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**Breaking Through – Making the Media Connections  
by Michael DePetrillo and Andrew Falzon  
Presented at 2004 *Faith in Action* National Conference**

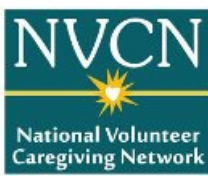
Mike DePetrillo was the Program Director for the AIRS *Faith in Action* Volunteer Program, Baltimore, MD, as an AmeriCorps member.

Andrew Falzon was the Station Manager at WRHU, Long Island's oldest non-commercial radio station, and is a freelance reporter at News12 Connecticut.

**Pitching Your Story  
Pro-Active Media Relations**

1. **Think Ahead.** Each time that you contact the media, remember that your goal is to build a long-term relationship and to establish yourself as a reliable, responsive source for information.
2. **Be Selective.** Don't blanket all the media with every release. Focus on the reporters who are most likely to tell your story.
3. **Take "No" for An Answer.** Don't worry if a reporter turns down your initial pitch. There are many reasons why stories are just not right for a reporter at the time. If your dealings with the reporter have been positive, he or she will probably call on you for assistance in the future.
4. **Three Strikes --So What?** Don't be discouraged by rejection. Two or three reporters might pass on a story that another grabs. Or, for example, if you are striking out with *health* writers, think about whether your story would appeal to *education* writers instead.
5. **Determine Your Objective.** Think about what you want publicity to accomplish for your organization. Then, develop your pitch and media list accordingly.
6. **Don't Call on Deadline.** Unless the reporter is waiting to hear from you, never call to pitch a story while a reporter is on deadline.
7. **Think Format.** Is your story eye-catching? Could it be told in a sound bite? Does it need to be read? Remember, not every story is right for all media.

This information is provided by the National Volunteer Caregiving Network as part of the organization's Training and Technical Assistance outreach for members and is designed to provide program directors with resources on core areas of program management. For additional information, contact the *National Volunteer Caregiving* Network at 304.907.0428 or by e-mail at [info@nvcnetwork.org](mailto:info@nvcnetwork.org).



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8. **Be Critical.** Ask yourself, "What makes this story compelling?" If you can't answer the question, you probably don't have a story.
9. **Be Patient.** *Beat* reporters are usually quite knowledgeable about the area they cover, but general assignment reporters don't have much time for research. Don't be annoyed by "dumb questions," think of them as an opportunity to educate the reporter to your point of view.
10. **Be Pleasant.** Treat reporters as you would any other professional. Try not to have an attitude or to be confrontational, even if a reporter seems abrupt. Chalk it up to the fact that reporting, especially on deadline, is high-pressure.

*Source: Donna Sicuranza, [www.nasbh.org](http://www.nasbh.org)*

### **Newsroom Politics: Pitching a Story**

*Excerpt from an article by Joe Grimm, Detroit Free Press*

Even after 25 years of newspapering, I pitch ideas that never make it to the plate. When that happens, I have to try someone else, or go back, re-evaluate what I'm pitching and try again. Sometimes I have forgotten my own advice for pitching a story. It is:

Pitch ideas, not topics. While the maxim is "if you can't write your idea on the back of a business card, you don't have one," editors need more than that. "Rave parties" is not a story idea. "Garage sales" is not a story idea. These are topics. A fully fleshed story idea has a news peg and answers the question, "Why are we doing this now?" The answer "because we never did it before" is lame. A story idea has news elements -- currency, importance, conflict or resolution. Editors do not deal in three-word ideas. They deal in budget lines. Get a look at the news budgets used at the newspaper for story meetings. See how the stories sound on there. Develop a budget line for your story idea.

Prepare your pitch with a little reporting. Talk to some people. Search the newspaper's library. Is this really a new idea? You don't want to be pitching a story that was written six months ago. Do some reporting to flesh out the idea. Who is behind the story? What make it news? How is it developing? Why does it matter to our readers?

