



Navigating media engagement & pitching

A guide by journalists

FREE PRESS
EASTERN
EUROPE
ENDOWMENT FUND

What we will discuss

What is a **target audience** for your story?

What is a **good pitch**?

How to **approach journalists**?

How to **maintain relationships** with newsroom beyond one story?

Take a picture of your targeted audience

... and your dream media

Go through this checklist every time you plan a media outreach campaign

- Who cares?** Who do you address? Audience breakdown by geography, demographics, social status.
- Where** would you like to see the **largest impact?** Political decision-makers, general audience, human rights activists or else
- What changes for them?** What additional value does your message carry for the targeted audience?
- What news outlets** are popular with your targeted audience?



EXAMPLE: defining additional value of the story you pitch

Also, there are a few ways that ordinary people can identify when people who are, for example, being trafficked, are in some crowded areas such as border crossings or airports. By showing the signs to look out for, people can help directly in rescuing victims. We interview experts who will tell us exactly what signs to look out for.

'Additional value' argumentation from the pitch for one of our Romanian projects highlighting the problem of Ukrainian women refugee who became the victims of human trafficking.



440

407 comments 103 shares

Looking for publishing partners



Shared values

Make sure that prospective publishing partners not only serve the same audiences you'd like to target, but also **adhere to corresponding values in their everyday editorial judgement** (no hate speech, fact-checked journalism, responsible human rights coverage.)

After the publication is out, not only do **you risk your own reputation by association, but also the reputation of the people you feature** in your outreach campaign.

STEP # 2: Get down to it

What editor would like to see in a good pitch?

What is a ‘pitch’?

- **Pitch** is a **speech, written note or act** that attempts to convince someone to buy or do something. In journalism, a brief description of a story **to convince an editor to commission a full-size story** for further publishing.
- **Pitch an actual story, not an idea.** Editors would like to see a description of a well-formed story or an argument, already **well-researched and providing necessary background** for the issue.



What is NOT a pitch?



- A press-release
- *'Have you seen this? Do you want to publish something about it?'*
An informal message in online chat pointing to the problem or a story
- Already written story

Step 1. Writing a pitch. 7-step checklist

- ❑ **FIRST: Subject line/ a title** (attention grabbing, up to 7 words, no exclamation point, no open questions, no UPPERCASE)
- ❑ **SECOND: Structure** what happened, where, when and why
- ❑ **THIRD: Format** what do you offer in terms of product (a narrative story, an interview, an opinion piece, a filmed video or else)
- ❑ **FOURTH: Context**: describe the people or arguments featured in your piece and circumstances that shape the story
- ❑ **FIFTH: Added value** make sure you clearly explain why this story is important, stands out from other similar stories and what additional value it carries for your targeted audience
- ❑ **SIXTH: Double check** isn't too long? Read it outloud and make sure it doesn't take more than **two minutes**.
- ❑ **SEVENTH: Contacts:** please, put contacts of the experts, featured speaker and someone from your organization to the additional questions.

What makes a good pitch



RULE 1. Captivating story or original argument

News media constantly look for good stories and captivating voices.

If you have such an idea, you are on the right track. A human story or a strong argument are always a good way to reach the broadest spectrum of readers. This is the ultimate goal of journalists, too.

EXAMPLE: a pitch for a captivating human rights story

Domestic violence in Eastern European countries is often hidden, normalized, and covered in media almost exclusively from the victim's perspective. But what about the perpetrators? Who are they, why do they become violent, and can they change?

In Moldova, programs for working with aggressors have been running for several years. Trained counselors and psychologists work directly with them, but the results remain largely unknown to the public.

Our story will combine **first-hand accounts** of two perpetrators — how they became aggressors and whether they see a path to change and **expert's insights** on whether rehabilitation is possible and under what conditions.

The main section from the pitch by our partner from Moldova for a project covering the problem of perpetrators' rehabilitation.



