

Don't Let Your Public Relations Program Be Pitch-Poor.

To make an impact with public relations, you need to hire yourself a good writer of pitch letters to the media.

The pitch letter, like press releases and other basic tools of the trade, too often gets taken for granted.

Good pitch letters spell the difference between great success – and mediocrity.

Clients, especially those with some history of working with public relations, look to their public relations people and agencies to generate some heat in the marketplace.

Which leads back to our discussion of pitch letters and its place in the public relations arsenal. (Our definition of the media includes bloggers, digital-only media outlets, as well as all forms of traditional news media – broadcast, newspapers, magazines, what have you.)

Public relations people fire off pitch letters – almost exclusively by email or digital messaging -- in hopes of generating media interest in whichever client's story they are promoting; when they land in the right in-basket, at the right time – and with an attention-getting subject line, which is a topic for another day – good things happen. The media takes an interest in the client's story; the resulting coverage can only help advance the client's cause.

The more tailored the pitch letters are to the individual outlet's, and reporter's, exact beat and area of interest, the better. It's not unusual for public relations people to spend hours on end writing and working their pitches for the media; that's how great stories happen (from the client's and the media's points-of-view). Some of the best in public relations writing happens at the pitch letter level; conversely, poorly written -- and even more, poorly targeted – pitch letters do nothing but raise the hackles of journalists, who dismiss most of them summarily.

Some of the key elements of successful pitch-letter writing include:

The angle. What's new about your story? Is it the product itself, a new way of using the product? Did you just spot a new way to tie-in your product/service to a social, seasonal or business trend? Are you releasing a story that the media will treat as breaking news?

You might have more than one angle on your story, depending on specific media targets.

Maybe your client, a locally-based construction company, just completed a major construction job on a shiny new sports arena on the Las Vegas Strip. Odds are, the construction industry trade press will be keenly interested in the nitty-gritty details of how your client accomplished this magnificent project. Back home though, 1,500 miles off the Strip, the local media might not see the story as relevant to their readers, who are looking for news about projects built in their neck of the woods. So, right away, you've got to customize your pitches – one to the trade press, promoting your client's impeccable work in bringing this project on-line – and under budget and ahead of schedule, too! And another, to the locals, maybe with the angle that here's evidence that your client ratcheted up its game with a major out-of-town job.

The focus: How is what you're pitching of interest to the media's audience(s)?

Length: Cut to the chase, give the reporter the gist of your story, let them know why you think it's sure to be of interest to his/her audience; alert the reporter to any attachments or online sources for more information; let him/her know who's available for interviews; add a few major supporting points – bullets are nice here – and close with an offer to help facilitate the story any way you can. If you're planning to make a follow-up telephone call, say so in the close too.

Always double-check your facts before pressing that "send" button.

Always include the "ask" – this is where you tell the recipient of your letter what you want them to do. They may not do it. Then again, if the pitch letter is on target, and you've sent it to the appropriate person (you won't get far if you send your pitch about a new high end restaurant to the finance industry reporter).

Writing good pitch letters takes time, effort, skill, imagination, persistence, empathy (reporters, editors, program producers, bloggers, they're all human), and – how else to say it? – a nose for the news. Ex-journalists often make for great media pitch people, since they understand what makes news – and what drives the people at the other end of the pitch.

In baseball, it's the pitchers who demonstrate a command of the strike zone that succeed. The same is true with people who do media relations. The good ones know how to work with the material they have and throw strikes – knowing that while the media isn't going to necessarily swing at every pitch, they won't even offer to swing at pitches that are off-the-mark.

(I'm Doug Hovelson, president of Big Thunder Public Relations and a daily media pitcher myself. If you've got questions about pitching your business to the media – I'm happy to talk with you anytime. I can be reached at doughovelson@msn.com by telephone at 712-722-5501, on Twitter at @doughovelson, and through LinkedIn messaging of course.)

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