

Pitching Local Stories

As national news develops, such as a flu vaccine shortage, offer reporters a unique and relevant local story. Local coverage represents a significant opportunity for you to garner media attention on important issues.

Do your homework

Find out which newspaper section covers stories like yours and identify the editor(s) for that section.

Find out how much lead time the newspaper needs to run a story and schedule your meeting before that deadline.

Research the newspaper's online site or library to determine if it has published stories on the current topic. Editors will appreciate that you know what the paper already has reported on these issues.

Before the meeting, sit down with a colleague and rehearse your pitch. Include any community partners who will join you in the meeting.

At the meeting

Keep your message simple and concise. Try to keep your introduction to three or four sentences that will tell the editor why he should be interested in publishing your story. Give more details as the conversation continues but think of your opening as a way to heighten interest.

After you have made your initial introduction, be prepared to answer more specific questions. Is there a local hook? An upcoming related event? Have a list of community groups who can provide background and interviews for reporters to help localize the issue. The more resources you can offer, the better your chances of success.

Aim at the right person

Do a little homework—which reporter actually covers your issue? Who has written positive pieces in the past? Whether you are pitching an innovative program or stressing an important public health issue to the local TV news, you can call the assignment editor or the news desk: they will tell you who is appropriate.

Get to the point

A pitch that clearly frames the story idea in the first or second sentence is infinitely more welcome than one that tiptoes up to it, or worse, buries it under paragraphs of phrase-making. In almost every case, reporters know instantly whether an idea will work for them.

Remember: It's a pitch, not a monologue

Give the reporters enough information up front to pique their interest, but let them interject with questions before too long, certainly within the first 30 seconds.

Give them time

The smartest pitchers tell reporters about things that are happening months before the program is launched or the event takes place. This allows reporters and sources to work together to figure out when and how a piece would work for a newspaper.

Be a resource

The easier you make it for the reporters, the better the chances they will bite. Be ready to immediately provide quotes, background, and interview opportunities. One strategy is to send a pitch note or announcement to your local media offering yourself as an expert on the issue at hand. The reporter/pitcher relationship is really pretty simple: You want the reporter to cover your story; in exchange, you help make the reporter's job easier.

Writing a News Release

A news release lets the media and others know about a policy, program, event, or activity. The release should have a clear objective. When developing a release, consider the following questions: What is the news? Who would be interested in the news? Who would care? What result do I expect from this news release (inform, educate, persuade, activate, etc.)?

Whenever possible, use existing resources to create news materials. This will save time and resources. Follow these basic steps to format a news release.

- Print the release on your organization's letterhead.
- Place the phrase "For Immediate Release" and the date on the upper left margin.
- Below the date or on the right margin, place your contact person's name and phone number.

- Compose a short headline that clearly describes the news release content and grabs the reader's attention. Set the headline in bold and center it on the page. Secondary headlines, or subhead, should be set in italics and positioned below the main headline.

Body of Release

- Begin the first paragraph with your dateline. The dateline identifies where the news originated. For example, "MADISON, WI—The Madison Health Department launched a new program today to help kids get active right in their own neighborhood."
- Also in the first paragraph, concisely summarize the facts—who, what, when, where, and why. Include the date, time, and other time-critical information related to your activities.
- In the second paragraph, insert a quote from a local health department leader, such as the director or project head, about the event or program. Be sure to identify the source of all quotes. Be sure that the quote's content explains and enhances the story and that the relationship between the person quoted and the story is clear. Try to limit the number of quotes to no more than two people.
- Include details on the policy, program, or event in the third paragraph.
- In the final paragraph cover basic organizational information (e.g., who you are, history of the event or program). If you have a list of member organizations, sponsors, or other partners, list them in an attachment rather than incorporating that information into the text of the release. This makes it easier for a reporter or editor to review.

Finishing Your Release

- ❖ The optimal length of a news release is one page. If it is necessary to go beyond one page, type "-more-" at the bottom of the first page.
- ❖ Finally, type "###" or "-30-" to indicate the end of the copy.

General Guidelines

- ❖ Use short, declarative sentences and double-space the lines. Use an active verb and the word "today" in your first sentence.

- ❖ Avoid using jargon and explain any acronyms at their first use (e.g. "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)..."). Avoid "puff" words and phrases such as "exciting," "very large," "monumental," etc. Be as clear and concrete as possible in your descriptions.
- ❖ Link the facts of the program or event to an important issue or need in your local community. Real-life examples help make the human connection and highlight benefits of your work to the community.
- ❖ Review the release for clarity and flow and check that all words and names are spelled correctly.