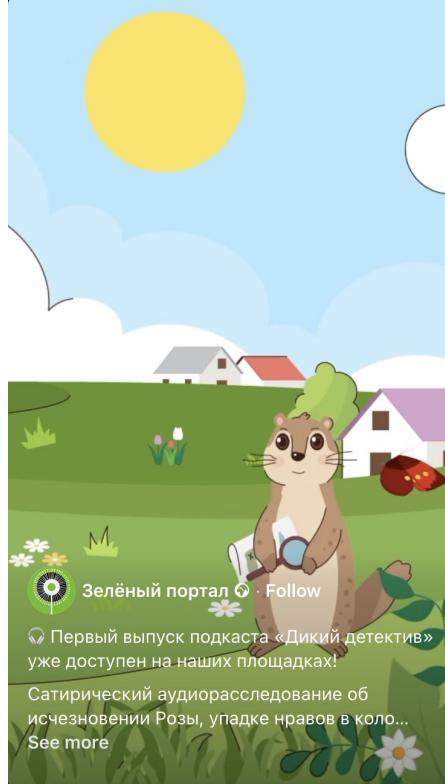
Ai tendințe violente.
Ce să faci?

RULE 2. Facts first

Your story has to have texture.

Remember, the journalist will want to check the facts. Are the people featured in the story ready to speak out publicly? If you can, prepare a support brief for the main speaker with key talking points and tips how to talk to a journalist. Remember, the featured speaker doesn't have to talk to the journalists - but you can help them establish a dialogue.

EXAMPLE: research and storytelling repackaged in a news reporting



A data set about declining of *European spotted marmot* populations in Belarus was translated into true crime format - a serie of podcasts and ironical animated videos for YouTube and Instagram.

RULE 3. Think like a news editor

What is the key thing in your story?

This determines which genre of journalistic publication will be most suitable.

Suggest a format, help a journalist.

- Conflicts, court case? **News report**
- Long-term problem? **Analysis**
- Good argument and strong opinion? **Op-ed**
- Success story / tragedy? **Reportage or a documentary**

EXAMPLE: thinking about news formats in advance



[The mass shooting in Prague University and its psychological impact on the young public.](#)

An explainer about PTSD after shooting, repackaged in a serie of TikTok videos by Czech newsroom.

RULE 4. Keep it simple. Keep it brief

Your story pitch doesn't have to be 10,000 words. Videos, animations, infographics, cards, polls can all be successful formats. But avoid the language of press releases. News outlets **are interested in attracting the audience with accessible, easy-to-digest content.**

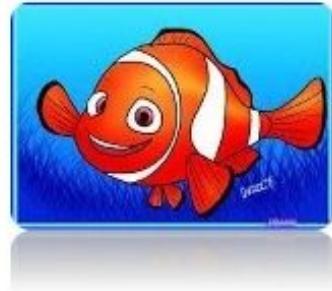
Your pitch idea must fit two paragraphs, or it may end up in unreads. Grab attention with a good subject line that might serve as a possible future title, too. Want to add a video or some other visual element? Cross-link, instead of embeds and attached files.

EXAMPLE: the Pixar pitch

Pixar is one of the most successful animation studios in the world. Each of their movies follows a simple structure:

