

NATIONAL JUVENILE JUSTICE NETWORK

Pitching Stories to Reporters

Why Pitch?

It would be great if you could get journalists to call you when they're working on a story related to your issue, but there will always be times when you'll need to reach out to members of the press to get them to cover your event, the publication of your shocking new report, and so on.

Before You Pitch

Journalism has changed a lot with the advent of Web 2.0. Here's some questions to think about before you call The New York Times:

1. Does your target audience read the publication or watch/listen to the show? We live in a world of niche audiences. What do your audiences read or watch?
 - a. Corollary #1: Target local media. For example: local neighborhood newspapers may be more effective at getting the right people to attend your event than your big, statewide newspaper – and the reporters there are going to be more likely to want to hear what you have to say.
 - b. Corollary #2: Don't forget media by and for communities of color, the LGBTQ community, etc. Is your story relevant to specific audiences, like communities of color? To the LGBTQ community? If it's about juvenile justice, the answer's probably yes.
2. Think beyond reporters. Consider pitching your story to prominent bloggers in your field – they're always looking for content. (Don't forget local bloggers when you do.)
3. Consider editorial calendars. You'll need to pitch to a monthly periodical weeks or months ahead of your desired publication date; by the same token, a TV news station or a daily newspaper generally won't plan more than a few days in advance. Find out what the publication's editorial calendar is and time your pitch accordingly.
4. Don't forget email – but attachments are a no-no. Many reporters can be pitched initially by email – they even prefer it. But if you do this, don't send an attachment, or it'll get caught in their spam filter or trashed without being read.

Pitching Reporters by Phone or in Person

Most of the following tips apply to written pitches as well.

1. Ask if this is an okay time to talk. If they're on deadline, call back.
2. Start by talking to reporters you know. If you don't know any, start building relationships well before you need to pitch them.
3. Pitch a specific story, not an issue. For example, don't tell them you want to end the practice of prosecuting youth as adults; instead, tell them the story of a specific youth who got a raw deal, or about your new report showing that recidivism rates are higher for youth prosecuted as adults.
4. Tell the reporter why your story is timely now. One way to do this is to link it to some other story that's in the news.
5. Figure out who the story is relevant to – e.g., parents in specific neighborhood, taxpayers, communities of color. Think broadly about whom it affects. Wrap this into your pitch.
6. Keep your pitch simple and clear, with key points – write it down to practice, but when you do the pitch, don't read from a script.
7. Don't be discouraged if they're not interested – thank them and go back to them next time.

If a Journalist Calls You ...

Sometimes, a reporter may call you about a story he or she is working on. (In fact, you should start getting more of these calls as you build relationships with them.) Here's some questions to ask. These will help you figure out how to be most helpful.

1. What's your angle/story? Once you know this, you can shape what you want to focus on; you may even be able to use what you say to reframe the story in their minds.
2. Who else have you talked to? You may learn something about where they're going with the story, or what sort of information you'll need to provide for a complete story. You may also be able to suggest other people for the reporter to interview.
3. How can I help? Sometimes, reporters who call aren't looking for an interview – they might only be looking for a fact or a referral.
4. What's your deadline? Always take time to gather your thoughts – asking this question helps you figure out how quickly you need to respond. If the reporter's deadline is in 20 minutes, put him or her on hold for a minute or so while you get out your message box and gather your thoughts; if the deadline is further out, ask if you can call him or her back in