PRD GIFT Winner AEJMC 2021

Pitch Perfect: Secrets of Media Relations

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Rationale

Public relations instruction is most effective when students are provided with opportunities to develop their capacities as practitioners. Educators often provide these applied experiences through academic service-learning partnerships, internships, and hands-on exercises. Media pitching is a unique, stylized process that requires a personalized approach gleaned through experience and persistence. Every pitch takes on a different feel based on the relationship with the blogger, editor, or reporter. Students commonly exhibit uncertainty constructing and delivering effective media pitches due to a lack of media experience and fear of rejection.

This activity (Appendix A) is appropriate for any course or student-run firm that would use media relations as a tactic. Following a firm theoretical foundation as described above, *Meet the Media Speed Pitching* uses Muck Rack's Public Relations Pitching Guide (Muck Rack, n.d.-a) alongside their Public Relations Management (PRM) platform to work together as a class to research local media for our local client pitches. The Muck Rack PR Pitching Guide (Knollmeyer, n.d.) focuses

on using the 'core six' combinations of news values most journalists and educators agree on (Timeliness, Impact, Prominence, Proximity, Conflict and Human Interest) as a rubric (Appendices B and C) for relevant pitching (Gatlung & Ruge, 1973; Shoemaker & Mayfield, 1987). Students then construct a pitch based on information gleaned from the State of Journalism Report (Muck Rack, 2020a) and the 'core six' criteria. There is a little bit of training of the target journalist selected who also evaluates the student pitch based on the 'core six' as well as their unique media type and audience in the feedback which leads to a meaningful dialog in a low-stakes environment for practice and reflection.

Connection to Public Relations Practice and/or Theory

By leveraging numerous mass communication theories, including gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; White, 1950), agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972); persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1987; Miller, 1989), framing theory (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999), and uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), the foundations of media messaging are explored, and students examine the benefits of creating audience focused messaging. This assignment has been developed as an introduction to the process of media pitching. Recognizing that media pitching is a skill that requires creative thinking, persuasive communication, strategy, and media targeting, assessing best practices can be difficult and is often influenced by individual contexts. Possessing a firm understanding of mass media theory and a solid understanding of media pitch construction alleviates uncertainty and allows students to enter the field confident in their skill sets.

Student Learning Goals

1) Draft pitches that are relevant and focus on use of the 'core six' combinations; 2) Deliver a pitch in a non-electronic high stakes environment; 3) Engage in meaningful dialogue on behalf of a client with a member of the media; 4) Networking with members of the media; 5)

Practice researching, constructing, pitching and follow-up for a real client; 6) Real life/real time use of follow-up emails and phone calls with reporter post pitch; 7) Reflection on media relations process and experience.

Assessment

The benefits to students are numerous, especially in relation to the PR industry where media relations is a core component. After completing this assignment, students recognize various mass communication and persuasive theories, identify the importance of strategy and targeting in PR, and analyze the role relationships play within the profession. This assignment is applicable to a variety of courses within the PR discipline including writing, social media, and case studies. This activity appeals to a wide range of students because it is interactive, allows for creative execution and community engagement. They are excited to learn how their creativity and personalized approaches play a role in their successes as future practitioners. Finally, higher levels of confidence regarding the 'core six' and lower levels of anxiety related to the process and prospect of pitching local media based on rubric feedback from professionals (Appendix B).

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Appendix A The Assignment: Meet the Media Speed Pitching

This activity enables PR teams to work together to find the right journalists for their class or student run firm client stories, create customized pitches, build meaningful relationships with the local media, an incentive to monitor news and quantify their impact through the Muck Rack software for the client.

Choose the style of your 'media targets' based on the level of course you have; for 200-level we tend toward low-medium pressure targets (see below for levels). For 300 to 400-level courses we go for the high-pressure target - the actual media. This gives us an opportunity to both network and practice by syncing up with some of our fave community mentors.

For this activity you will need audiences for pitches, a large open space

that you are able to cluster seating arrangements, or at minimum provide a 1:1 setting for an audience member and a student; or Zoom and breakout room access. PR students have three minutes with the audience targets selected to introduce themselves, share a bit about their organizations/ clients and to pitch away for their in-class client. These three-minute meetings go fast - which means preparing students ahead of time with a plan becomes important to success and meaningful feedback.

