



THE ART OF PITCHING

Ken Silverstein

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INTRODUCTION

You may have an idea for a truly fantastic magazine or newspaper story, but the first thing you need to do is sell it to an editor. And no matter how great your idea, a poorly crafted pitch letter can sink your chances of it ever seeing the light of day. Putting together a good pitch letter, on the other hand, will not only sell your piece but will also help you frame it and identify the key points that you want to convey. That will make it easier to structure and write your article when it comes time to do that.

The suggestions below assume that you do not have an established relationship with the magazine editor¹ you are pitching. If you do, you can be less formal than I'm suggesting here.

Getting a pitch commissioned as a freelancer is rarely easy, especially nowadays when media outlets are stretched for money and use staff writers whenever possible. There's also simple math. I have written for Harper's for many years. It comes out 12 times a year and typically has about four feature stories per issue, one of which is probably a work of fiction. That leaves 36 slots per year and many of those will be assigned to regular contributors, so there just are not a lot of openings.

The same rough math holds true at most well-established magazines. That said, there are a lot of options out there, especially with web publications. It never hurts to aim high, but if you don't have a lot of clips it might be best to approach smaller publications. Once you build up your clip file it will be easier to pitch to outlets with bigger circulations.

Still, editors love a fresh, interesting story idea from a new writer and if you have a great idea there is a good chance you'll sell it – not always to your first or second choice, but perhaps to your third or fourth.

Sending a magazine pitch is like speed dating. The editor has a lot of options to pick from and you have about 30 seconds to convince him/her to take your proposal. The entire pitch – rarely longer than one page – needs to shine, but the first few paragraphs need to be perfect. (See below.)

You need to have a thick skin and keep trying even if you get a lot of rejections. That said, if your idea gets turned down at four or five places, it might not be as great as you had originally thought. Many years ago I tried to sell a story that I thought was a no-brainer, and yet multiple outlets rejected it and in the end I never published it anywhere. It was extremely frustrating but if you get that sort of negative feedback, it's probably best to accept defeat and move on to the next idea.

Don't take rejection personally and under no circumstances convey to the editor who declines a story that you think he/she is an idiot (even if he/she is in fact an idiot, which occasionally may be the case). Remember, even a great pitch may get turned down for a very good, but not apparent, reason. For example, maybe you have pitched a story about illegal arms trafficking to an outlet that already has commissioned a story on the same topic.

Always stay on good terms with the editor. He/she might turn down your pitch but ask you to write a different piece or at least encourage you to try again. Publishing is a small world and getting a reputation as "difficult" spreads fast and is hard to shake.

It sounds counterintuitive, but it's generally better to send a pitch and not a complete story, even if you have already written it. (It might be OK if it's a 1,000-word story for web publication, but even then it's better to send a few paragraphs first.) Editors are far more inclined to read a fast pitch than a full story. An editor's first reaction to an unsolicited story is to hit the delete key. They don't want to have to read a full story, they want a pitch that they can finish and evaluate in 60 seconds.

This may sound obvious but make sure your pitch is spellchecked and that there are no typos. You want to look professional; obvious mistakes can be fatal.

Before sending your pitch, be certain that it is factchecked, especially key assertions. Future reporting may turn up new information that changes your final story and that's fine, but don't say, for example, that Businessman X is a major donor to Politician Y unless you are 100 percent certain. Do not pitch a story about a super hot confidential document unless you have the document in hand. It's embarrassing, to put it mildly, to get a story commissioned and then have to tell the editor you can't deliver. Another example: do not pitch a profile unless the subject has agreed to make him/herself available.

It's generally bad form to send a pitch to multiple outlets simultaneously without telling all the editors involved. If you need to do so – maybe there's an important news hook or event your story is pegged to and hence you need to sell it fast – you should note it in your pitch. Editors will be disappointed and angry if they accept your pitch and you've sold it elsewhere.

HOW TO PITCH AND HOW MUCH TO PITCH:

The subject line should generally just be “story pitch.” could be “magazine pitch from south african reporter” [or obviously whatever relevant nationality]. and if it's a really hot topic, you might use, for example, “story pitch – illegal U.S. arms sales to Sudan” or “story pitch – internal documents show exxonmobil paid bribes to angolan officials.”

