

THE *trusted* RESOURCE

HOW TO BECOME
A JOURNALIST'S GO-TO

If we could only offer one piece of advice, we've decided it would be this:

**TO BE A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC RELATIONS
PROFESSIONAL, YOU *must*
CARE ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS.**

RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE BACKBONE OF THE PR INDUSTRY.

If you're directly involved with media relations—whether part of an internal team or representing a client at an agency—then interacting with and convincing journalists, influencers, editors, bookers, and producers to spread your message is the backbone of what *you* do.

The benefits of coverage in third-party print, online, or broadcast sources are immense. Earned media can help build a brand's credibility and authority, increase brand awareness that may translate to greater sales, and garner goodwill with the target audience for a nice reputational boost.

In this guide, we're going to provide strategies and resources to help you become a trusted resource for journalists.



Two things that haven't changed, that you can always count on are the value of a relationship between a PR professional and a reporter; and the value of a story that is either emotionally compelling or has high practical value for readers."

*Journalist Megan DeLaire at the
2020 Earned Media Mastery virtual summit*

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP

Any PR pro will tell you that media relations is not as simple as sending an email or making a phone call. There's a lot of research and relationship building that happens long before you ever send the pitch, and a lot that comes after. It takes work, but PR pros know it's worth it because being a trusted resource to a journalist sure has its perks:

- Journalists will be more likely to read what you have to say
- Journalists may come to you for a story (even if they change outlets)
- Journalists may introduce you to others in their network

Journalists are people and, just like you, they are trying to fulfill their role to the best of their abilities. They have a responsibility to provide readers, viewers, and listeners with timely, relevant, and important information on a regular basis.

They receive hundreds of emails a day, operate under strict deadlines, and are very busy people. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Gideon Lichfield, Global Editorial Director at Wired, wrote an excellent [article](#) for Quartz back in 2014. Years later, the article remains a treasure trove for PR professionals who need to hear some hard truths. We especially like this part about good PR:



I have never worked in PR, but it's clear that it lends itself to two natural strategies. The first involves getting to really know journalists: not just what they cover but what they've written before, what they're experts in, where they've lived, the things they believe in, the things they love, the things that make them mad. It also means understanding the nuances of their news outlet — who it writes for, how it frames its stories (people or issues? gossipy or wonky? newsy or off-newsy?), how its readers find those stories.”

(Published in Quartz, November 14, 2014)

That second natural strategy that Lichfield mentions is one all PR pros should avoid if they want to build positive, mutually-beneficial relationships with journalists—**the robotic-mass-irrelevant email**.

IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, JOURNALISTS WON'T EITHER

We've all probably received a few emails in our time that called us the wrong name, were poorly written, or simply irrelevant to our work or role. That feeling of annoyance you get is the same feeling journalists get (but worse) when they receive yet another pitch that is obviously part of a broad mailing distribution or completely irrelevant to them.

PART ONE BEFORE YOU PITCH

Relationship building takes time and it begins your first day on the job.

When you're a PR professional, no matter what company you work for or client you represent, you are your own brand, and you build the relationships.

The best and first place you should begin the relationship journey is research. We're not talking about sitting down at your desk and spending hours conducting a deep dive on one journalist (although who knows, it may come to that). Your research should happen a little bit every day or every week as you read, listen, and watch the news and as you follow potential contacts on their public social channels.

Going back to Gideon Lichfield's quote, good PR and good research involves "getting to really know the journalists" and "understanding the nuances of their outlets". You can accomplish both by following these two steps:

STEP 1 KNOW THE NEWS

If you're going to be in this business, you need to know news. How else will you know what makes the headlines, what gets airtime, and what types of things are top of mind? Once you start reading and listening daily through the apps, websites, newsletters, or podcasts that work best for you, make sure to pay attention to who covers what topics and who produces the content that interests you. These are the journalists you'll probably want to pitch one day.

We encourage you to read the work of journalists you like even if they don't seem to be "relevant" to your industry, brand, or clients. You never know what the future holds.

Another great tool for having a nose for news is media monitoring. As a PR professional, you're likely already using something, maybe a combination of free services mashed together, or a cloud-based software, or maybe you've even invested in a media intelligence service where analysts sift through the coverage for you. By tracking your coverage, your competitors' coverage, and your industry, you'll be able to identify trends, see what outlets share your industry's news regularly, and which journalists have relevant beats.