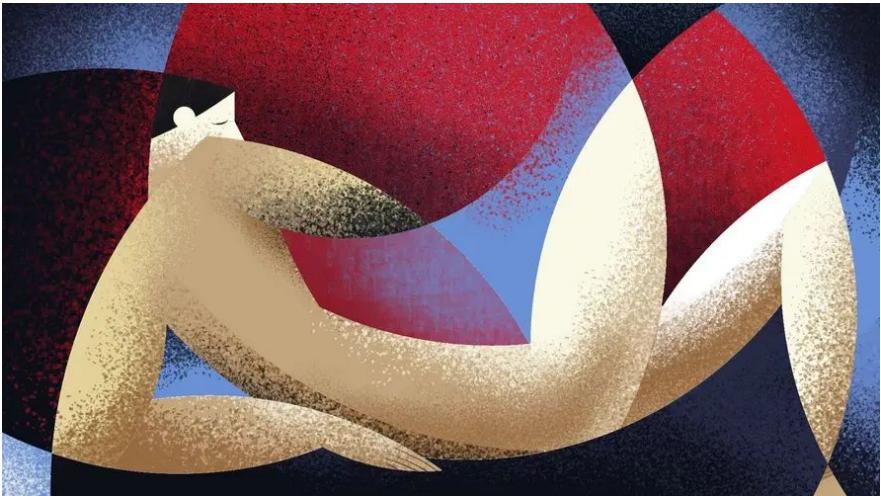
Pixar Pitch: The Plot of Finding Nemo

1. **Once upon a time there was** ... a widowed fish, named Marlin, who was extremely protective of his only son, Nemo.
2. **Every day** ... Marlin warned Nemo of the ocean's dangers and implored him not to swim far away.
3. **One day** ... in an act of defiance, Nemo ignores his father's warnings and swims into the open water.
4. **Because of that** ... he is captured by a diver and ends up in the fish tank of a dentist in Sydney.
5. **Because of that** ... Marlin sets off on a journey to recover Nemo, enlisting the help of other sea creatures along the way.
6. **Until finally** ... Marlin and Nemo find each other, reunite and learn that love depends on trust.



RULE 5. Highlight context and backstory

The best story pitch is the one that is connected to a larger problem or phenomena.



A story by Ukrainian TV explores challenges faced by Ukrainian war veterans in returning to sexual life after injuries, highlighting larger problem of reintegration of war veterans with PTSD into society, not only in Ukraine

RULE 6: Ping

Make sure that your pitch, no matter what channel you send it, is received. The story may not end up published, but it will be a waste if it is simply overlooked.



Finding a home for your pitch

Life hacks of a successful communication with journalists

A **good pitch** is quite likely just 10% of the **successful** media outreach.

The chances of your story to get published are contingent on **good** strategic communication **outreach** and **long-lasting** professional **relations** with news outlets.

This is a two-way street: be a partner to journalists, instead of turning to them only when you need to use their platform.

Life Hack #1: Understanding the needs of news outlets

The editorial decision-making within newsrooms is hyper-sensitive to news developments.

Very rarely a good human story or an argument makes news on itself. Usually they reach the audience connected to the current news agenda (a war, anniversary, a crisis or unprecedented development, etc.)

Master timing. Keep a close eye on the news agenda and anticipate when your issue can ride the wave. Be ready with material in media-friendly formats.



EXAMPLE: linking a story to a news cycle



The [transborder project featuring animal rights volunteers](#) was in the production stage as the Covid-19 pandemic hit, exacerbating the problem of stray animals, so our partners adopted the project to the news cycle.

Life Hack #2: Keep in touch

It is important to **map the people in newsrooms** who make ultimate editorial calls. How to spot them? Communicate more informally with journalists, **socialize** and network with them regularly. Be curious about how things work at their workplaces, latest staff developments and whatnot. **Make the database!**

Journalists are your best focus group. Keep updating them regularly on what is happening with you or your team professionally. Run your activities by them time to time, maybe they'll spot something newsworthy even if you don't see it on your own yet.

Life Hack #3: Step into a reporter's shoes

Educate yourself about pressures, limitations and struggles of news outlets in your region. State regulations for covering certain topics may result in a fine or jail term for journalists in some countries.

When designing a media outreach campaign, **help your publishing partners to tell the story in a way that doesn't put them in danger**. If the risks are too high, consider looking for publishing partners in neighboring countries or reach out to global news outlets.

Life Hack #4: Be realistic

Your story won't be told 100% the way you want it. Every news outlet has a set of its own professional and ethics rules. And by telling a story a journalist serves the audience, not the people featured in it.

Adjust your expectations. But to avoid misrepresentation of facts or distorted focus, discuss the story with journalists **in advance** as detailed as possible.

Let's practice!

Subject line/ a title

Short description: what happened, where, when and why (150-word summary)

Suggested formats: what do you offer in terms of product (a narrative story, an interview, an opinion piece, a filmed video or else)

Context: describe the people or arguments featured in your piece and circumstances that shape the story

Reason/why now: why this story is important, stands out from other similar stories and what additional value it carries for your targeted audience?

Useful contacts

Suggested newsrooms: please, describe what kind of newsrooms - or some specific newsrooms - you plan to target