

## PR pros and scientists: A 10-tip formula for collaborating

*How to make sure the chemistry works—and doesn't blow up in your face*

Popular media outlets are increasing the quality and quantity of coverage of scientific advances and understanding of important environmental issues. Or in the case of the current oil spill crisis off the coast of Louisiana or the floods in central Tennessee, these events, unfortunately, occur, and we must react.

Scientists, on the other hand, are also discovering the importance of working with the media to showcase their research to the public. During the Renaissance, part of the job of a scientist was explaining what he did. He (in the 19th century, scientists were predominantly male) was expected to discuss findings with the public, feeding the "scientist as populist" culture. And this culture is returning.

The role of the public relations professional in this trend is to create a bridge between the two, in order to make sure the scientist's research is portrayed in an accurate and interesting light and to make sure the journalist has access to enough information to properly understand and convey the importance of the research.

Working with a scientist to form a successful pitch that will get picked up by the media is an art. Here are 10 important tips for mastering this art:

- 1. Do your research about the scientist** before making initial contact. Four questions to which you should know the answers: Where did she obtain her degrees and in what? What is her area of specialty? What has her latest research project involved? Has she been part of any other popular media coverage?
- 2. Expect a scientist to use jargon.** Become familiar with some key terms related to the scientist's field. Pretend a pitch-stage interview is a college subject you need to brush up on, and don't go in knowing nothing.
- 3. Give a source more than a few hours' notice** before a deadline, if at all feasible. Make it a few days. Those left-brainers can get into their "zones," and it's hard to get them out. Don't ask them to come out of their zones unless they have time to prepare properly.
- 4. Be respectful.** Understand that a scientist's research is her/his child, and respect it as such, even if you don't understand it.
- 5. Let a scientist review the final article or pitch.** This will save any embarrassment or aggravation down the road. If a published article comes out with an error, at least you'll know it wasn't because of any mistakes or misunderstandings on your end of the pitch.
- 6. Ask questions.** Your source will appreciate it. Repeat what you think you've heard. Nuances are the lifeblood of science and research. Get one thing wrong, and your reputation is going to suffer; it could also negatively affect the scientist. Remember, PR is all about informing the

public through good relationship building.

**7. Build trust** by getting to know the scientist and let him get to know you on a non-professional level. In addition to contacting him when you need information, send him an e-mail every now and then, asking how things are going. You might not get a response—we're all busy, after all—but on this tip, it's definitely the thought that counts.

**8. As you educate yourself** on a scientist's language, develop strategies for how to get scientists to explain things in your language; that is, in language that non-scientists use.

**9. Consider national and international ties** to get your local story national media attention. Is there something about your pitch that's also part of a global event or trend? This is a challenge that can come with a big payoff.

**10. Be familiar** with the sources to whom you're pitching this research. Let your source know of the journalist's past work, reputation and style. The scientist will be more comfortable if he knows a little bit about who's handling the article once it leaves the pitch stage and is out of your hands.

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