

# Perfect Pitch Tip Sheet

## A Journalist Reveals 5 Ways to Send Your Pitch-Response Rate through the Roof

By Jeff Vance

**What's your story?** Are you having trouble getting responses to your pitches? If you're like most PR pros I know, you believe pitching is more of an art than a science.

This myth couldn't be further from the truth.

The truth is that there is indeed a science to pitching good story ideas. It's not an exact science, granted, but if you learn a few quick and effective pitching principles, you'll see your response rate double, triple or even quadruple.

I know because I'm a freelance writer. **I pitch story ideas** – ideas not much different from what you should be pitching for your clients – **almost every day**. For years I was on the other side of the desk, editing high-tech magazines. Back then, I received a couple of hundred pitches a week and read very few of them.

Then, my company was a victim of the dot.com collapse and I found myself on the outside looking in.

At first, I didn't believe you could make a real living as a freelance writer. Boy, was I wrong. However, it took me a while to get off the ground. The reason for that is that it took me some time to hone my pitching strategy.

Like most PR pros, I used to send out wide story-idea blasts. I used to be hesitant to pick up the phone and follow-up on a pitch with an editor, not wanting to seem like a nuisance. I used to try to cut corners and use generic templates instead of tailoring my pitches for each and every publication – and each and every journalist.

And then I started studying the independent writers whose stories popped up all the time and all over the place. I contacted a few, I read a few of their writing-advice books, I attended some seminars, and I learned that pitching is not an art. It is definitely a science.

Today, as a journalist who covers technology trends, ***I receive anywhere from 10 to a 100 PR pitches a week.***

The vast majority get deleted before I read more than the first few sentences or even just the subject line.

This isn't because I'm hostile to PR agents filling up my inbox. Quite the opposite, I'm one of the few journalists who actively solicits story pitches. Even so, 99% of the pitches I get go directly into my junk-mail folder. Why?

## **Because these pitches don't even try to meet my needs as a journalist.**

When you craft any pitch, try to place yourself in the recipient's head and answer this one question:

### **Why should I care?**

If my name is not in the email anywhere, it looks like spam, and I don't care about it. If the pitch is outside of my coverage area, my email filters may interpret it as spam, and I won't care about it. If the pitch has a long list of cc's instead of hiding them with bcc's . . . well, it looks like spam, it won't be an exclusive, and I won't care.

That's the low-hanging fruit – stuff you should already know. The following tips are the advanced ones. Use these tips and you will craft more compelling pitches – pitches that get read instead of deleted – and you'll see your response rate rise higher and higher.

### **1. Pitch stories not announcements.**

Stories are just that, stories. They have a beginning, middle and end. There is some type of conflict. Overstating things a bit, there is a hero and a villain.

Stories appeal to a wide audience. Announcements do not. Announcements are more like the status line on Facebook.

“Company X is unveiling the new version of its product on Monday.”

“Company Y is signing up its 500<sup>th</sup> customer in Europe this month.”

“Company Z just hired a new CEO.”

These events may be newsworthy, but unless you're representing a brand-name company or a company already generating serious buzz, the above items are filler, not stories.

### **Leave this stuff to your press-release distribution service.**

Some writers and editors do look at these items, but they come at the end of the publishing cycle – because they are filler items. They fill whatever available space is left and can be cut easily. It's fine to distribute these through the wires or whatever service you use, but save the direct contact for real story-based communications.

To figure out what type of stories a target publication covets:

### **2. Read the target pub and make your pitch look like its stories.**

For example, instead of pitching me a story about your client's new social-media software release, pitch me a story titled “Is Twitter the Next Pets.com?”

Let the product release go out over the PR wire. When you contact me directly, send me something I actually need and crave: a unique story idea.

### **3. Time your pitch.**

Go to the editorial calendar and look at the ad-close dates. These usually give you a rough idea of when articles close. This varies from publication to publication, but a good rule of thumb is that stories close a few weeks before the ads do.

You'll want to send your pitches just before the magazine's writers starts working on their own stories for the issue you're targeting.

Again, this varies from publication to publication, but most writers have a lead time anywhere from a week to a month. For special issues and feature stories, the lead time is often longer, say 2 months. Time your pitch accordingly. Good timing can be everything.

### **4. Reference one of the writer's stories in your subject line.**

Writers are human. They like positive feedback as much as anyone else. If you take the time to do a little background research, read a couple stories and link them to your pitch, journalists will appreciate the effort and will usually respond to your pitch.

This doesn't mean they'll bite, but your pitch will be different than 95% of the pitches most of us get. And it will invariably be read. A subject line along the lines of "I saw your story on X" might not get you a reply, but it will get your pitch read. Usually, it will get you a response as well, in addition to piquing the journalist's interest.

If I get a pitch like this and it doesn't meet my needs, I still add this PR rep to a special contact list I turn to when I'm stuck and need fresh story ideas. With a good personalized pitch, editors and writers will remember your name and will start to think of you as a resource, not a nuisance.

### **5. Scour the most-read and most-emailed story lists.**

Publications exist to drive traffic. Today, the vast majority of magazines include most-read and most-emailed lists in their online versions. These lists are intended for readers, directing them to what's popular, but they're pure gold for PR pros.

The most-read/most-emailed lists show you exactly what is most prized by the publication's audience. I know this intimately because they've helped me boost my story-acceptance rate as a freelancer. I study those lists to help me craft my pitches. I scrutinize them again to help me choose the correct approach for the stories I land, and I look at them once more before I file my stories to help me fine-tune my headlines and leads.

✓ **Bonus Tip: Hire a professional writer.**

Even if you're representing a client with an executive who is indeed a good writer and whose stories you can place successfully, remember this nugget of wisdom from Wayne Gretzky: "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take."

You may place stories for your client, but you won't be putting very many shots on goal. A professional writer will boost the volume of your stories. An A-list writer will also boost the quality of those stories.

For more on crafting successful story strategies, in addition to information on white papers, case studies, contributed articles and more, visit [www.sandstormmedia.net](http://www.sandstormmedia.net).

If you'd like to receive new entries in my *Journalist's Advice for PR Pros* series, drop me an email, [jeff@sandstormmedia.net](mailto:jeff@sandstormmedia.net), and I'll add you to the list.

Or call 617-848-8141 and mention *Perfect Pitch Tip Sheet* for a **free 20-minute story-pitch consultation**.