

Pitch Imperfect



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In previous end-of-the-year assessments of the state of the [public relations](#) biz, I've tackled the following trends and developments:

2015: The need for PR pros to consider paid digital marketing schemes to advance their client's communications objectives, i.e., "we no longer can rely solely on the benevolence of journalists to tell their stories (["New Media & The PR Pro: A Look Ahead"](#))

2016: The growth in the use of social influencers as trusted "third-parties" to create awareness and action (["Content Marketing is So Last Year"](#))

2017: Can the ethical breakdown of political PR with its purposefully spread false narratives poison other industry sectors? (["When PR Turned to the Dark Side"](#))

For **2018**, I thought we'd get back to basics even as the PR profession is overwrought with more communications tools and disciplines than I could have imagined when climbing into the trenches decades ago. They now include the use of sophisticated consumer data sets to inform messaging and media channels, tapping social influencers to drive brand esteem and consumer behavior, and even getting into bed with the Facebook-Google advertising duopoly to deliver impressions, engagement and conversion.

While these new digital marketing disciplines beckon, we as a profession must acknowledge that our goals have essentially remained unchanged from those early days, especially with regard to securing editorial media coverage. Today's PR pro is still charged with building a positive client-branded presence in the "media" – one that hopefully produces measurable business results such as an increase in sales, stock price, reputation, support for an issue, etc.

Whatever else they say they do, nearly every PR firm I know today – from the coolest-sounding digital boutiques to the global agencies owned by Omnicom, IPG and WPP – places a premium on generating news and feature stories for their clients. I'd even venture to say that the majority of their clients still measure their agencies' value by the number and quality of these media "hits" and the audience impressions (and ad equivalencies!) they produce. On the social side of the media equation, sharing, likes, and engagement – not business results attributable to a specific campaign – still serve as success metrics for many.

I'm not complaining. I maintain that even as people derive their news and information from a hyper-fragmented media ecosystem, a prominent story in an influential news outlet like the *Wall Street Journal*, [The New York Times](#), Bloomberg News, the *Washington Post* or *Fortune* or on NBC Today, The AP, CNN or PBS "NewsHour" still has a greater capacity to move the needle than any paid social media post, podcast episode, digital advertisement, YouTube clip, or (real or fake) news item crossing one's Facebook feed.

And while we saw many digitally native news orgs struggle to find their financial footing in 2017 including [Mashable](#), [NowThis](#) (Group Nine), [Buzzfeed](#) and [HuffPost](#), all draw millions of eyeballs, considerably more than many of their legacy media counterparts.

More significantly, a plethora of digital news outlets such as

[ProPublica](#), Axios, [Buzzfeed](#), the Daily Beast, and [The Information](#) have risen to the ranks of *The New York Times*, The AP, NPR, the *Washington Post* and Bloomberg to produce some of the highest quality journalism we're seeing today – breaking stories that frequently set the national news agenda (however ephemeral that agenda has become).



Looking through the lens of the modern PR professional – of which there are six for every one on-staff news reporter or producer in

the U.S. – the odds of successfully engaging a journalist to cover one's client are minuscule indeed. I don't have hard statistics or success rates, but anecdotally as president of the [Publicity Club of New York](#), *I'd be surprised if one in one hundred PR-driven story pitches actually results in a story.*

It's not just the 6:1 ratio of PR people to journalists that has led to these abysmally low engagement rates. The quality of the pitch itself has degraded over the last few years. The vast majority of story ideas foisted upon journalists are poorly conceived, articulated and targeted. I see this firsthand as a sometimes [journalist](#) who personally receives too many superfluous if not inane story suggestions.

I often wonder who's mentoring the junior ranks in the agency world. Have young PR pros grown overly reliant on automated media list-building software, skipping the vital reporter research before they hit the send button? Do they recognize the difference between a message and an actual news hook? Do they have the temerity to challenge their clients' sometimes

unrealistic editorial expectations?