If you're wondering where to start reading, visit our online resource [Top Media Outlets](#). You'll find lists of the top 10 newspapers and top 10 magazines by circulation for the US, the UK, and Canada.

We recommend that you go beyond the big outlets while doing your research. Read, watch, and listen to local and regional news. If you work in a particular field, make sure you're familiar with trade publications, niche outlets, and other industry influencers (maybe there's a podcast perfect for you!).

STEP 2 HIT FOLLOW

Just like you, journalists know the power of owned and shared channels. They want to get their work seen. Follow their professional accounts on Twitter and Facebook (if appropriate) and start liking, sharing, and retweeting what you find insightful, intriguing, and valuable.

Pay attention to the articles they share, who they interact with, and who interacts with them. This will give you greater insight into their interests and the community they engage with, which could end up being a community you want to reach out to.

When you share, comment, and engage with journalists on social media, you begin to create name recognition. Even if it's just for a second, you catch their attention. But remember to be authentic in your interactions. Not everything—in fact very little—should be a sales pitch.

If they have a professional website, make sure you check that out too and sign up for any newsletters they might send.

**FIND THE TOP US AND UK JOURNALISTS IN THE INDUSTRIES THAT MATTER TO YOU
WITH OUR [TOP JOURNALISTS](#) ONLINE RESOURCE.**

In his 2021 Earned Media Mastery presentation, Devin Knighton, Director of the PR Intelligence Lab at Brigham Young University, shared his 20-minute Twitter rule for building relationships with journalists.

He breaks it down into four steps:

- Build Twitter private lists of journalists and media professionals. If you're having trouble identifying the right journalists to add to your list, Agility's [database](#) of over 1 million unique contacts is the place to start. Learn [how to identify media contacts on Agility](#).
- Use Twitter's [TweetDeck](#) to easily see what people in your lists are tweeting.
- Spend 20 minutes, three times a week checking your lists (that's only an hour a week!).
- Engage with smart, authentic comments. Likes can get lost, emails can go unread, but comments are eye catching.

HOLD UP!

Let's pause for a second before we get into the art of pitching.

We want to talk about two very important things that need to happen after you do your research but before you write your pitch.

ONLY PITCH NEWS

Not everything deserves coverage. Here's a snippet from our [Press Release Anatomy Guide](#) that we think you'll find useful:

Think long and hard about the message you're putting out and whether it's actual news. If you start sending press releases to journalists for every bit of information coming out of your organization, you'll quickly find yourself in their "Spam" folder and you can kiss future email opens goodbye.

The best way to know what's news is to read news (revisit Part 1). Would you want to read a story about what you're pitching to a journalist? Be honest...

[Katy Pollard](#), Founder of Listening Pig PR in the UK, says to put your news through the "pub test". If your mates wouldn't care to hear about your news at the pub, why should the media?

You may think that the more eyes that see your pitch the better.

Nope. It's in your best interest to avoid mass emailing.

If you pitch a story that has absolutely no relevance to a journalist or their audience, there is only one place your email will end up—the trash! Or worse yet, the journalist may tell you to never pitch them again. And just like that, you've lost a future contact.

ONLY PITCH RELEVANT JOURNALISTS

Best practice is to build small media lists of only the most hyper-targeted contacts. According to a survey we ran in May 2021, 69% of PR professionals email 100 people or less per pitch, and a quarter of those professionals email 25 people or less per pitch.

If you're not among the 25% of PR professionals pitching fewer than 25 people at a time, we recommend segmenting your list. In [Pitching the Media: How Do You Measure Up?](#) we say:

Regardless of the total amount of journalists you choose to pitch about a certain story, your media database should make it easy for you to segment contacts into lists based on characteristics, such as beat, location, media type, and interest area (to name a few). This allows you to tailor your pitch to select groups of journalists with shared characteristics.

For example, you may choose to pitch your story to 50 contacts who report across different media types including online, print, broadcast, and blogs. You'll likely want to segment this list of 50 into four sub-groups and tailor your pitch to each of these groups as different story elements/value-adds may interest them (e.g., b-roll, photography, links, bios).

To build these efficient segmented lists, you'll need to have done your research (yep, it **always** comes back to that).

