Well, we have a news release page on our web site, so you can check in there every day!" If I had a dollar… ;-)

Stop saying "Go ahead and" in front of every verb. I recognize this has nothing to do with media relations, but I just wanted to add it. People who add "go ahead and" in front of every verb ("I'm going to go ahead and get lunch," or "They're going to go ahead and buy the company" are schmucks. Don't be a schmuck.

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