



Seven Success Strategies for Pitching to Bloggers

(Chicago--November 17, 2006) - Pitching a story to a blogger on the Internet is a different animal than pitching to a print or broadcast reporter. Unlike the "traditional" media world, on the blogosphere you don't get to leverage your verbal agility to establish a relationship with a reporter over the phone first, and then ask if they'd like to see your press release. And you certainly can't spam World Wide Web bloggers with a single, impersonal press release that you've already emailed to the whole wide world.

While traditional media and the blogosphere both rely on the integrity of honestly forged personal relationships, on the blogosphere more than anywhere reputations are built around endorsements by others: specifically, vouching from supportive bloggers and positive comments submitted by a community of interested readers. If your blogger pitches hit the mark, a buzz of third-party vouching can develop, where bloggers and their readers begin to debate your message *among each other*, with little additional effort needed by you. When that happens, you can even start pointing print and broadcast reporters to the hubbub around your message on the Internet, if they haven't found it already.

To get that zeitgeist going, however, you'll need to establish a relationship with a blogger and disseminate your message at the *same time*--in one, carefully crafted email. And, given the amount of spam that floats around the Internet, you need to make that email personal and heartfelt--that is, if you don't want your pitch to immediately end up, unread, in the trash bin.

With this in mind, you may want to consider the following seven strategies to put your best virtual foot forward when pitching to targeted bloggers:

1. Be on the Internet Yourself- Yes, this means you (or your organization). Bloggers give credibility to other bloggers. If you or your message aren't represented somewhere on the Internet, where a blogger can easily click through and read more--or, more powerfully, disseminate your link to other like-minded bloggers--you're starting out at a distinct disadvantage.

So be a blogger yourself, have an organizational website, post a regularly updated news page, whichever means you prefer. Just do it, no excuses. If twenty million teenagers can figure out how to use MySpace, the adults in your IT department--or you--can figure out how to set up a blog.

If you do choose to launch a blog, popular, free or low-cost resources to consider include the web-based blog services TypePad (www.typepad.com) and Blogger (www.blogger.com) for those who want someone else to take care of site design and hosting, and the stand-alone blogging software WordPress (www.wordpress.org) and Movable Type (www.movabletype.org) for those who'd rather take care of design and hosting on their own.

2. Be Personal with Your Pitches- Spending as much time on the Internet as they do, it should be no surprise that bloggers have a finely honed sense of--and distaste for--spam. Save your canned, impersonal releases for another audience. Bloggers can smell bull a mile away. If you want a personal relationship with a blogger (and those are the relationships that will get you prime coverage), best to start personal in your pitch. Let the blogger know that you've

read their site and what you think of it. Share some of your own or your organization's backstory, especially if you can highlight past efforts or web articles that could be relevant to your pitch or to the blogger's individual interests.

You can certainly write a master blog pitch leaving space to personalize the pitch to different bloggers. In fact, in order to safeguard the consistency of your message, you probably should. But guard against wooden language, the hallmark of the hackneyed press release. Instead, imagine that you're writing to a friend. Be honest, open, and direct. Have a sense of humor and a sense of humility. Remember that you're essentially asking someone to risk their reputation by vouching for your cause on their website, so your initial pitch ought to reflect a level of respect appropriate to that kind of an ask.

That respect, however, need not--and should not--be reflected in any sort of a formal "Dear Mr. or Ms. So-and-So" salutation. Address your pitch to Dear Bob or Sally or Sue. The blogosphere is run almost exclusively on a first-name basis, and we like to keep it that way.

3. *Have a Heartfelt Message-* Adjectives may be verboten in print releases, but they're absolutely necessary in your blog pitch. You want the bloggers you contact to be friends and supporters, to feel the same passion that you do about your message and your cause. So speak to them from the heart. After all, that's what most bloggers do: write from the heart about subjects of a particular, personal importance. So why not use their language and tell them, in moving detail, why they should feel as you do about your cause?

Mind you, leave over-the-top sob stories for the afternoon soaps. But if your cause has emotional resonance (and if it's about human beings in any way, by definition it does), start beating that emotional bongo and resonate.

4. *Join the Resulting Comment Debates-* When a blogger takes up the invitation and writes about your cause, chances are that their readers will comment on the coverage. Some of those comments will agree with your cause, some will not. And, hey, there's no guarantee that the blog coverage will be favorable, either.

Usually, a blogger will email you back and let you know if they intend to cover your story. If you're diligent, you'll monitor that blog--and all the other blogs you've emailed--to scan for coverage. When you find coverage, if that blog allows comments, enter the comment debate. If you're the first to post a comment, thank the blogger publicly for the coverage (see no. 7, below) and reiterate your message. If others have beaten you to the punch, respond to their opinions about your cause, both positive and negative.