MEDIA RELATIONS IS *not* A SALES TRANSACTION.

You are not doing them a favor, so they'll do you a favor. Neither are they going to sell your products, brand, clients, or services for you. That's not what they're there for. If you are looking to make a sale and get your CEO or product a quick highlight, back away from the keyboard!

Also, if this is a true relationship, don't only reach out when you need something (like getting your story covered). Check in with them to see how you might be of service on a project they're working on or, if you have a topic idea that you know is right up their alley even if it may not involve you.

HOW TO PITCH

Pitching is an art. When you do it right, you can build and strengthen your relationship with the journalist. When you do it wrong... well, it's not a suggestion when journalists say never pitch them again.

Before we get into our tips on how to write and send your pitch, let's quickly go over some things to avoid:

- **Being overly familiar.** Use the recipient's first name but avoid nicknames or shortened versions.
- **Being cutesy.** Leave the bad puns for dad. Sassy subject lines and sentences will earn you an eye roll if you're lucky, and the trash bin if you're not.
- **Being rude.** Pay attention to where journalists will receive pitches—and where they won't (like personal email accounts).
- **Regurgitating news.** If the story you're pitching has been covered extensively by various other outlets, it's not going to have much—if any—appeal.

Alright, now that we've got those out of the way, let's get into what you should do.



BE CONCISE

Successful pitches come in all word counts. There is no maximum or minimum email length that will guarantee a read. A lot of PR pros say to keep it short—a couple hundred words, a few short paragraphs. On the other hand, according to [research](#) we conducted early in 2021, the average length of emails with top clickthrough rates sent using our platform was 620 words.

Here's why both work: **there is a difference between short and concise.**

Concise means to be brief in form but comprehensive in scope. You want to help journalists do their jobs as easily and quickly as possible by providing everything they need to write or produce a story. Show them what makes your story newsworthy, but get to the point quickly.



BE FLEXIBLE

What you want and need may not be what the journalist wants and needs at that exact moment. Be prepared for your story to undergo some changes and be open to it! If you're not easy to work with, journalists will find someone else.

In broadcast, the relationship between producer and PR pro is quite collaborative. As Rebecca Rogers, ex-producer and Broadcast Media Lead at [LEWIS](#) says: “Once you get the producer to buy in, to want your spokesperson on the show, then you have the opportunity to develop that segment. The producer knows it’s a collaboration. They’re not going to say that ‘this is the story I’m writing, and this is it.’ Producers and anchors want to work with you and with your spokesperson. It’s a natural conversation, much more I would say than with print and online media.”



BE UNDERSTANDING

Sometimes your email might get missed or what you’re pitching just isn’t a good fit. Don’t take it personally. Some days, that’s how it works. A journalist not answering your email doesn’t necessarily mean they’re not interested. Follow up politely, but also learn when to let go.

Follow-up procedure depends on the media you’re pitching. According to our survey of PR professionals, most PR pros follow up 2-3 days after sending the initial pitch. However, if you’re pitching broadcast which moves quickly and has a lot more daily and nightly staff turnover due to odd working hours, you’ll want to follow up multiple times and even within a few hours of sending your first pitch.

Celena Fine, Vice President at Tier One Partners and a former TV journalist, led [a special webinar](#) that lays out how to pitch broadcast. You can also learn more about pitching broadcast media in this [PR Daily](#) article.



BE TRUSTWORTHY

The quickest way to detrimentally impact a relationship is to prove yourself untrustworthy. Don’t mislead your contacts. Don’t sensationalize your subject line just to get an open. Don’t call your first email a follow up when it isn’t. When you’re desperate for an open and willing to try anything, know that you’re risking a lot more than a quick rejection—you’re risking your professional reputation.

The second part of being trustworthy is making sure that you are always factual and accurate. Providing journalists false information reflects badly on them and you, which then means they won’t want to work with you again. As Isabel Lara, Chief Communications Officer at NPR said in her 2021 Earned Media Mastery keynote:

Sometimes in the fast-paced environment that we live in now, people are tempted to provide information that they haven’t completely fact-checked or that they’re not really sure of. I think it’s so important to provide accurate information. If you get back with wrong or not confirmed information, you’re not helping. Sometimes as a PR person you need to take pause and think, *the story can’t publish until I have this information so let’s wait until we’ve confirmed our facts and then get back to the reporter.*



BE EARLY

Understand the pressures and deadlines journalists are under and how those differ depending on the type of media they're in. Broadcast is different than print. For instance, unless you're pitching a special projects producer who works with a longer lead time, you'll need to pitch two to three days in advance of when you want your story to be picked up.

