

LAB REPORT

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How to Pitch Reporters

BY CHRIS MOODY

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CHRIS MOODY
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Executive Summary

My name is Chris Moody. I've been a reporter for more than 15 years, contributing to such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Magazine*, *Outside*, *CNN Politics*, *VICE News*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Book Forum*, *The New Republic*, *Reason*, and more. Over the course of my career, I've received thousands of story pitches from public relations professionals. While most of these pitches never amounted to anything, a select few did end up serving as a jumping off point for a story.

"PITCHING A REPORTER IS MORE ART THAN SCIENCE, BUT THERE ARE BEST PRACTICES YOU CAN FOLLOW TO HELP YOUR ODDS."

In this Lab Report, I will discuss the elements of a great pitch as well as the characteristics of great public relations professionals.

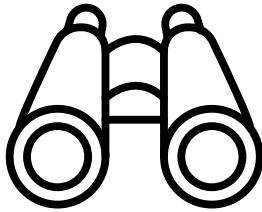
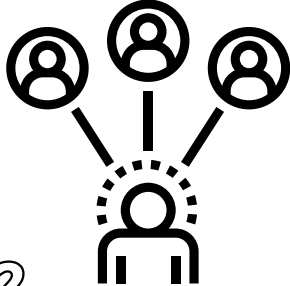

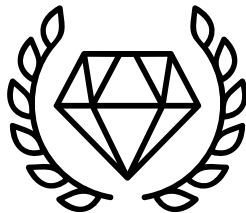



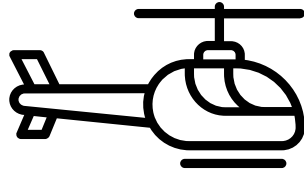

A pitch is not just one sheet in one email. It's a process that involves relationship building, trust, and a deep understanding of what is important to journalists. It starts with coffee, and it continues until the story is published. Throughout the process, make sure that you are readily available, providing access, and respecting the journalist's independence. In a best case scenario, your organization receives media coverage and you successfully convey your message.

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9 Pro Tips

HOW TO PITCH REPORTERS

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MY FAVORITE PITCH

In 2015, I was a digital correspondent for CNN and hosted a video series about politics and American life.

Around Veterans Day, a press agent reached out to me from an aviation museum that wanted to showcase a military plane that had flown over Normandy during World War II. The plane was still in operation, and it would be flying again as part of a special event in West Virginia. Former members of the Army Golden Knights would be parachuting out of the plane for a display, and they were hoping journalists would cover the jump.

I was already hooked, but then came the ultimate sweetener: “Would you like to jump out of the plane with them?” she offered.

This pitch was a no-brainer for me, for several reasons:

- The story **fit my content strategy** as a journalist looking for a compelling story combined with stunning visuals.
- They promised me **access**. I got to go on location and see this plane, be inside it, and then get up into the air and jump out of it. I also got access to some amazing veterans whom I could feature in the story.
- The **timing** was superb. I needed content for Veterans Day, and here was someone coming to me with a great idea.

1

FIND THE RIGHT REPORTERS



This may go without saying, but when it comes time to pitch reporters directly, aim to pitch reporters you think would be interested in your story. This sounds easy, but it will take some preparation.

It is important to build a list of reporters and to start learning what interests them. This isn't just a one-day project. Building a Rolodex of reporters is something you should do continuously throughout your career. Make the list searchable, with key terms about each reporter's beats, strengths, and even personal interests.

This has never been easier. There are paid services like Muckrack.com, where you can find curated lists of reporters. Build your own list based on Twitter and LinkedIn searches. These are all invaluable tools for building your list.

When you look at a reporter's Twitter account, you only have to scroll for a few minutes before you have an idea of what that person is interested in.

2 MAKE RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS



The first step to successfully pitching reporters begins BEFORE you even have a story to pitch.

Just like in any industry, growing your network should be a key part of your strategy as a press agent. That takes doing groundwork, even in times when you don't have a story to pitch.

The best press agents often reached out to me for lunch, drinks, or to meet at a happy hour, just so they could get on my radar.

This is a great practice, and one I strongly recommend. It is important to get to know reporters through casual and informal conversation. If possible, make sure it's in person--you can learn so much about what that reporter is interested in over just one cocktail, a cup of coffee, or lunch. You can tell what excites them.

Once you have something for them, you have already established a baseline relationship. You know each other. When you email them, you won't be another random person out of the blue that they've never heard of.

