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Fast Company reporters and editors reveal the “do’s” and “don’ts” of pitching them in the hope that they’ll write about your startup.



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BY MICHAEL GROTHAUS

7 MINUTE READ

Finally, after years of work, your startup has launched its first or most important product—and you want the world to know about it.

A well-timed article in a major publication could be the golden ticket many small startups need to get noticed by customers and potential funders. But convincing a journalist to write about your startup is easier said than done. Of course every reporter, editor, and publication is different, but there are some general rules that make the difference between getting your pitch deleted and getting a second look. I spoke to almost a dozen of my colleagues at *Fast Company* to see what they do and don't like to see in a pitch. Here are the things most of us agreed on.

DO: CONTACT JOURNALISTS THROUGH EMAIL

If there was one universal agreement among the journalists I spoke to, it was our preferred contact method: email. Though this communication method may seem antiquated in the social media age, it's a medium that works best since a single message (if you craft it correctly) contains everything we need to know—and it's one we can read and reply to at our leisure.

In fact, not one journalist I spoke with had a desire to be contacted via social media. "Twitter and LinkedIn are not good ways to get in touch," says *Fast Company* senior editor Kathleen Davis. "I don't check LinkedIn frequently, so it's not the best way to get hold of me, and if you don't include a message with your connection request, I likely won't accept it because I don't know who you are."

DO: BE CONCISE

Another universal agreement among those I spoke to was to get to the point quickly. "Be incredibly concise," says *Fast Company* senior editor Harry McCracken. "Focus on the news or story you have, and describe it super briefly, remembering that I get a gazillion pitches a day and don't have time to skim a lengthy pitch, let alone read it in its entirety. If I'm intrigued, I'll ask for more."

Fast Company staff editor Jeff Beer agrees. "Send an email, maybe ONE follow up. Get to the point very quickly: What it is, why FC readers might be interested, and why you're pitching me specifically," he says. This should be obvious, but it bears mentioning: Write a unique pitch for each journalist/publication and make sure it's clearly formatted. "Don't create a form letter pitch in some weird font that looks like a spam email newsletter. That's almost an immediate delete."

DO: EXPLAIN WHY YOUR STORY IS RELEVANT

A concise pitch is a must, but in that brief one- to two-paragraph explanation of why you are contacting us, one of the most critical things a journalist wants to know is, why, specifically, is your story relevant? "Show me how it fits in a trend or what's going on right now," advises Davis. "Show the scale and impact that it's had. Ask yourself, Why now? Why would we cover it now? And why would people care? What's in it for the reader? What value are you bringing? Keep it short and readable, and give me a useful and clear subject line on the email."

Anisa Purbasari, an editorial assistant at *Fast Company*, sums it up like this: “Treat it like you would pitch a VC: What problem are you solving, why is your solution unique, what makes you the right person to solve it?” Do that convincingly and you’ve gone a long way to getting us interested.

DON'T: BOTHER IF SOMEONE ELSE HAS ALREADY WRITTEN ABOUT YOU

While it’s true journalists always are looking for things to write about, we’re more likely to ignore a pitch if someone has recently written about it already. As *Fast Company* staff writer Cale Weissman says, “Don’t talk about past recent coverage of the same thing. If *Forbes* already wrote about you, why would I want to?” If readers have already read the story of Startup X’s development somewhere else, why would they want to read the same story again?

DO: TAKE THE TIME TO LEARN ABOUT WHO YOU ARE CONTACTING

When you reach out to a journalist, you’re asking them to dedicate their time researching and writing about your company. So why wouldn’t you show them the same respect and get to know what they cover and the kind of stories they’re interested in? For example, if your startup just made the latest killer app, don’t waste your time (or hers) in contacting an editor who covers leadership when you should be contacting a tech editor.

“It’s pretty clear what my section covers from just a quick scan through the page and my past coverage, and it will benefit you greatly to get yourself acquainted with that before pitching,” says Eillie Anzilotti, who covers sustainability and social for *Fast Company*. Oh, and one more, simple, thing: “Do spell my name correctly. I know it’s a weird one, but I will respect you so much more if you do.”

DON'T: TRY TO FLATTER US

This isn’t a date. Flattery will get you nowhere, and it’s actually a big turnoff and a bit insulting to the journalist that you think it will help you. “I’m willing to believe some people do so sincerely,” says McCracken. “But I get so many people trying to butter me up through unsolicited praise that I’m immediately suspicious of anyone who says something nice and then tries to sell me on a story.”

DON'T: MAKE US DO YOUR LEGWORK OR TELL US HOW TO DO OUR JOB

Journalists don’t work for you, they work for their readers. And like you, they are really busy with their job, so asking them to do things for you to help you get your work done is a nonstarter. “Don’t give me more work: Don’t email me just to ask me to introduce you to someone else at *Fast Company*. Don’t email asking me for what I’d like to be pitched or telling me that you have something great with next to no info and ask me if I want to learn more,” explains Davis.

And no one likes to be told how to do their job. “Do not try to instruct me on how to cover the thing you’re pitching, or suggest that we ‘work together to come up with an angle.’ That’s my job, not yours,” says *Fast Company*’s Anzilotti.

DON'T: STALK US

This was another issue many journalists I spoke to brought up. While most colleagues said that a follow-up email was fine if they had not replied to your pitch, what wasn’t cool was going all-out stalker on them. Don’t hear back? Wait a few days before following up—but only follow up once, and do so via email. Don’t text, Tweet, Facebook Message, or call. Their work email should be the only method of contact unless you already have a good existing relationship with them.

“Don’t call my cell phone, that’s not a number that’s listed, so if you got it somehow that’s really going to creep me out,” says Davis.

Speaking of creepy, don’t bother buying contact info. “Don’t ever contact me at an email address not ending in @fastcompany.com, says *Fast Company* associate editor Rich Bellis. “If you bought my personal email address from a third party that scraped the internet for it, congratulations for being a lazy, unprofessional creep—you just got blocked.”

DON'T: BE A LYING PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE JERK

You’d be surprised how deceitful some people can be in the hope that that tactic will get a journalist to write about their company. “I have had a few instances where people have told me I ‘accepted’ a piece I never did, or even go so far as to craft a fake email I never sent,” says *Fast Company*’s Purbasari.

What’s almost as bad as outright lying is thinking passive aggression will get you anywhere. “Never guilt me into writing a story by saying, ‘You’ve covered my competitor before, why aren’t you covering me????’ or ‘I have been pitching you for one year, why aren’t you responding to me????’ says *Fast Company* staff writer Elizabeth Segran. “This undermines my editorial judgment and makes me inclined to never work with you in the future.”

DO: BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH US

And it’s Segran’s last point that is perhaps the most pertinent for everyone who wants to get their startup’s story told: Journalists want to work with you. They hope you have a killer pitch they just can’t wait to turn into one of the best stories they’ve ever written. But for whatever reason, your story might not be right for their audience at this moment in time.

Your startup's story is likely only just beginning, and though you've followed all of the advice above and haven't seen your company's name in print yet, it doesn't mean you never will. The key, above all, is to cultivate relationships with journalists. You do that by understanding what their duties are to their readers, the types of stories that interest them, and by treating them with the same respect as you would any other person you want to build a long-term relationship with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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