No matter who you're pitching though, give them enough time. If you're pitching a journalist who usually takes a week to complete a story, pitching them with the expectation that the story will be done by end of day is unrealistic.



BE THOUGHTFUL

Journalists do not work for us. Not even a little bit. We answer to our clients or to our bosses (or to other stakeholders) and journalists answer to their editors, directors, and audiences. If we show that we understand the value of their work and understand their audience, we will build positive relationships. Think about it in terms of giving, not receiving. What can you give the journalist—sources, information, scoops, angles—that will benefit them and their audience?

Take it from the three journalists that joined us at the 2021 Earned Media Mastery summit:

- “You have to seduce us with a story hook where we can go, 'Hey, that's a great story for me.’” [Tom Hallman Jr.](#)
- “Some of our best sources for stories are our readers, so if you can start thinking like our readers, then you're going to be able to pitch a good story to us.” [Christopher Elliott](#)
- “Most of what we're doing is not in service of an organization or institution or whoever is pitching us, it's all about the readers. Everything we do, we do wondering what kind of value the readers will find in this story.” [Megan DeLaire](#)



BE CAUTIOUS WITH MULTIMEDIA

Until you learn what a journalist prefers, be cautious with multimedia. It's a good thing to have on hand, but depending on who you're reaching out to, files, attachments, or links may not be appreciated in the first email—or even make it through. Spam filters often pick out emails with overly large files or don't allow embedded images to be viewed. Some journalists want attachments, others prefer links, still others would rather just know you have multimedia available should they decide to pursue the story.

According to that [survey](#) we mentioned earlier, most PR pros (57%) use links to popular file-sharing platforms such as Dropbox or Google Docs to send their multimedia.



BE THOROUGH

Make things as easy and simple as possible. Be reachable and make sure that your resources are organized and the expert sources you're offering are available—and ready to chat. Lama Nicolas, former Canadian TV broadcast journalist and now Director of Earned Media and Editorial at Proof Strategies Inc. says, “We have to give them a complete story—an outline if you will. Data. Quotes. Background. Here's who you're going to interview and why. They want something that doesn't involve a lot of research because they're often expected to file for multiple platforms.”

Time-poor journalists should never have to beg or hunt you down for more information. It's your job to do the heavy lifting. As PR coach to the big names in business, Michael Smart says, “Do it for them. Not just the angle, but the examples and sources too.”



BE INTERESTED

You don't always have to be pitching. Sometimes the most beneficial thing you can do is ask a journalist what they will be working on next. You may be able to help them out, or if not you, introduce them to someone who can. PR is not a competition, it's a collaboration.

As we said before, media relations is not a sales transaction.

By applying our tips for pitching, you'll avoid the #PRFail Hall of Fame. What are we talking about? Twitter is a deep well of journalist frustration, much of which could have and should have been avoided by a wily PR pro exhibiting attention to detail, common sense, and vigilance. From misspelling a journalist's first name to irrelevant ideas to cringe openings, journalists have seen—and tweeted—it all.

We wrote an article about the 5 common pitch fumbles that land PR pros on #PRFail Twitter—and how to avoid them.

THE PERSONALIZED PITCH

What constitutes a personalized pitch?

You'll know your pitch is personalized if it wouldn't work for anyone besides the journalist you're sending it to. A personalized pitch should include at minimum:

- The journalist's name
- Reference to some of their previous work that aligns with the topic or trend you're pitching
- A relevant story angle that will appeal to their audience

HOW TO CRAFT A PERFECT PITCH COULD BE AN ENTIRE GUIDE UNTO ITSELF—AND THERE'S NO EXACT FORMULA—SO WE'RE GOING TO LEAVE YOU WITH A FEW RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT:



EARNED MEDIA» MASTERY

One last thing before you hit send on that perfected, personalized pitch: There's nothing more embarrassing than sending an email with an egregious spelling mistake or a clumsy grammar faux pas. Double or even triple check your email.