Instead, the reporter remembers you as the person they had that drink with. The odds that you will send a pitch that they want to hear are much higher because you already know what they're interested in.

A word of warning: Be careful balancing your relationship with reporters. Your time with them might be cordial, but it is a business relationship, not a friendship. Do not expect a reporter to do favors for you and do not be personally offended if they decline a pitch or write something you do not like. Remember the nature of the relationship. You have a job to do, but so does the reporter.

3 RESPECT THE REPORTER



Respect goes a long way in this industry.

As a reporter, I can tell when someone respects my time when it's clear that they understand the topics I write about.

For example, when I was a full-time political reporter, I was amazed by how many people pitched me stories about, say, a romantic getaway in Alaska.

Sending irrelevant pitches will train a reporter to ignore your name when it appears in their inbox. I'm probably not going to cover vacation packages at your new resort. It's just not a thing I've ever written in my entire career. Why would I just suddenly stop everything on a presidential campaign and do that? You don't want reporters to see your name and mark it as spam.

4 PROVIDE EXCLUSIVITY



Reporters want to be first. That excites us. Scoops give us an adrenaline kick. It's what we live for. Can you provide that to me?

To grab a reporter's attention, pitch them something exclusive. Maybe it's access to a high-profile or famous person, a politician, or it's a conceptual idea, or access to an organization or a group of people.

Here's an example: Let's say Alphabet, the parent company of Google, is releasing a new driverless car.

A press agent might call a reporter and say, "We are unveiling something no one in the public has seen before. We want to give you a first look."

This is the kind of thing that will excite any reporter.

In making promises like this, it is essential for you to be honest. Nothing kills a pitch like when a press agent makes me think that I'm getting something exclusive, and then I read an interview with the same person that comes out before my story is published. Expectation management is important. Let the reporter know if the information is exclusive or if you're sending it out to everybody. Be honest about these things so reporters can determine if they should jump on the story quickly, or if there's some time to work on the story.

5 PROVIDE ACCESS



When you send out a press release, you need to be ready to provide the reporter access to the key players in the story. You need to be ready to work with the reporter to get them what they need. Sending the pitch is only the beginning.

Reporters want access--access to the people at the center of the story. It is essential that you be prepared to provide reporters with that access. When you send a press release and you don't have the people in the press release lined up to speak to the reporter, that is a red flag.

Here's an example of what not to do:

I received a pitch from a university developing a new program that was in the purview of topics that I cover. It was a great story for me. I asked to interview one of the academics who was part of the program. The university responded by saying that no one was available for interviews.

Even though the press release had quotes in it already, I didn't want to rewrite them. I wanted to talk to somebody. I wanted to get my own material.

I merely wanted a 15-minute conversation with the person quoted in the press release, but the press agent couldn't make them available. That's bad. Don't do that.

On the flip side, there was a national polling organization that was always doing really interesting congressional polls. Every time a new poll was released, I'd get on the phone with the pollster, and he'd give me an interview with his analysis. He might have had that conversation 20 times that day, but he was always there and available to speak with me.

That's how you do it.

6 BE AVAILABLE TO REPORTERS



In the course of working on a story, make yourself accessible, especially if you're the one facilitating access to your organization.

When I covered Capitol Hill—a highly competitive reporting environment where news moves fast and every second counts—the best press representatives for members of Congress were ones that you felt like you could get an answer from quickly when writing a story.

These representatives understood the importance of responding quickly. Even if they didn't have exactly what I was looking for, these press agents still responded.

In the same spirit, when I write to somebody and I'm on a deadline, I really appreciate it when the person on the other end of the email says, "Got your email. I'm on it." That lets me go work on other projects with peace of mind. Whereas if the press agent waits until they have the information and then responds six hours later, I might have already moved on thinking they might never respond. A good press agent will respond very quickly and let me know they are working on it.

Give reporters confidence that you are going to help them make their deadline. That will go a long way.

These are the best press agents because they always respond, even if they can't answer questions immediately. That can help build a level of trust.

These press agents can often also be people that speak to you just on background about things that might not be directly related to their organization or the boss, but that give you context and understanding on what's going on.

7 YOU DON'T CONTROL THE STORY



Sometimes press agents will act as though the reporter owes them something because they gave them access to a story.

Remember, keep a healthy distance between you and a reporter. Reporters are independent entities. We're not paid by your organization.

You may have control over the agreed-upon time of the interview or the location. But you ultimately do not have control over what gets published. And once you release that control mentally, it will give you a lot of freedom to say, "Okay, they're going to write what they're going to write. But how can we make sure that our message is in that story?"