Make the case. You want to pitch a story about a quirky little diner that is shutting after a short but successful run. It doesn't sound like much of a story -- unless you can say that the diner attracted a large clientele from the city's legal community. Or was the only place where homeless people and business people ate, side by side. Or was the only place in the city that served gazpacho, and now people will have to drive a hundred miles to find it. Or the owner is closing shop because she is going to take the profits and sail around the world. Do enough

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reporting so that the editor can take this story into a news meeting and talk it up to other editors. Don't blurt out a story idea on your hunch alone. Poke around. Chances are your instincts are good, but you need to deliver some specifics.

Understand what the newspaper is looking for. If you come up with a story that connects to one of the newspaper's key initiatives, you have something. They say they care about the well-being of children and you have a story about children having no safe place to play. You're onto something. Find a child who exemplifies that and who could be the lead for your story.

Look at it from the editor's point of view. This is not selling out or "playing the game," this is framing *your* idea in a way that will strike the right chords with the newspaper and get your story into print.

Try another angle. You've sharpened, focused and retooled. No dice. There may be another avenue. Sometimes you're pitching the wrong editor. If the metro editor won't take it, will the features editor? Could it be a photo story? There's more than one way to get an idea into print.

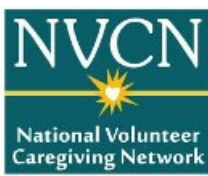
Finally, explain why you think the story is important. You and the editor may have different perspectives, but you're not from different planets. Listen to the editor's questions. Find out what it will take to move your idea to the story stage. Be willing to explain, negotiate and sharpen the idea.

If your pitch falls flat, it's easy to blame it on an editor. Too easy. If your story matters to you, find a way to recast it and pitch it again so that the editors can see what you have. Don't drop the idea at the first obstacle. If you really have a good idea, it deserves more than a half-hearted pitch.

### **10 Tips for Writing a Press Release**

1. Make sure the information is newsworthy.
2. Tell the audience that the information is intended for them and why they should continue to read it.
3. Start with a brief description of the news, then distinguish who announced it, and not the other way around.
4. Ask yourself, "How are people going to relate to this and will they be able to connect?"

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5. Make sure the first 10 words of your release are effective, as they are the most important.
6. Avoid excessive use of adjectives and fancy language.
7. Deal with the facts.
8. Provide as much Contact information as possible: Individual to Contact, address, phone, fax, email, Web site address.
9. Make sure you wait until you have something with enough substance to issue a release.
10. Make it as easy as possible for media representatives to do their jobs.

### **Seven Basic Elements of a Press Release**

*Every press release should have these seven basic elements in terms of content and appearance.*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** These words should appear in the upper left-hand margin, just under your letterhead. You should capitalize every letter.

**Contact Information:** Skip a line or two after release statement and list the name, title, telephone and fax numbers of your company spokesperson (the person with the most information). It is important to give your home number since reporters often work on deadlines and may not be available until after hours.

**Headline:** Skip two lines after your Contact Information and use a boldface type.

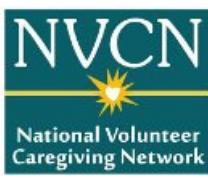
**Dateline:** This should be the city your press release is issued from and the date you are mailing your release.

**Lead Paragraph:** The first paragraph needs to grab the reader's attention and should contain the relevant information to your message such as the five W's (who, what, when, where, why).

**Text:** The main body of your press release where your message should fully develop.

**Recap:** At the lower left hand corner of your last page restate your product's specifications, highlight a product release date.

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### **Other Useful Information**

Use 8 ½ x 11 paper.

Use a minimum of one-inch margins on each side of the page.

Use a Bold typeface for the headlines to draw attention.

Capitalize the first letter of all words in the headline (with the exception of: "a", "an", "the", or prepositions such as: "of", "to", or "from"). The combination of upper and lower case makes it easier to read.

Complete the paragraph on one page instead of carrying it over onto the next page.

Use only one side of each sheet of paper.

Use the word "more" between two dashes and center it at the bottom of the page to let reporters know that another page follows.

– more –

Use three numbers symbols immediately following the last paragraph to indicate the end of the press release:

# # #

*Source: [www.press-release-writing.com](http://www.press-release-writing.com)*

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