You'll have a much better chance of earning coverage when you practice personalization. Now, let's be very honest for a second. Sometimes your perfect pitch will still get a 'no' because that's just how news works. You know this, but your client or boss may not. Make sure to set that expectation early. We talk about this essential step of managing client relationships in a [PR Daily article](#).

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU *don't* HEAR BACK?

Our survey found that almost 60% of PR pros wait 2-3 days to send a follow up email. Another 14% wait a little longer, stretching follow up to 4-7 days.

KEEP IN MIND—REJECTION HAPPENS.

It's normal. You won't win every time. But... if you are getting rejected time and time and time again then it's time for some self-reflection. No amount of experience or years in the industry will assure you coverage if you have poor pitching skills (and eventually you have to stop blaming journalists and the news cycle). If you refuse to self-reflect and objectively analyze your pitching technique, you won't improve.

PART THREE AFTER YOU PITCH

The relationship building isn't done after you hit send or after your story is picked up. Here's what to do even after they've said yes.

CONTINUE BEING HELPFUL

Pay attention to the details. Make their experience interviewing your source or receiving the multimedia as streamlined and pain-free as possible. Celena Fine (remember her?) says that she finds that a substantial part of relationship building happens when you're helping get the story set up.

SAY THANK YOU

Don't drop off the radar after the story is live. Say thank you. It can be an email. Maybe even a physical gift. But one of the simplest ways you can say thank you is to share the story. Promote it on your networks. Get your client or coworkers to promote it too.

KEEP UP THE RELATIONSHIP

Show journalists that you appreciate them outside of what they can do for you. Continue to share and engage with their work even when you're not actively working with them on a story. Check in if you have a good professional relationship and it's appropriate.

BE AVAILABLE

The dream is to have a journalist follow up with you quickly or even reach out to you first. So, when they do, don't leave them hanging!

CONNECT WITH THEM AS PEOPLE

Because at the end of the day, that's what we all are.



“It’s a two-way street relationship with PR people and reporters. When we do a story, we need you to tweet it out, put it on social media, and share it because the more hits that story gets, the more prominent that story becomes on our sites. Your job as a PR person is not just to pitch something, but once it’s out—share it.”

Journalist Christopher Elliott

It may not seem immediately obvious, but media database and media monitoring tools are extraordinarily helpful in relationship building.

HOW? *Thanks for asking.*

MEDIA DATABASES

Depending on the database, you will have the contact information of hundreds of thousands of potential journalists and influencers who may be interested in your story. The sophistication of the media database will determine how you can search for appropriate contacts—by keyword, beat, region, outlet, topic, and interests. The more focused and specific you can get, the more targeted and relevant a list you'll create.

Your database may also give you a glimpse into the social media presence of these journalists, linking to public accounts so you can get a quick peek at their recent posts.

MEDIA MONITORING

Media monitoring is listening. By including your competitors and your industry as part of your monitoring, you can see who your possible advocates are, who your naysayers are, and who is frequently covering topics relevant to you.

With media monitoring, you'll be able to keep track of your coverage so you can share it afterwards with all of your stakeholders and thank the journalist or producer responsible.

EMAIL OUTREACH AND REPORTING

Again, depending on the monitoring or database tool you use, you may also have the benefit of an integrated email outreach tool with a reporting function. Why is this so great?

Other than making your life easier, the reporting function can help you put together next steps. When you can see who opened and/or clicked your email, you'll know who to prioritize, and how best to follow up (or not). The journalists who clicked a link are likelier to be receptive to a follow-up email, an offer for more information, or a call.



A good service will combine all these tools into an integrated platform allowing you to have a 360°, in-depth view of your media relations. Our Agility platform happens to do just that, and we'd love to tell you about it!

BOOK A FREE TOUR WITH ONE OF OUR EXPERTS TODAY.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We'd like to end this guide by saying that no two journalists, bookers, or producers are the same, and that you have to determine what works best for your contact. Unfortunately, that does largely happen through trial and error. However, employing the tips we've outlined—which ultimately are about being respectful, courteous, and helpful—will better your chances of becoming a trusted resource.



“There’s just this lack of understanding, lack of respect for the PR profession and I find that deeply offensive because I could not do what I do without the help of good PR professionals.”

Journalist Christopher Elliott