

Storytelling Secrets for PR: Seven Ways to Win Ink in Regional Feature

By *Brian Pittman*
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"Getting into your area daily newspaper really boils down to four basic, often forgotten, practices," says Denise Joyce, a features editor at the Chicago Tribune and former president of the American Association of Sunday and Features Editors. "First is to think of your paper's audience and to pitch ideas that are localized to them, second is to research lead times, third is to avoid clichéd subject lines and not to be overly cute with your pitches, fourth is to think of your paper's audience and to pitch only ideas that are localized to them," she jokes. "On a serious note, though, you would be surprised how many calls we get that have nothing to do with our geographic coverage area—or even the Midwest in general."

In addition: "Legitimate surveys that talk about impacts of a national trend on localized markets really do get editors' attention," she says. "But when sending those, make sure you provide all the details and methodology up front so we can run it past others here without having to call you to validate it first." Joyce offers these additional tips:

- Stand out by pitching quirky feature ideas. "While the local angle goes without saying, our lifestyle section here also distinguishes itself by being quirky and offbeat," Joyce says. "For example, we saw a survey from Axe deodorant on delays and amenities at airports. It had to do with, 'How to increase the chances of a love connection at airports.' They offered localized stats about O'Hare airport—so our transportation did a page one story on it."
- Turn heads with top ten lists. "What worked so well about that pitch was that top ten lists really do work," Joyce elaborates. "We're all losing space in newspapers. We're pushed to do shorter stories and sidebars and things like these lists and quick hits certainly do fit the bill," she assures.
- Get sexy and pitch ideas that skew younger. "The Axe idea was also sexy and quirky in a very cool way," Joyce says. "We all look for those things in features sections because papers are trying to draw that audience of younger readers—people we haven't been so successful reaching in the past. The more you can put yourself in the editor's shoes and realize who we're trying to get to read us, the more likely it is your idea will be a fit for us."
- Recognize newsroom realities and pitch to second and third-day story holes. "News stories are encroaching on features territory in dailies because breaking news gets up there online so fast," Joyce says. "Breaking news just gets plugged and played so fast that it's a really hard place to try to get into. But what's more open are the feature ideas—where staff is trying to spin news stories out another 24 hours or more." Her point: "Help reporters push existing news stories to second and third day features—when something breaks, think about what the headlines on follow ups for that piece will be in a few days and how it can be contextualized and explained. That's what we're looking for."
- Pitch appropriate contacts by grabbing a hard copy. "It's really a good idea to get your hands on a physical paper, because I defy you to find newsroom contacts on a lot of newspaper websites," Joyce says. "There are contact boxes in every section of a paper, usually with emails and phone numbers of editorial staff. This helps you stay up to date on bylines," she assures. "Also, online coverage is different than print—it's not a mirror image. Different people file there. So check out both to make sure you're reaching the right people."
- Think like a dramatist—not a news hound. "Feature stories are certainly different from hard news stories," says Joyce. "They contain elements that help tell a narrative story—and PR people who can try to include those elements in pitches to features desks will get more response. Those elements include such things as conflict, an emotional connection, color, action and visual elements." For example: "A PR person put us on the trail of a dentist who had a long-time patient who was a retiring pediatrician. The end result was basically that the dentist was building a coffin for a pediatrician who was dying," Joyce shares. "The wood was from acreage the pediatrician used to own. The story was about this drama (facing death) and emotional connection (friendship forged over the years), and it included color (the plot of land), action (planning and designing the coffin) and obvious visual elements."
- Find feature angles at your company or client. "PR people need to go beyond doing surface stuff for the client—they need to go deeper like a reporter would and interview people. Have your radar tuned to think like a reporter and hang out or spend a day at the company with a recorder and asking people what they do. That's how feature reporters get stories. Go beyond the CEOs and talk to real people on various levels of the organization," Joyce advises. "Get out from behind your desk and observe. That's what we do. It's how we find characters and drama and even trends to tie features to."

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