

# Six Steps To Securing Headlines: How To Pitch the Media and Make Your Firm a Thought Leader

By Mallory Horshaw



Constantly seeing your competition's name in the press can be frustrating. And that frustration multiplies when your firm's leadership stops by your office to ask, "Why weren't we included in that article?" Cue the rambling and excuses.

The truth is, when it comes to media relations, many marketers struggle to understand the process for landing headlines. It's not part of the traditional skillset of a marketer and that's why many A/E/C firms have dedicated PR specialists or the support of an outside firm. But for smaller firms or those with limited resources, the role of PR often falls to the marketing or business development team.

The good news is that media relations is not as difficult as it may seem. With a solid process and messaging foundation, you can take on the role of a public relations professional, adding yet another (extremely valuable) skill to your bag of tricks. Here are the six steps to make you a media master and your firm a thought leader in the news.

**Build your bench.** The first step in media relations is identifying the subject matter experts (SMEs) at your firm. Who are your primary spokespeople and what are their areas of expertise? Once you identify these individuals, you will need to craft their unique message platform to differentiate your firm from the competition. You also need to ensure SMEs understand what's expected of them as a spokesperson. Media does not wait on experts to be available for interview, so make it clear that they must be accessible on short notice.

**Uncover the news.** Now that you know who will speak to the media, hit the halls of your firm to uncover the news. Meet with various departments to understand project milestones on the horizon, upcoming speaking engagements and events at the firm, and more generally, trending issues and topics within the industry that folks are following. Your firm may not always be producing a lot of news on its own. That's why understanding trending issues and topics—and the unique perspective your SMEs can provide on those issues—is critical for ongoing thought leadership media relations.

**Identify media targets.** Building a relationship with a reporter starts with understanding his or her coverage area. Do your homework. Read their last 10 articles. Follow them on Twitter. Track their stories daily to keep a pulse on what they're focusing on. If you know what type of stories the reporter is hot on, you can determine if your SMEs can serve as a valuable resource for their next article.

**Send your pitch.** Your media relations efforts live and die with your ability to write a good pitch and snappy email subject line. The most important thing to remember is to get to the point, quickly. In the first three sentences of your pitch, you must detail the news hook related to the reporter's coverage area, the unique point of view your SME can offer, and why your SME is a qualified source. After that, you can provide more color on the topic and include links for more information. Personalize every pitch—a mass email blast will get trashed. If a few days pass and you don't hear back, send a brief follow-up email or call the reporter to pitch them over the phone.

**Prepare your SME and facilitate the interview.** If your pitch was on point and the reporter is interested in speaking with your SME, that can be the start of a beautiful relationship. Once you lock in logistics for the interview (likely over the phone), prep your SME. Develop a detailed briefing document that highlights the reporter's background, coverage area, and talking points. Hold a mock interview if the SME is feeling particularly nervous. You should always join the interview to make introductions, jot down notes, and provide follow-up items that the reporter requested. Debrief your SME post-interview by providing specific feedback on things that went well and areas of improvement.

**Monitor for the story.** The final step is an easy one—watch for the story to appear. Fact-check the story before sharing with anyone at the firm or on social media. You can't ask for changes in an article because you don't like the way the reporter positioned your firm, but if something is factually incorrect, request a correction.

Building relationships with the media and training your SMEs to be interview rock stars won't happen overnight. But after more than a few successful interviews and positive articles, the PR process will become a well-oiled machine, and eventually, you will have reporters coming to you to set up interviews with your firm's SMEs. Before you know it, your firm's leadership will be stopping by your office to thank you for another home-run article (that doesn't include the competition). ■