**Advantage Africa Partners’ Workshop**

# **Handout 16.3: Tips for Pitching Story Ideas to Journalists and Getting Your Organisation's Work Recognised in the Press**

1. **Apply the 'Dr Pepper principle'**It's a cliche, but asking yourself 'What's the worst that can happen?' before you make the call really can work wonders and set your mind at rest. Taking a punt on pitching a story is not going to alienate you from the media forever or make you a laughing stock. At the very worst the journalist won't be interested, but at least you tried, and maybe your proactivity will be rewarded at a later date.
2. **Take the 'So What' test**

However earth-shatteringly exciting your story is within your organisation, it won't cut the mustard media wise unless you can prove that your news is timely, fresh and relevant to a wide audience. Ask yourself: why do people need to know this and how will it benefit them?

1. **Be on target**Think about the best way to approach different journalists. Interestingly, while the phone call was favoured across the board up until very recently, journalists are increasingly reporting that they prefer an email or even a tweet, depending on how time-dependent your story is. Make sure both you and your organisation are active on social media well before you start talking to journalists on Twitter.
2. **Preparation, preparation, preparation**Know your story inside out and upside down before you pitch it; deadline-driven journalists won't be impressed if you give them the wrong stats or have to offer to get someone else to call them back.
3. **Make it personal**Do your research beforehand, so you can link your pitch to things they've written before or themes they've shown an interest in.
4. **Do the donkey work**The current climate coupled with the explosion in rolling news, blogs and digital media means that the typical journalist is juggling multiple deadlines and under more pressures than ever to get the hottest stories. Try and tailor-make your story as far as possible, so you have quotes, case studies, photos and spokespeople ready and waiting. They'll thank you for it.
5. **Keep it brief and keep listening**Always, ALWAYS ask journalists if they have time to talk. And if they do, don't just launch into describing your story idea in exhaustive detail. Just summarise the main bits -  if they're interested the secondary stuff can follow. And know when to stop - the longer you stay on the phone the higher the odds that your nerves might kick in or the impact of your idea will get lost in a sea of small talk.
6. **Be open to ideas**If they haven't got the time or space to cover your story, that doesn't have to be the end of the road. Think online and user-led - could you write something for them, or could they revisit your story in a blog post or online item at a later date?
7. **Exclusive means exclusive**The national press in particular will often expect to get first dibs on running a story, so think carefully about who you pitch to first. And be honest - they'll take a dim view if you promise them an exclusive only for them to see a rival outlet running a story the day before. Think about offering taster statistics, an interview or a different angle before you release your story to everyone else - that way they get a first without compromising anyone else's interest, and your story is covered more widely over a sustained period of time. Job done!
8. **Deal with rejection**If they're not interested, thank them for their time and move on. And don't ever take it personally - deadlines, big breaking news stories or just not quite fitting with the day's agenda are all factors that may mean your story isn't given the priority you think it deserves.
9. **Create your own news**
You'll need to come up with a positive pitch to convince the media to cover what you're saying. This could take the form of:
* a new piece of research or important breakthrough
* a new campaign (which could be linked to the above)
* strong comments from your chief executive or celebrity supporter
* strong case studies from your beneficiaries about how their lives have been changed
* well-researched analysis of the impact of government policy

## Piggyback on news This is a proactive response which involves reacting to breaking or ongoing news stories that are relevant to your work. Stay up-to-date by:

* monitoring newspapers, online news websites and twitter (use a # search) for relevant stories in your issue area
* setting up [Google Alerts](http://www.support.google.com/alerts/) to keep you informed about what’s happening
* looking out for important general [news anniversaries](http://www.expertsources.co.uk/anniversaries.php) or commemorative days

Be ready to react at short notice. A speedy, brief reaction is usually better than a slow, long one. Make sure you have background notes about your organisation and contact details always ready to go.

1. **Build a constructive relationship with journalists**Then they will come to you first. Peter will elaborate on this at the workshop.See also handout on this topic.
2. **Write a letter to a newspaper**Can you contribute something new to the debate, react to an announcement or correct something that been written? A letter is a quick and relatively low-effort way of getting your views heard in a news environment. The contact details for writing letters to newspapers will be on their websites and it usually helps to react to a particular article. And don’t forget magazines.
3. **Call in to a radio station**Radio phone-ins are happening all day every day. Listen out for subjects that are relevant to your work on local radio, and national stations.
4. **Use social media, including Twitter**
A whole new subject area that we may not have time to cover at the Advantage Africa Workshop. Ask Peter or Andrew for specific help if you need it?