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Pitching Your Story

Before you pick up the phone:

Know who you're pitching.

Do your research. Reporters have beats, but it's not enough to just know what the reporters' beat is. Look up past stories they have written so you know what they like to cover. If you can make it seem like the story you are pitching is tailored to what that reporter likes to cover, you will be more successful. If you have to do a cold call, ask an assignment editor (at a paper) or producer (for radio or TV) who the right reporter to speak to is.

In order to be a good producer of news, learn to be a good reader/viewer of news.

When you see a good story—even if it's not from your typical enviro reporter—email that reporter to let them know you think they did a good job, and attach your signature at the bottom. *Reporters are human just like the rest of us, and they have egos.* They get some hate mail but not much fan mail. Sending a quick email is a good way to build relationships.

Even an environmental reporter has their preferences.

There are only two ways to find out what someone likes to write about—by reading them, and by asking them. If you haven't already done this, don't hesitate to just come out and ask, "Generally, how do you decide what you are going to write about? What kinds of stories are you and/or your editors looking for?"

Write your pitch and practice it.

Write down your pitch beforehand and have it in front of you while you're on the phone. A good pitch has a "hook." Show the reporter that your story is significant, dramatic, timely, controversial, or impacts a lot of his or her readers. Reporters are busy, so keep it short, and make sure to get the Who, What, Where, When, and Why in during the first minute.

When you've got them on the phone:

The 4 "C"s – Connection, Context, Commitment, Catapult.

As with many organizing calls, a good phone conversation is structured with the 4 "C"s. Calling a reporter is no different than calling a coalition partner or a new recruit: you are trying to build a relationship (connect), develop their interest and understanding of the issue (context), get them to do something, in this case, write a story (commitment), and make a follow-up plan with concrete actions and goals (catapult).

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Keep it short, and always pitch first. Then ask them if they got your press release later – get to the point, quick!

Tell a story.

Telling news stories is like telling fairy tales. Think about how to make your story come to life. Who are the good guys and bad guys? How can you make it sound vivid and compelling? Instead of saying, “we have some folks who are working on stopping logging,” try “We have a real David and Goliath story here—local indigenous community who have taken on the world’ largest lumber company.”

Be ready to adjust.

Think through several different ways you can pitch your story. Everything the reporter tells you is a clue, and you are the detective. If they say that they are not interested in covering the story, ask them what kinds of stories they *are* interested in covering, and figure out if you can bounce back with another angle that works for them.

You’re doing *them* a favor—you’re not asking for help.

It’s easier to show them this when you know what they like to cover. Reporters need you, because you are the one who can give them the story they are looking to write. Make the reporter feel like you are familiar with their work and you are pitching them something that is right up their alley.

As soon as you have the reporters’ ear, they are already thinking about how they are going to get the story past their editors.

Reporters have to pitch stories to their editors. If you present a thoughtful, well-organized pitch, the reporter can often use the same pitch to pass the idea by their higher-ups. *Hand the story to them*—make it as easy as possible. Let them know what useful materials you can send. If it is a juicy story, think about giving them an “exclusive.”

After the call:

Be prepared and prompt.

What materials do you have that would be useful to the reporter? What are you going to send them after you get off of the phone? What photos can you send them? What contacts or research can you get them? Send them anything you promised, immediately.

Don’t get frustrated.

You might have to make dozens of calls to find one reporter who is interested. But every call you make keeps your issue and organization on their radar screen and builds your relationship.

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The Pitch Call:

Phrases to use:

“Are you on deadline, or do you have a quick second?”

-shows them that you are considerate of their timeline, and you can make it quick.

“I saw that great article you did on X...”

“I wanted to give you the heads up on an interesting story idea...it seemed like it would be right up your alley.”

-this shows that you are doing them a favor, not begging them to help you.

A good way to end your pitch is: **“Does this sound like the kind of thing you’d be interested in covering?”** If the reporter says no, that is a great opportunity for you to ask, “Well, what kinds of stories are you interested in covering?” and figure out if there’s a different angle that works.

Catapult: don’t forget to make a follow up plan. “Great, so I’ll send you X,Y,and Z, and the contact info for you to get in touch with A, B, and C. When’s a good time for me to call back and follow up with you?”

Some final tips about etiquette:

- Be enthusiastic and helpful.
- Reporters get a ton of emails every day. You can use email to pitch if you have a very good relationship with a reporter. In the beginning, you should do phone outreach.
- Leaving messages: generally, you want to avoid leaving lots of messages for reporters. The first time you get voice mail, don’t leave a message—it’s preferable to call back later and get them in person, unless you have a good enough relationship with the reporter that you know they will call you back. If you try a few times and don’t reach them, leave a message—but make it short and sweet.
- Be prompt. If you say you are going to get information to a reporter, let them know how long it will take and make sure you meet their deadlines.
- Respect deadlines – make pitch calls in the morning, and if you sense a reporter is busy, ask if they’re on deadline and offer to call them back.
- If you pitch more than one reporter at an outlet, let them all know you have.

Sample Pitch:

Hello Malia. Do you have a second? Great. I know you cover Weyerhaeuser and I wanted to give you a heads up that on Thursday there’s going to be doing a colorful protest outside Weyerhaeuser’s Quadrant Homes development in

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Federal Way. We've discovered that they are making the homes with wood clear-cut from a Native community in Canada without permission. The kicker is that they're marketing these homes as "environmentally friendly," We're going to be having a sit-in with members of the community at the housing development Thursday. There will be some really powerful speakers from the community there as well as some great photo opportunities. If you'd like I can send you the report that proves where the wood is coming from.