For those plying the lost art of media relations (i.e., most of you?), I thought it would be helpful to share ten common mistakes I've observed over the years:

1. **Mis-targeting** – There's no excuse for putting a story suggestion in the inbox of a journalist who has never covered, nor would ever consider covering the proposed topic. Tools now exist that can help avoid this common mistake, including [MuckRack](#) and Cision. Furthermore, if you use a service to send out group emails, know that many such services do not adequately mask the fact that the recipient is one among many. This is a definite turn-off for journalists.
2. **Awful Subject Line** – Since the subject line of an email will often determine whether the overture is opened or ignored, it is imperative to cogently capture the story idea. Worst example: "A Good Story for You;" Better example: "XXX Acquires YYY." Superlatives in the subject line are a big plus, but avoid hyperbole. If it doesn't work, do a little A/B testing and re-send with a different subject.
3. **Promotion-Minded** – Nearly every journalist I know bristles at the notion that he or she is serving as a cog in a marketing campaign. Their job is not to help companies sell more products or advance their messaging agenda. Stick to the essence of the news.
4. **No News Is No News** – A cursory look at the myriad news releases that cross Business Wire or PR Newswire on any given day makes one wonder why their purveyors wasted time creating them in the first place. Sure, publicly traded companies are required to announce news that may be material to their stakeholders, but as PR counselors, we're charged with honestly advising our clients on what makes and what doesn't make a story.
5. **Being Oblivious** – Not only is it imperative to research

the journalist before dashing off a story pitch, but it is equally important to have a thorough familiarity with the story's context and any trends or developments that contribute to or take away from its newsworthiness. Need I mention NOT to pitch a local TV news outlet a story on the day a mass shooting occurs in its hometown?

6. **Leadtime** – Unless it's Amazon acquiring Whole Foods or Spotify filing for an IPO, it is imperative to give a reporter some latitude to properly consider a proposed idea. It's a fool's errand to think that a reporter is going to suddenly pivot to your client's "news" with just 24-48 hours' notice. Two to three weeks is better. Also, Most honor embargoes, but don't send an embargoed news release without prior agreement from the journalist to take a look.
7. **English** – It never ceases to amaze me to see common grammatical mistakes in the story pitches I receive. Today there are tools to help avert such faux pas including [Grammarly](#), which flags such mistakes, or an email client that gives itchy senders a 10-20 second window to pull back the email *after* hitting the send button.
8. **Cut to the Chase** – Yes. Journalists are a beleaguered bunch. They do not have time to read through paragraphs upon paragraphs of your seemingly well-crafted prose. If you can't capture the story's essence in two or three sentences, then it's probably not worth pitching.
9. **Get Social** – Nearly every journalist I know is active in social media, especially on Twitter. No, do not pitch them story ideas via these channels, but rather, follow those whose beats correspond to your clients' industries and periodically retweet their more inspiring output...in a non-stalking manner. (They'll notice you.)
10. **Facetime** – Sure, a journalist will probably see your name if you RT or like what he or she has tweeted. Still, there's nothing like an in-person meet-up to make a more lasting impression. Media conferences, PR

industry events and, of course, actual interviews or pressers offer opportunities for quality face-time.

I've seen a number of [industry stories](#) and blog posts lately from PR pundits who insist that media relations as a core PR competency is over. My experience working with journalists and presiding over many PCNY-hosted media panels tells me differently. (Just listen to what these journalists tell the audience of PR pros during one of our [PCNY media panels](#).)

Sure, it's harder than ever to capture journalists' increasingly shorter attention spans. And yes, there are days when you begin to wonder whether it's all for naught. Honestly, I'd be in [Bellevue](#) if I took to heart all the rejection and unanswered story pitches I've sent over the years. (I'm not, btw.)

Yet, if you do your homework and thoughtfully engage the reporter like a human being (not a bot), you'll eventually connect. That said: do not neglect the other tools we have in our digital toolbox for building a media footprint for your clients – earned, owned or hybrids thereof.

Best of luck in 2018, because it often comes down to just that.

About the Author: Global PR agency veteran [Peter Himler](#) is founding principal of [Flatiron Communications LLC](#), a NYC-based PR and digital media consultancy that helps established and emerging companies capitalize on the latest PR techniques and digital media strategies to advance their business goals. He can often be found on Twitter at [@peterhimler](#)