

How to catch a journalist's attention

 By [Zweli Mkgata](#)

4 Apr 2023

After spending a significant portion of my career in the newsroom before transitioning to public relations as a writer, I have gained valuable insights into how PR consultants can effectively engage with media.



Source: www.pixabay.com

For eight years, I worked at one of South Africa's top media organisations, contributing to various newspaper and magazine titles. I witnessed first-hand how journalists hustled from one assignment to another, all in an effort to break a story on time. Our editors, sub-editors, and reporters were all laser-focused on one word: Splash.

In print media, a "news splash" refers to the lead story on the front page of the publication. General news is highly competitive, and multiple factors contribute to a story's newsworthiness. This is something I quickly realised was essential to the public relations industry, albeit under a different name: "earned media."

Based on my experience in the newsroom, here are my recommendations to catch a journalist's attention and secure media coverage:

Write with the reader at the centre of the story

Inside the newsroom, it was clear from the first paragraph whether a story sent to us by an agency would be used or not; it had to resonate with our readers. Writing for a news publication and writing for agency clients are very different. The briefs differ, and what is perceived as "news" often varies. The amount of detail also differs, which is why press releases are never used verbatim in the newsrooms where I worked. Always consider the reader. If you believe that the reader, like you or me, would want to read it, chances are that the editor will want to read it as well.

Facts over feelings

I came across so many releases where the client's first quote was included in the second or third paragraph and began with the words, "We are very excited/pleased/happy...". Whether it was because of a spokesperson's insistence or an accepted practice in communication teams, this opening line can waste precious time for journalists who are constantly racing against the clock. They may skim past this line and move on to the next email.

To make sure your news release grabs their attention, put all the important facts upfront in the first few paragraphs. Move quotes from spokespeople or individuals three to four paragraphs down, ensuring they offer unique and meaningful insights while maintaining a human voice. This simple solution can make a big difference in getting your news release noticed.

The eight elements of newsworthiness

Most storytellers understand that the 'Five Ws and H' (who, what, where, when, why, and how), are the basic building blocks of reporting on news, but it was always surprising to note that even some people working in newsrooms did not know the elements of newsworthiness (the eight news values). These are: impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity (close to home), conflict, novelty (unexpected), timeliness (current), and human interest.



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While not every story can include all eight of these elements, a story is typically more compelling and impactful when it contains more of them, such as by providing additional information, greater significance, or a more surprising or shocking angle. I use these values when writing for our agency clients now and it makes a bigger impact on the stories we tell.

Learn the news cycle

Every news outlet, whether it is print or online, a radio or a television station, follows its own production schedule. For instance, a weekly news magazine such as *Financial Mail* might have one weekly "diary meeting" with various deadlines per section, whereas a daily newspaper editorial team conducts diary meetings every morning, which can be quite stressful. The submission of copy occurs at various times, and the amount of time allocated for story development depends on several factors. An investigative piece might be given weeks for research, while a standard report on company results may only receive a few hours. To ensure that your content is submitted on time, it is essential to ask your media contacts about their deadlines.

Know who you're pitching to

Pitching a story can be challenging, especially for a junior consultant speaking with a more experienced media person. However, effective salespeople know that a good product will sell itself. Therefore, it's crucial to take the time to create a high-quality product when 'selling' a client story. To do this, identify the most relevant media outlets and invest time in reviewing their past stories and issues of the publication. If the story aligns with their focus and you've effectively conveyed it in your email and phone pitch, the journalist is more likely to respond.

As someone who has worked in a newsroom, I am grateful for the opportunity to now guide our PR teams in identifying

newsworthy stories and developing relevant angles for specific publications. Since the two disciplines are closely intertwined, it's essential for PR consultants to have a deep understanding of how newsrooms operate, so they can effectively assist their clients in securing coverage with the right journalist and publication.

ABOUT ZWELI MOKGATA

Head of Content at Tribeca Public Relations

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