Before the speed pitching you should equip your students with:
1. A thorough understanding of theory as described in GIFT rationale
2. A thorough understanding of media ethics and PR ethics (Ward et al., 2020)
3. Students should be thoroughly briefed on the State of Journalism (Muck Rack, 2020a)
4. Instruction on and practice of crafting a newsworthy press release using AP style (Purdue Owl, n.d.)
5. Students should write up a client press release on something newsworthy
6. Students should use Muck Rack or manually create a local media list based on client activity (Muck Rack, n.d.-a) - from this you should attempt to recruit your speed pitching media member line up
7. Students should create an emailable pitch they will base this exercise on; pitching in person this newsworthy idea to local media (Muck Rack, 2020b)

After the 'Meet the Media Speed Pitching' activity:
1. Students should craft a follow up email for the media they engage with using the Nine Media Pitching Tips Directly from Journalists advice from Spin Sucks (Joffe, 2020).
2. Your class should also publicly thank your local media for their time

and efforts as well as like, follow, share when possible their bylines to foster a longstanding relationship

Possible Audiences for Pitches:

Low Pressure	Medium Pressure	High Pressure
Pitch peers in class	Pitch your PRSA chapter	Pitch THE actual local media in person
Pitch peers on Zoom	Pitch university student-led media	Pitch THE actual local media on Zoom
Pitch peers in a news writing class	Pitch program alumni volunteers	

Appendix B Media & Professor Feedback Rubric

Speed Pitching Rubric & Assignment
PROFESSOR | COURSE | SEMESTER YEAR

CLIENT: _____
STUDENT NAME(S): _____

	Advanced – 10	Proficient – 8, 9	Basic – 7, 6	Needs Improvement – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1
Press Release	Clearly focused, thoroughly presented the topic; immediately and efficiently articulates the issue or failure.	Focused and thorough; engages the audience in the topic.	Vague; does not immediately engage the audience in the topic. Is play-by-play; not an assessment.	Unfocused and rambling; confuses the reader. Lacks structure of introduction of issue or modeling.
Pitch Write Up Structure	Well-developed point, assesses situation, formulates a strategy based on 2 models appropriately selected, suggestions as to why or why not successful; provides recommendations based on models and evidence.	Well-developed point, clear conclusion. Meets minimum guidelines, does not go above and beyond in articulation nor logic/research. Lacks detail or effort.	Some elements are lacking or not adequately developed. No clear conclusion. Missing key points or lacks articulate logic, research, or missing any other components.	Write up is disjointed and may be difficult to follow. No clear point or clear conclusion. Lacks clarity of thought and organization.
Pitch Write Up Tone/Professionalism	Highly appropriate tone, matches intent of the piece, enhancing readers experience and understanding.	Appropriate tone consistently maintained throughout the piece.	Inconsistent tone or tone not maintained throughout the piece.	Tone is completely inappropriate or professionalism not present.
Pitch Write Up Grammar, Punctuation & Spelling	Consistently follows AP Style. Uses completely appropriate grammar that helps readers understand meaning. No errors in punctuation. All words spelled correctly, helping readers clearly understand the central idea.	Consistently uses AP Style. Uses appropriate grammar that does not interfere with meaning. A few punctuation errors. Most words are spelled correctly.	Uses AP Style inconsistently. Grammar choices sometimes confusing. Many or major errors in punctuation that sometimes confuse the reader. There are many spelling errors that sometimes make it hard for readers to understand the central idea.	Uses AP Style inconsistently, or not at all. Grammar choices keep readers from understanding the piece. Frequent and/or major errors that obscure meaning. There are frequent spelling errors that make it hard for readers to understand the central idea.