You want to send your very best pitch which means including information that might be sensitive and exclusive. At the same time, It's always a little nerve wracking to send a story pitch with confidential information to an editor you don't know and have to worry that he/she might steal your story and assign it to another writer. In my experience, that has never happened. As with any profession, there are unscrupulous editors but outright intellectual theft is uncommon. Furthermore, if you send proprietary information in an email pitch and your story (or key elements of it) end up in a magazine you pitched you will have a paper trail documenting it, and strong grounds for complaints to the magazine's top editor. So I would suggest not worrying too much about that possibility because omitting your best material will weaken your pitch.

That said, for security and general peace of mind there are ways, if you feel it necessary, to couch information in a pitch that makes clear what you have but doesn't fully disclose it or would at least keep anyone else from easily replicating your research. For example, let's say you have documents from a U.S. State Department official that show ExxonMobil has made payments into an offshore account in the Bahamas that is controlled by the president of Angola. (OK, you probably won't get those sorts of documents very often but this is just for purposes of illustration.)

In your pitch, you might write: “I obtained confidential U.S. government documents that conclusively show that a major American oil company has bribed an African ruler. The payments to the ruler were funneled into an account he controlled in a leading offshore financial haven.”

WHERE TO PITCH

Know your target. If you are pitching an outlet like Harper's or the New Yorker, make sure you have a good narrative. They might turn down a great investigative story if there is no narrative arc or central figure to profile and tell the story through. You'd be surprised how many writers shoot themselves in the foot by sending a good pitch to the wrong place.

This may sound obvious but if you are pitching Foreign Policy, it better be a foreign policy story. Just because a story is reported from abroad does not mean it is a foreign policy story to an editor in New York or London.

Corruption is a serious and important topic. It is not a story you are likely to sell to a U.S. publication, though, unless you can show that your story is relevant to an American audience. For example, maybe a major American oil company is involved in the story or you can demonstrate that corruption or human rights abuses are so severe that the State Department is considering cutting foreign aid.

I don't mean to sound callous but editors in New York, Washington and London generally do not have a keen interest in poverty or corruption in Africa (or anywhere else for that matter). They will see that, rightly or wrongly, as too obvious to bother with. In some cases – if you have a colorful or outlandish enough figure, i.e. Dan Gertler, Benny Steinmetz – you might be able to sell a story without an obvious hook for an American or European audience, but your chances will be far higher if you do.

I have written about poverty and corruption in Equatorial Guinea for more than a decade, but the only reason I could sell these stories to American publications is that American oil companies and banks were involved. Another huge advantage was that Teodorin Obiang's personal conduct and corruption were so outlandish, and that he bought a house in Malibu, California. If he had only bought properties in South Africa, France and Brazil, I would have found it much harder to write about him and Equatorial Guinea for U.S. publications.

If you are traveling overseas, contact an editor before you go. He/she may not like the story you want to write from China but maybe they are keen to have a different story from China, possibly even one he/she already had in mind.

WHAT TO PITCH:

Your pitch should generally fit on one page. Never send a pitch longer than two pages.

Your first paragraph should make clear exactly what the story is and why you can write it. If the first paragraph doesn't sell the editor 75 percent of the way, he/she probably will not read any further read.

Example

I'm a freelance writer who has published stories with The Daily Times, ABC Magazine and The Weekly. I want to pitch a story about David Hahn, a Boy Scout in suburban Detroit who tried to build a nuclear reactor in his backyard. He didn't succeed but he collected and refined enough radium, thorium and americium that moon-suited federal agents raided his backyard laboratory and shipped the remains to a radioactive dumpsite in Utah.

That's a true life example. I sent roughly that pitch to Harper's about ten years ago and I got a call ten minutes later and the story was immediately commissioned. Obviously, most stories are not so simple to market, but that's basically a model for the first paragraph.

Do not send clips or a CV with your pitch but (at the end of the letter) offer to send them. Also offer to send references.

If you're a younger writer it's OK to send clips, if asked, from a university newspaper but do not send a senior thesis or your masters publication. Also, for writers of all ages, don't send a lengthy essay from an academic journal (unless of course you are pitching an academic journal).

Like your pitch letter, clips should generally be on the shorter side but if you are pitching a 6,000-word story, it's OK to send a 6,000-word clip. If you are pitching a 1,500-word story, it is generally a bad idea to send a 6,000-word clip. You want to show that you can deliver the type of story you are pitching.

HOW TO SEND THE PITCH

If you have a friend who knows the editor, ask him/her if you can drop their name in the pitch, and do it in the first sentence. This might also sound obvious but make sure you send the pitch to the right person. Don't send a political pitch to the literary editor. If you don't know who exactly to pitch, call the front desk and ask.