Reporters are sensitive about stories coming across as looking like PR. We don't want that. And so there's going to be little dings in certain stories, even if it's a generally flattering piece. There might be a person quoted who criticizes your organization. You have to be okay with that possibility. And you have to see a win where there's a win, even if you didn't get 100% of what you wanted in the story.

That said, you can really help yourself by providing as much information as possible to that reporter so that they get the clearest picture they can, so that they're not making an unforced error that you could have avoided if you had provided them with the information.

8 DON'T BE A HELICOPTER FLACK



There is a type of press agent I call a “helicopter flack.” These people are domineering, and they attempt to exert control over reporters.

Once I was doing a story on location with a film crew, and the PR person tried to micromanage everything about the shoot, including the lighting and the framing of our video. Even though we had a very specific style, she got in our space and even looked through our camera’s viewfinder to let us know she didn’t like what she was seeing.

"No, this will not do," she said. "We’re not doing this." There was nothing untoward about our approach. It was just a certain style she didn’t personally like. But when she said to us, "We're not doing this," we found it deeply objectionable. You can't tell reporters what to do.

Another bad practice of helicopter flacks is demanding to be in the room when we're talking to the subject. That makes me a little bit suspicious, especially if they interrupt. Does the interview subject need a babysitter? Do you not trust this person?

Then there's also the difficult conversation of managing the expectation of the interview. Helicopter flacks will say, "We'll give you this interview if you don't ask about X." Reporters don't like that. Some reporters will agree to those kinds of terms, but I don't recommend that. Many reporters will just shut down an interview if you're making too many demands.

Reporters don’t like handing over questions in advance. Asking for specific questions makes us bristle. Instead of asking, "What are the questions you will be asking in this interview?" instead ask: "Can you give me just a general idea? What is this going to be about?" Asking reporters what the interview is about and the general topics is completely reasonable; asking for specific questions is a red flag.

9 DEALING WITH CONTENTIOUS PRESS



Let's say a reporter calls you about a story you didn't pitch. You suspect that the story won't be flattering to your organization. What do you do then?

People take different approaches to this. Some are nice, and some people are a little bit more aggressive. You have to determine what kind of approach that you are going to take—whether it's a bulldog kind of approach or something a little sweeter. That's going to depend on your organization. It's going to depend on the story.

First, you have to make a decision if you're going to participate in a story. Do we want to have our quote in the story that shows our side? Or do we want to appear like we had nothing to do with this story, so we refuse to participate?

If you refuse to participate in a story, there will be consequences. Be prepared to see a line in the story saying that you declined to comment. And by not participating, it's likely that you will be exclusively defined by your critics in that story. If it's a story targeting you, are you okay with your critics being the main narrators? Or would you rather have an opportunity to help shape the narrative—or at the very least be able to respond to the things being thrown at you?

Remember that not responding doesn't mean that you won't have a voice in the story. The reporter might find other means to include your organization's position through non-official channels. Now, if you're the chief spokesperson and you refuse to participate, you are abdicating your opportunity of having some influence over the narrative. For example, other people in your organization might speak to that reporter, feeding them a narrative that was not approved by your team. This is a real vulnerability that exists if you do not participate in a story.

I'll give another example for a different kind of story. You see this in journalism all the time: a story that involves two sides to an issue. You have to be okay with the possibility that if you participate, you'll be jumping into an arena with the opposing side. And you have to be open to the possibility that the tone of the article might lean slanted toward the other side. You might know that ahead of time. What you really don't want is only one side attributed and quoted. You want to be able to present your position and be represented in the story. By not talking, you guarantee not being represented.

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ABOUT



Iron Light Labs is an award-winning nonprofit focused on R&D for social impact. The nonprofit is called “Labs” because it experiments, innovates and tests to discover the best way to drive change. Iron Light Labs is building a future where storytellers leap out of their echo chambers, creators partner with effective messengers, changemakers experiment with emerging media, and everyone measures what matters.

ABOUT

Chris Moody

Chris Moody is an award-winning journalist with more than 15 years in news. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Magazine*, *Outside*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Book Forum*, *The New Republic*, *Reason*, and more, with hundreds of appearances on television and radio, including CNN, NPR, Fox News, and MSNBC. He is a former political reporter for CNN and correspondent for VICE News Tonight.

In 2019 he received the Robert Novak Journalism Fellowship after traveling 50,000 miles across North America in a solar-powered tiny house built in a cargo van. He teaches journalism and broadcast media at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.