



BETWEEN THE LINES

by Dawn Chafe

I identify as journalist

This is not the column I wanted to write. Rather, it's not the column I originally wrote. That one... well, that one may have crossed the line. The accusations of hypocrisy and unprofessionalism had one of my co-workers shuddering her revulsion (and those were just the self-directed allegations). Other co-workers applauded my raw honesty as enhancing our trustworthiness as a publication. But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered: was I being admirably frank, or annoyingly rude?

That's when I realized it was the intention behind my commentary that needed fixing. This column in its original form was a 650-word vilification of corporate story pitches. The rant and roar didn't help anyone (except for me – I rather enjoyed the literary letting of steam).

But even I had to admit it would be more productive if, instead of railing against erroneous ways, I offered some insight into how my ideal pitch would look.

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Selecting content is essentially a complicated gamble. Three to four months in advance of publication, I discuss potential stories with my editorial team. We only have room for five to seven feature stories per issue. In those five to seven features, we try to balance content type (profiles, investigative, how-to, etc...) with geographic representation from across Atlantic Canada and coverage of multiple industries. With those parameters in mind, we try to guess which topics we think will be most relevant and appealing to readers.

As you can imagine, I hear from a lot of companies who want us to write stories about them. The following guide lines won't guarantee you editorial inclusion, but they will improve your chances.

What makes your story newsworthy? With room for only five to seven feature stories per issue, we're forced to be exceptionally selective about the stories we print. It's not enough to have a growing enterprise or a new product launch. How and why do you stand out in the crowd? What obstacles have you overcome? Hook me, and you'll hook our readers.

Be aware of what you're asking for. I've had great pitches that piqued my interest – until the company representative starts talking about advance access to the article for proofreading.

That's not going to happen. A pitch is a starting point: if we decide to pursue a story, we will follow the story where it leads us. Which means it is unlikely to be a glowing testimonial of your corporate achievements, products or services. Our ideal stories are pithy and entertaining, exhibiting exceptional research and strong personality. Writers are expected to unravel topical issues and go beyond seminal facts to reveal new, and valued, information. The inclusion of alternate points of view is a must. If you're looking for positive coverage – and ideally (from your perspective) advance access for fact-checking and proofreading – you have to pay for it. That's what advertorials and sponsored content are for.

Never reference an ad purchase in your story pitch. Telling me you have bought or will buy an ad won't help your cause. As a professional journalist, I take the ethics of my profession seriously – especially when it comes to being objective and free from political or corporate influence. This doesn't mean we aren't grateful for your support: we are (immensely) and we return that favour by working as hard as we can to deliver a loyal, engaged readership. It's no accident that we're the most award-winning and largest audited circulation regional business magazine in Atlantic Canada.

Don't waste your time pitching stories to our sales team – aside from advertorial or sponsored content, they have no control of, or influence on, our editorial. And, it's insulting to the editorial team because you're implying we don't know how to do our job. Start off on the right foot by contacting the right people.

Last but not least, think ahead. We plan content months in advance of publication. What's the best time to make contact? Look at our ad material submission dates: the deadline for one issue is generally a good time to pitch a story for the next edition.

I really hope you find this helpful. If not, I still have that original commentary on file. Just in case.

Dawn Chafe started with *Atlantic Business Magazine* as a freelancer 18 years ago, becoming editor in 1998.

FEEDBACK

✉ dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com
 @AtlanticBus; @ABM_Editor;
 #BetweenTheLines