

6-POINT GUIDE TO APPROACHING HEALTH JOURNALISTS WITH A MEDIA STORY

Based on feedback from health journalists

In considering what health journalists are looking, or not looking, for when being approached with a media story, the Medical Journalists' Association undertook a sample survey of their members*. This 6-point guide is based on that feedback and provides a useful foundation for the healthcare communications professional. Clearly, journalists are individuals and may like to work differently. Where you have an existing relationship with a health journalist you will be able to personally tailor your approach based on those personal insights. However, if you do not have an established relationship, this guide provides some helpful best practice.

1 ENSURE THE STORY YOU ARE PITCHING IS RELEVANT TO THE JOURNALIST'S OWN AREA OF INTEREST

Journalists report their biggest pet-hate is pitches for stories which are not appropriate for their subject or regular outlets. Of concern is the fact that journalists say that only around 10% of the press releases and pitches they receive are relevant to their work. As well as blocking inboxes and wasting journalists' time, this damages the reputation of the communications sector and numbs journalists to unsolicited approaches in general.

“ Any PR who has done the most basic homework will see that I cover only evidence-based science and medicine, but I still get a barrage of unwanted releases touting fad diets and “wellness” trends.

Staff writer,
national newspaper

2 A SHORT EMAIL OUTLINING THE IDEA AND STORY ELEMENTS AVAILABLE IS THE JOURNALISTS' PREFERRED APPROACH

Email is the universally preferred approach with brevity being the most important factor for around 90% of journalists. It is important to note that follow-on calls to ‘check a press release has been received’, or find out ‘when the story is being used’, are journalists’ second biggest pet-hates.

But don't undersell the story either. Journalists pointed out that press releases don't always highlight the significance of the story. They need to know if the product being promoted is the first/best/only/latest, and have that context at their fingertip. If it's not in the release, many said they have no time to follow up, so the announcement is not covered.

“ If a PR calls to check if I've received their press release, the most polite response they are likely to receive is, “Which one of the dozens I've had today?”. If I'm interested, I'll follow up.

Health correspondent,
national newspaper

3 ENSURE YOUR STORY IS CLEARLY OUTLINED IN THE HEADLINE AND FIRST PARAGRAPH OF A PRESS RELEASE

It will be no surprise that most journalists do not read every press release or email they receive. And when they do, they rarely read a press release to the end, with many only reading the headline and first paragraph at most.

“ I know there are tight controls on what can be said in pharma press releases, but if it's not clear from the first para I usually don't have the time to decipher what the story might be. Please, keep it short and clear.

Health correspondent,
national newspaper.



4 IF THEY ARE INTERESTED, JOURNALISTS WILL WANT RAPID ACCESS TO THE FULL STORY OR PAPER, PREFERABLY AHEAD OF TIME IF UNDER EMBARGO

Be ready. Professional journalists will respect embargoes if they have agreed to them. Giving a journalist time to prepare a story maximises the opportunity for them to present it in a format most likely to be published. If you offer an exclusive, ensure it is exclusive and be honest about which other media outlets have been approached and promised. Some don't mind a story appearing in a non-competing outlet, but they do mind not being asked if this is OK.

NEWS

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In order to decide whether to do a story, even before I get round to getting comment and writing it, I need to see the paper and it can be very frustrating when that is not attached to the press release or a link provided (under embargo if needed). I then have to waste time trying to track it down. Please make this easily available from the start - it makes the job so much easier!

Contributor to the BMJ and other specialist journals

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I might speak to a company spokesperson for background, but I would never quote them. I want to speak to scientists or medics who can translate the science into understandable sound-bites.

Freelance health writer

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5 SPOKESPEOPLE NEED TO BE CREDIBLE AND AVAILABLE

The right company spokesperson can be of interest, but most journalists will also want credible, independent spokespeople. In all cases, these individuals need to be available in the journalist's timescales. They also need to be prepared to be interviewed on the subject and not expect pre-prepared questions or to have a communications colleague 'listen-in'. Ensuring that spokespeople are media trained is advisable, both in general and on the messaging for the specific story.

Following this guide will help ensure, as a sector, healthcare communicators are seen as professional colleagues who appreciate the needs and work demands on health journalists. In turn, this can help ensure health journalists remain receptive to healthcare communicators, knowing what they provide will be appropriate, considered and of potential media value.

*Results presented exclusively to HCA members. Available at: <https://the-hca.org/Events/Event-Recordings/MJA>

6 DON'T FORGET IMAGES AND FOOTAGE

Think in terms of media packages; it's not enough to have a good story, you need to think about how it will be illustrated or explained. This is particularly important if you want television coverage. If access is an issue, provide a showreel with a range of footage — work in the laboratory, patients being treated, medicines coming off a production line. Journalists also like mode of action explainers.



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Unless it's something absolutely earth shattering, if I can't show the story, it's not a story. Ideally we'd want access to record our own footage and if timing is a problem I'm happy to work under an embargo to film ahead of an announcement.

Broadcast journalist

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