Never, ever telephone an editor with a story idea. Email your pitch. Do not send your pitch as an attachment. Put it in the body of your email so the editor can skim it immediately if he/she is so inclined. This is especially important nowadays when editors may get your email on a smart phone while they are away from their desk and opening an attachment is a nuisance.

Still, make sure to put your phone number in the pitch. If an editor is inspired to call you, you want to make sure they have your number handy.

It generally takes a week or longer before you hear from an editor. Let him/her know if your story is time sensitive and you need a fast reply. A lack of response doesn't necessarily mean your pitch was rejected; the editor may merely be busy. If you don't hear back in a week send a follow-up email.

It's rude for an editor not to reply to a pitch at all, but it happens. Don't write the editor a note telling him/her they are a jerk because you might well want to pitch him/her again in the future. The reason I keep emphasizing the need to be nice to editors is because I know a surprising number of writers who break this obvious and fundamental rule. And many of them don't get many writing assignments as a result.

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ADDENDUM

Sample pitch

This is a pitch letter (lightly edited) I sent earlier this year to The Nation magazine. The pitch was accepted and the story will be published shortly in the magazine. [Note: It will be published in a week or two, if you want to include a link to it in the brochure] I knew the editor so I didn't send the first paragraph (introducing myself) or the bottom paragraph offering to send clips, etc, but I inserted them here so you would have a full sample pitch letter.

Dear [insert name],

I'm a former Washington editor at Harper's magazine and investigative reporter for the Los Angeles Times. I wanted to pitch a story to The Nation about the massive flow of shady cash from offshore into luxury Miami real estate. The majority of the money is coming from Latin America and Eastern Europe, and property records and other evidence I've obtained show that luxury condo buyers include an assortment of oligarchs, corrupt government officials and business cronies of political leaders.

I've already compiled a significant amount of documentary evidence for the story and have conducted a number of important interviews. My plan is to travel to Miami in mid-June for further research and to talk to local real estate agents, money-laundering experts, bankers and other sources. I could deliver a first draft of the story by August 1.

Miami has always been a bellwether for foreign political dysfunction, corruption and sleaze. Hence, successive waves of crooks and despots have poured into the city, from Cubans and Nicaraguans in the 1950s and 60s, to Venezuelans and Colombians (including countless cocaine traffickers) in the 70s and 80s, and up through the current day, during which the city has attracted dubious characters from a broader global range.

In the past decade, Eastern Europeans, especially Russians, have colonized a booming area of Miami known as Sunny Isles. Sunny Isles is home to three Trump Towers and three other Trump-branded properties, as well as dozens of other luxury buildings. These include the \$560 million Porsche Design Tower, "the world's first condominium complex with elevators that will take residents directly to their units while they are sitting in their cars." Russians are among the most numerous buyers in these luxury towers, shelling out \$2 million and up for beachfront condos.

Of course, it's not only Russians buying up real estate in Sunny Isles and greater Miami. Property records I've reviewed have also revealed properties owned by a former senior Angolan government official, the daughter of a spectacularly corrupt former Latin American president and a notorious gangster formally barred from entering the United States because of his alleged ties to Russian organized crime. This is surely the tip of the iceberg as the great majority of Miami luxury properties are owned through domestic LLCs and offshore companies, which makes it impossible to identify the true owners.

This story is particularly important and timely given the recent exposure of leaked financial records by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, which has been extensively covered in the New York Times and Washington Post, among other places. The documents have shown, in the words of one news story, "how corrupt government officials and their families and associates have used offshore firms and bank accounts to buy mansions, yachts, art masterpieces and other assets." My story will also show how lax U.S. laws on bank secrecy and disclosure of corporate ownership easily allow foreigners that plunder their national treasuries to come here and live the good life.

In addition to documenting Miami's status as a global center for real estate money-laundering, the story would have great color and on-the-scene reporting. I have not been to Sunny Isles, which has gained the nickname of "Little Moscow," but people I've interviewed have described it to me. They have told me about the numerous local real estate agencies run by and catering to Russians, as well as the many Russian restaurants and nightclubs, and even furniture stores offering goods aimed at the incoming oligarch class (i.e. \$20,000 white leather sofas).

I hope you'll find this story of interest. I can send clips, references and a CV if you'd like and you can contact me via this email or by calling me at [phone number].

Thanks in advance for your consideration.

[Name]



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