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## Injecting life into healthcare-story pitches

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Reporters covering complex healthcare subjects are typically entrenched in their beat and knowledgeable about the subject matter. That means that PR pros pitching potential stories to healthcare media must step up their game.

For example, the quickest way for healthcare PR pros to lose credibility with reporters in the sector is to spin the data.

“It is so easy to provide misleading cuts of data, but you need to deal with the totality of the facts,” says Brian Reid, media director at WeissComm Partners and a former health and science reporter at Bloomberg. “I’ve seen the other side and understand you have to respect the sophistication of the journalists. No one is ever satisfied.”

WeissComm recently provided PR support for the release of data from a 12-month, Phase 2 study of client Medivation's drug Dimebon (treatment of mild to moderate Alzheimer's), published in the July 19 issue of *The Lancet*.

The agency's plan centered on highlighting the soundness of the data and providing access to key researchers. This approach generated coverage on all major newswires, *ABC World News Tonight*, *Good Morning America*, and *NBC Nightly News*.

“It is critical to have really good relationships with people on the ground doing the research,” Reid says. “You have to make those connections for journalists who need another expert perspective.”

Roger Sergel, managing editor of medical coverage at ABC News, insists on full disclosure. “What does not work are the pitches that became the model a number of years ago, where a medical problem was stated, experts were offered, but there was no disclosure of who was behind the pitch,” he says. “We want full disclosure to consider any... pitch.”

Because Sergel needs to be able to describe a story in three or four sentences, he prefers concise pitches.

“We need to know what makes the story news,” Sergel says. “I’ve been surprised by how often we get pitches from someone and ask for data, and then they have trouble getting that data, because apparently it was not pulled together in advance.”

Meanwhile, Scott Hensley, editor of *The Wall Street Journal’s* Health Blog, notes that competition for coverage in the healthcare arena is intensifying.

“Understand that each pitch is in competition with a lot of different pitches,” Hensley says, warning against being overly aggressive or deceptive.

“I would caution people to not oversell results of clinical trial or benefits of treatment,” Hensley says. “If we pursue something, we’ll look at what the data shows. There are some companies or institutions so hungry for coverage they bombard us with pitches to the point it becomes spam. The danger is that we’ll tune out or be less likely to respond to genuinely good pitches.”

Knowing how particular media cover healthcare can make for more effective pitching, says Marion Glick, SVP of healthcare media relations at Porter Novelli.

“The reporters at *Internal Medicine News*, *USA Today*, and CNBC have very different news criteria, even though they might all cover news of a drug approval,” she says.

It’s also important to understand the client’s research, pipeline, product, or device, as well as current marketplace conditions, to be prepared to answer in-depth questions, Glick adds.

Some peer-review journals, like *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *JAMA*, *Nature Medicine*, and *Circulation*, offer their contents in advance to select reporters via an embargo system, usually less than a week before the publication date, Glick says. Medical organizations such as the American Heart Association and ASCO also use embargoes.

“PR [pros] need to know... the embargo and media relations policies for such publications and organizations,” Glick says.

### **Do**

Develop pitches that concisely identify the news value up front

Have research experts and data ready

Learn policies for leveraging embargoes with select media

### **Don’t**

Underestimate the sophistication of the reporters

Spin select data sets to fit into what you are pitching

Hide behind complex healthcare jargon