

How to pitch news outlets to cover your action

To *pitch* a reporter or assignment editor about an action or event you're planning is to call them up—typically after sending them a news release—and attempt to persuade them that they should come out (or send a reporter) and cover what you're doing. A good pitch call is at least as important as sending a good news release. With a call, unlike a news release, you are creating a memory of a human-to-human interaction. It's your opportunity to make a strong impression so that when the reporter or editor goes into their morning or afternoon meeting—where they're deciding which stories to cover—they are more likely to advocate for covering your event.

Reporters and editors are busy people. They often sound as if they are unhappy that you reached them by phone, and sometimes you'll be lucky to get a full minute of their time. An effective pitch call makes a strong impression within the first five seconds, and makes at least the start of a compelling case within ten seconds.

INEFFECTIVE PITCH (example)	EFFECTIVE PITCH (example)
<p><i>Hi. My name is [name]. I'm calling about an event that we're organizing. The event will be here in Manhattan. We'll be having a march. It's part of Occupy Wall Street. Veterans will be joining the protest today.</i></p>	<p><i>Hi, I'm [name], calling on behalf of 'Veterans of the 99%'. Tomorrow, military veterans dressed in uniform will march in-step from the Vietnam Memorial in lower Manhattan to the Stock Exchange. Then they'll join Occupy Wall Street — where they'll use a "people's mic" to talk about why, as veterans, they are participants in the 99% movement. Did you receive our press release?</i></p>

In the *ineffective pitch* example, the pitch is bland. There's no indication of what the caller is even talking about until a few sentences in. The caller would be lucky to even get to the veteran part—which is the *news hook*—without the reporter yawning or interrupting. While the example of the *effective pitch* is slightly longer than the first, it is packed with words that command attention and stimulate the imagination. Everything in this pitch floods the mind with powerfully vivid images.

The effective example ends with a question: “*Did you receive our press release?*” The reporter or editor has to respond, and will typically do so in one of three ways: 1) Yes, 2) No, 3) Maybe/I don't know. You can respond to their answers in the following ways:

- *Yes*: Great. Will you be sending someone to cover it?
- *No or Maybe*: I'll resend it right away. What email or fax number shall I send it to?

No matter how they answer, you should close the call by making another brief, compelling pitch. You may want to try a pitch that speaks explicitly to production considerations, such as:

Veterans in uniform standing at attention in front of the Stock Exchange will be a powerful visual — you'll definitely want to send a photographer [if print media]. Will you be sending someone?

If the reporter or editor is non-committal, ask them if there is any additional information you can provide that would help them decide.

Writing an effective news release

has some things in common with making an effective pitch call. It's important to stack the most exciting stuff at the top: the most exciting language possible to describe the most compelling people and to spotlight the most captivating visuals. In a news release though, it is also important to weave the issue more substantially into the story. The modern media tends to be disturbingly lazy, and sometimes they simply quote from—or even print whole sections of—news releases, rather than send a reporter. A good news release starts with the strongest news *hooks* (the stuff that really catches reporters' or editors' attention) but weaves in the campaign message (what you want to communicate about your issue), so that, ideally, any one sentence could stand strongly on its own if that were the only sentence a news outlet chose to print. *Be sure to keep copies of releases about upcoming events onhand for journalists at your occupation's info or press table.*



'Veterans of the 99%' in front of the New York Stock Exchange. 11/2/2011

A few more tips:

- **When to call:** *early and often.* Send your first advisory to get your action on editors' radar screens (and calendars) as early as possible. Make a first round of calls to accompany the advisory. Send it again a few days before and then again the morning of your action. Whenever possible, send the release and make follow-up calls first thing in the morning (7-8am) — to hit morning meetings where assignments are often determined. Additionally, if you are organizing an event where you want a lot of people, then find out if your local papers, weeklies, etc. have a public community calendar where you can list your event to help build turnout.
- **Who to call:** If you don't already have a press list, see if you can "borrow" one from another local grassroots organization that does. If you can't borrow a list, don't worry, just look up all your local media outlets online or in the phone book, and start calling. The default is to call and ask for the assignment editor. However, pitching specific reporters can be more effective. So, it pays to familiarize yourself with the reporters from your local news outlets. Notice who covers what "beats" and start calling the reporters who you think will be interested in your story. If a reporter covers you once, call them next time around. Be sure to add to your list any reporters who visit your occupation site. Think of your press list as a dynamic document. Keep good notes, including links to past coverage.
- **Who should make the call:** Ideally the folks who are doing the pitching are folks who can speak compellingly about the issue. Callers should be prepared to do an interview on the spot, should the opportunity arise. When possible, it's good for the pitch caller to have a level of authority on the issue. In the example above, veterans participating in the event would be ideal folks to do the calling. However, *someone* making pitch calls is better than *no one* making pitch calls. And it's important to train new people too. One thing you can do is assign calls to news outlets that are "lower stake" (typically smaller readership or audience) to new folks, so that they have the opportunity to make their first pitch calls without so much pressure. It's always a good idea to practice role playing a few pitch calls — to build confidence and to refine your pitch.