



# Media Tips for Activist Groups

Spreading the word through Internet, print, television, and radio news outlets, is a great way to change minds about important issues. But if you don't interact with journalists the right way, you could waste a lot of time or worse, do more harm than good.

## How and Why to Contact the Press

### *Using a News Peg*

If you want to pitch a story about your cause to the news media you need a news peg. Two of the most common news pegs are an event in the news that relates to your cause or an activism event you organize yourself.

Tying your pitch to **an event in the news**—local, national, or international—is probably the most effective way to get news coverage. Reporters are often looking for ways to put an issue in context, and advance it past what other news outlets are reporting.

Another strategy that can be effective is staging an event. However, there are many things to keep in mind during the planning for this. Make sure that the event is at a convenient time and place for reporters to show up, ensure you have a good turnout from your team, and create strong visuals. There are more tips on staging events in this guide from the SPIN Project: <http://spinacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/SPIN-Works.pdf> (as well as many other useful tips).

### *The Pitch*

Many reporters prefer getting pitches in email, as they can read them when they have enough time to digest the ideas. Occasionally, it might be worth following up with a phone call, but a good first step is an email.

Here's an example of an email you might send to a reporter when the peg is a story that's currently being covered in the news.

*"Subject: Your story on tech and small business and another big problem that's looming*

*Bob – I saw that you wrote about how technology is impacting small businesses and really enjoyed it. So I thought you might be interested in another angle here, which is how international treaties will hurt both consumers and innovation. My group works on these issues, and we have an expert who would love to talk about what's going on right now: secretive international negotiations that could create new global rules that hurt small business. For example, the business you mention could be forced to stop adding upgrades to customers tablets and cell phones. There's more information here [URL to a blog post or something else on your website—not your home page!] Please let me know if you'd like to talk more."*

\*\*\* In your signature line, include complete contact information for yourself (with a title if you have one), and your organization.

If you have decided to **organize an event**, you should post a media alert on the web that includes the basics: title of action, where, when, what reporters will see, and contact information for organizers and some links to more information (to blog posts or other analysis as well as to the organizers' home pages). Don't put up too many graphics

or over-design it—make it easy to read and understand. You can see an example at <https://www.eff.org/press/releases/senators-call-privacy-law-update>.

*“Subject line: Local event on dangerous international treaty that hurts consumers everywhere*

*Bob - I saw that you've covered how ill-conceived laws can hurt technology businesses, so I thought you'd want to know about our Anti TPP flash mob at 10am Saturday in front of the Big Corporation Building [URL]. TPP stands for Trans-Pacific Partnership, and it's a secretive, multi-national trade agreement that threatens to extend restrictive intellectual property laws across the globe and rewrite international rules on its enforcement. You can see pictures from our last flash mob here [URL]. If you need anymore information, just let me know.”*

\*\*\* In your signature line, include complete contact information for yourself (with a title if you have one), and your organization.

You might consider adding an RSVP to try to gauge interest. But you will find that response or lack thereof has little connection to reality, either way.

You might consider offering a reporter an exclusive tip. This can be a difficult thing to negotiate, but they can work if you are willing to spend a lot of time with the reporter and go by his/her schedule. Make sure you have all the ground rules set out: what you expect and what the reporter expects. There is more information in the SPIN guide: <http://spinacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/SPIN-Works.pdf>

## Who do I pitch it to?

- The best bet for small activist groups is to go local. Look at the websites for local radio, TV, newspapers, and popular blogs.
- Identify the reporters who have covered issues that are similar to your own, using keyword searches if you need to, and find their email addresses if you can.
- Don't be afraid to send email to the general “news tip” email address that most outlets include on a “contact us” webpage.
- You are much better off sending email to a small, targeted group of reporters than to a long list of email addresses that aren't well vetted. Reporters are deluged with sloppy email pitches, and taking part in that is a good way to get ignored.

## What happens when a reporter is interested?

If a reporter responds to your email, answer any questions promptly and clearly. If you leave reporters hanging, you are telling them you are unprofessional and your tip isn't worth following up on.

Never imply that your email is an exclusive tip, unless it is. If a reporter asks who else you pitched it to, be honest: “I sent out similar email to a number of other reporters, but I've heard from you first. I think this story is very important and under-covered.” Or: “I sent email out to a number of other reporters. This story is very important and under-covered. Let me give you an example that you'd be particularly suited to writing about.”

## What happens when I get no response, or a reporter seems to lose interest?

- If you emailed a *reporter in response to news coverage and got no answer*, don't resend the email. He/she may have read it, and may not have. But you should feel free to try again when there's a new story to respond to.

- If you emailed to *pitch an event you planned*, you may follow up with a phone call or email reminder about 24 hours before the start time. If you call, remember to ask whoever picks up the phone if they have time for your call, and then keep it short and to the point. Example: “I emailed about an event tomorrow the TPP treaty. About 20 people will be there in costume, doing skits on how this treaty will hurt consumers. Do you need any more information?”
- If reporters email you back to say *some nice version of “thanks but not this time,”* make a note of it. They are good reporters to email again when a new news peg comes up.
- If reporters email you back to say *“please don’t contact me again” or give other instructions for pitching stories,* follow their directions. If you don’t, you are going straight to the trash.
- In all your interactions with reporters, *don’t get annoyed about not getting the response you want,* and don’t spam them in frustration. Stay positive and email judiciously.

## What to Do When the Press Contacts You

- You should have **three points** in mind that you’d like to make. Rehearse them, a lot. Make sure to get them in your answers. Think of three questions that you really don’t want to answer and rehearse your response to those as well.
- Always assume that you are on the record and everything you say is going to be quoted. If that makes you speak slowly and deliberately, all the better—it will give the reporter time to take notes and get clarification.
- If someone calls for a TV or radio interview, make sure to clarify if it will be live or taped, and what the reporter or interviewer expects of you. In case of a live show, feel free to ask for tips and helpful hints.
- For TV or in-person interviews, dress in something that makes you feel confident and professional. It doesn’t have to be a suit or something fancy, unless that makes you feel relaxed and in control.

As mentioned above, never leave reporters hanging. Always be well organized in returning phone calls and answering any questions promptly and clearly. If you don’t, they’ll never waste their time again.

## What happens after I see the story?

- If you like it – or even if it’s just average or not so bad – send a follow up thank you email. Compliments don’t hurt either, if they are genuine.
- Do follow up later with any new developments that you think might interest the reporter. But don’t overdo it or you will find you’ll soon be ignored.
- If there are elements of the story that you don’t like, you can clarify politely in your thank you message. This is a good way to get corrected spellings, etc., into web copy, for example. It happens much faster if you are cheerfully pointing something out than if you angrily demand a correction.
- Don’t directly ask for a correction unless you feel there is no other option. Once you start arguing with a reporter about his or her accuracy and ability to tell a story, you’ve probably ruined the relationship. Have a tough talk with yourself before escalating to that level. Is this change I want worth sabotaging all future coverage? Or am I being oversensitive? Remember that you can’t control media coverage: looking imperfect – or even occasionally flat-out bad – is the price of admission. However, the public opinion gains that you can make with media coverage usually make the risk worth it.

Getting media is extraordinarily hard—be pleased with any progress that you make. If you don’t get any coverage from your first few attempts at pitching the media, learn from your mistakes and try again!