You may be surprised to find a heated debate going on about your organization and its message, and potentially even readers calling for you to respond. If you just hit-and-run with your pitch and don't come back to join the comment debates, your organization will seem missing in action to that blog's readers--and you may damage your budding relationship with that blogger. Remember, you never know when you might need to call on them again.

5. *If You Blog, Allow Opposing Comments-* If you've chosen to set up your own blog to help disseminate your message, by all means, enable the comments option. Don't worry, you'll always have the option to moderate comments before they go live on your website. Your readers will want to share their opinion with you about your message, and they'll enjoy the ability to discuss your message with each other.

But fight the urge to keep negative comments in limbo. Unless a comment is hateful, needlessly provocative, or grossly misleading, let it go live and then post a response to it. Your message--and your integrity--will be magnified if you bravely debate detractors on your blog.

Besides, for all you know, the dissenting opinion that you'd rather not post was submitted by, perhaps, a Chicago Tribune reporter to test your organization's character. Unless you wouldn't mind your blog appearing in tomorrow morning's paper with the word "fraud" in front of it, delete that dissenting comment tonight at your own risk.

6. If You Blog, Use All Available Content-Distribution Tools- If you've chosen to blog your message, your message deserves a blog that will help get the word out in as many ways as possible. These days, a multitude of online tools exists to help bloggers disseminate their content and build a community of readers. Among them are subscription feed services (like feedburner.com) that automatically push new content to faithful readers, and popular linkblogs (like technorati.com, digg.com, and del.icio.us), that let your readers share your content with others without any effort on your part. All of these services can also provide you with simple HTML or Javascript code to use in your posts to allow readers to email, submit, and discuss your content.

If you've never heard of the above services, browse their websites. Now. Learn them, sign up for them, use them. Do Google searches for similar services. These resources are very powerful, but they're also a lot simpler to use than they at first sound; the learning curve is actually pretty gentle. So don't be afraid to explore them.

7. Express Gratitude- The last and simplest tip is probably the most powerful. If a blogger has honored your cause by taking the time--and risk--to put their reputation behind it and write about it in a supportive manner, you owe them your thanks. However, you'd be surprised how rarely such gratitude gets expressed. When you go out of your way to send a personal email thanking a blogger for going out of *their* way to write about *you*, you demonstrate that you care about the relationship you've forged with them. And best of all, you've made that relationship stronger for the future.

There you have it. A book could be written about stewarding successful relationships on the blogosphere. However, these seven success strategies are a good foundation on which to begin forging solid links with like-minded bloggers who want to support your cause. They can't work miracles. But as I've seen happen, they and a diligent, steadfast outreach to traditional media by a skilled and scrappy communicator can help get your cause on the front page of The New York Times.

That's a ringing endorsement if ever there was one. For the porous line between traditional and "new" (read: Internet) media relations is growing more imaginary by the day. While the approaches to each are different, the aim is the same: get your message out there and support your reputation while you're at it. The wisest of individuals and organizations with a cause to promote will reach out on both fronts, utilizing appropriate best practices and building supportive synergies between their traditional and Internet outreach activities. The less savvy will lose out on key opportunities to disseminate their messages.

In 2006, the Pew Research Center showed that 31% of Americans turn to the Internet as a regular source for news, with more people turning to the web than watching the network evening news (source: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=282>), and bloggers are a key part

of the mix. The days of waiting for new media to mature are dead. Long live the new medium. It can be a powerful, welcoming, and altogether useful medium if you take the time to explore it and learn how it can work for your cause, hand-in-hand with your more traditional media activities.

And when you get right down to it, doesn't your cause deserve every opportunity to be heard? So no excuses. Ramp up on blogger outreach now. We're all ears and we'd love to hear from you.

Just remember: first names, first names.

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Mike Doyle is the scribe of Chicago Carless (www.chicagocarless.com), where he blogs about his life as a former New Yorker living in downtown Chicago. Mike's blog has been featured in the Chicago Tribune, Centerstage Chicago, and the Detroit News, and Mike's writing has appeared in print in Time Out Chicago and on the national public-transit blog, Live from the Third Rail (thirdrail.smorgasblog.com).

During the lead-up to Election 2006, Mike was the internet outreach coordinator for the celebrated ACORN/AFL-CIO video blog, *7 Days @ Minimum Wage* (www.sevendaysatminimumwage.org) hosted by Roseanne Barr, a series of interviews with low-wage workers that helped to successfully raise the minimum wage in Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, and Ohio. Mike was honored when his heart-wrenching video interview with single-mom "Jessica" was used as the centerpiece of the campaign. He expressed gratitude to all.