Speed Pitching Rubric & Assignment   CLIENT: _____
PROFESSOR | COURSE | SEMESTER YEAR   STUDENT NAME(S): _____

Core Six: Timeliness, Impact, Prominence, Proximity, Conflict and Human Interest	Core Six are observed consistently, appropriately with sound logic, evidence, and has obviously used research to solidify ideation and creation.	Core Six are observed inconsistently, has a few logic flaws, uses research sparingly or inappropriately, modeling not explored meaningfully or accurately.	Core Six are observed inconsistently or not at all, suffers logic flaws, lacks research, lacks meaning or evidence.	Core Six are not applied correctly, lacks logic, research, meaning, and evidence.
Pitch Statement Written	Appropriate and thorough. No errors.	Appropriate, but not thorough. Some errors.	Thorough, but not appropriate. Some errors.	Not appropriate, nor thorough. Many errors.
Pitch Statement Delivered - Question Responses	Clear and concise. Doesn't patronize. Nonverbals are professional. Leads with empathy. Tells the truth. Owns the situation. Answers questions truthfully and pursuant to the situation in a knowledgeable manner.	Clear and concise. Doesn't patronize. Nonverbals are professional. Leads with empathy. Tells the truth. Owns the situation. Struggles to answer questions truthfully and pursuant to the situation in a knowledgeable manner.	Major inconsistencies in: Statement. Engagement with audience. Nonverbals. Empathy. Truth/Facts. Answers to questions.	Not clear and concise. Patronizes audience. Nonverbals are unprofessional. Doesn't lead with empathy. Unable to answer questions truthfully and/or pursuant to the situation in a knowledgeable manner.
Participation/Preparation	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Needs Improvement
Overall Quality from Student(s)	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Needs Improvement
Speed Pitching Reflection Essay	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Needs Improvement

FINAL GRADE: _____/ 100

Speed Pitching Rubric & Assignment
PROFESSOR | COURSE | SEMESTER YEAR

CLIENT: _____

STUDENT NAME(S): _____

Meet The Media Speed Pitching

Before Meet the Media Event Day:

1. Using a press release constructed in class for your client news and keeping in mind models from chapters and prep we did in class regarding theory, in your pitching group, or on your own, use Muck Rack to develop or manually pull a local media list to meet the needs of your client news. You can find tips and tricks for both here: https://muckrack.com/media-database-guide . If you need a sample template to start one from scratch try this one: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Qo-dT1Rn50IVUQmhiPPrY9FMCJ-3Msa6b0kiMJNja9I/edit#gid=1003667026

2. For each journalist that you have chosen, develop a custom pitch of your newsworthy potential story by taking into consideration the media member's audience and previous article authorship align this audience to your client need to develop an angle from which to pitch your chosen member of local media. Find some tips on how to develop a successful pitch from your lecture notes and from here: https://spinsucks.com/communication/media-pitching-tips/, https://info.muckrack.com/guide-to-pr-pitching-2020 or https://blog.justreachout.io/media-pitch/ there are no shortage of blogs discussing pitching best practices.

During Meet the Media Event Day:

3. Your professor has recruited 9-12 members of media from your local media lists to whom you will use the pitch you developed on paper and move it into an event where you will be given three minutes to pitch using the technique based on the written pitch, a verbal pitch and answer follow up questions regarding your client's potential story. For this in-person activity, be sure to research each member of media and see if or how you can align your client news with the member of the media in order to attempt earning media coverage by way of a verbal pitch. Remember from our media kit workshop, that personalized media pitching yield happier returns for everyone. Please use the rubric associated with this assignment to anticipate what the members of media will be evaluating for your pitch.

4. After time is called, you will rotate to the next member of the media for your next pitch. Be sure to have your notes accessible in order to modify anything you need for your next media member. There will be roughly 2 minutes between pitches for you to recover, recoup, and make notes. After 1 round of 3 pitches, there will be a 15 minute media break – we will do this 2 or 3 times, depending on how efficient we are in moving and recovering between pitches. At the 15 minute media breaks, please network with fellow classmates and members of the media. Relationship building is among the top of successful media and communicator attributes.

After Meet the Media Event Day:

5. Following the pitching experience, please write up a one page reflection (500-800 words) on your experience. How did you feel? What would you change about your pitching strategy? Did anything change from your first pitch to your last pitch? Would you want to work in media relations? Tell me everything! ☺ You may turn your essay in on BlackBoard under the discussion board under "Speed Pitching Reflection."

6. Next, please take the time to either email or handwrite a thank you note to the members of media you engaged with today, this is important as you build your network. Gratitude is always a good idea.

Appendix C Photos of Speed Pitch Event 2019