

Finding story and pitching

Spoiler/Спойлер (click to read/кликните, чтобы прочитать)

Hi, my name is Mark Egan and I want to take you through the process of finding and pitching story ideas. So the first thing we need to ask is, what makes a story? Well here are a few factors for you to consider. Firstly, is there a challenge or conflict? People will often come to me and suggest something that they think is a good story. The difficulty is, if there is no challenge, problem, conflict, or anything new, then there is no story. If you go to watch a movie at the cinema, the story always has the hero faced with some challenge. It is the same for news stories. If you say, do a story on this shop, what is the angle? But if the shop is struggling because of higher rents, competition from a new shopping mall, or has done something clever to survive when other small shops have failed, then you have a story. Next, is it out of the ordinary? If someone goes skydiving that will not make the news. If they are 100 years old and they jump out of a plane then that is more likely to be a story. If something is mundane and normal, then it is not likely to make a good story. Look for events that are exceptional and out of the ordinary. The next factor is, does it have resonance with the audience? In other words, is this something your readers, viewers or listeners actually care about right now? Is the topic, area, and timing of the event or issue of interest to the audience you are trying to serve. Stories about ventilators became very relevant to audiences once the Covid 19 outbreak happened, but these would not have been seen as important a year before. Relevance is key. Another factor is contributors. Do you have great interviewees, experts, or people affected by the story? Sometimes the opinions of an expert or victim may make an issue worthy of coverage. And finally, do you have strong photos, videos, or audio to communicate your story? If you are making a tv piece, but have

no visuals to illustrate it, it weakens the story. It is the same for a radio story that has no relevant interviewees. Do you have the media assets, be that video, photo, or audio, to tell the story effectively. So where do you find story ideas? Firstly, you have press releases and events. These are usually held to announce news or give updates. In this case, you are usually going to find out what is happening and choose which story angle you want to tell. Next is using data. There are often reports and research that give a great deal of data about a subject. If you are able to analyse the data, spot anything unusual or interesting you can turn that into a story. So if schools in one area are doing very badly compared to all the others, you could look into the reasons behind it and turn it into a story. Another easy way to spot trends and find stories is to monitor social media. Set up alerts and search for particular topics or hashtags. Social media is a great way of finding out what your audience is talking about. The best way to get original stories is to build up a network of contacts. They can become your eyes and ears. Let them know what you are interested in and how they can contact you. Stay in regular contact with this network and occasionally ask them if they have noticed anything newsworthy lately. Finally, be observant. I sometimes wonder if modern journalists could find a story if their office was hit by a power cut. You don't need a computer to find a story. Look around you. What are the trends in your area? Has anything got better or worse? Did you see anything unusual that might be worth more investigation? If you don't actively look for stories when you're going about your daily routines, then you may miss them. Now once you've got an idea for a story, you might need to turn that into a proposal. That might mean just pitching it in a meeting, or writing a formal proposal. The first thing you need to do is find out the demands of the news outlet. Do they need proposals in a particular format such as a written outline or a bit of sample video? Whether you need to pitch formally or just speak to a news editor, it is best to narrow down your story to a one-liner. If you cannot sum up your idea in one

sentence, then you are probably not being specific enough with your story pitch. If you have an interviewee lined up then include that in your pitch. Who will you be able to talk to and why are you choosing to speak to them? Add into your proposal what the viewer, reader or listener will see or hear. This gives the news editor or decision-maker a better idea of how the end product will look or sound. When we were speaking about what makes a story, we considered the audience. Again at this stage, you should explain why you think this story would be the perfect fit for this particular audience. Why are you doing it this way? Well, it all makes sense if you put yourself in the shoes of that news editor or whoever the decision-maker is. So what are editors looking for? Firstly, they're going to see if your idea matches the goals, style and topic that are usually covered on their news outlet. You might have a great story, just not for that particular programme or website. Next, they are going to see if it is the type of story the audience would respond to. Nowadays, news editors have lots of data about audiences. They know what articles they click on and what videos they watch. If your story idea is similar to stories that audiences have engaged with in the past, then the news editor will feel more confident that it will be a good fit. Next, news editors want to hear an outline of how you would tell the story. A good story can be ruined by bad storytelling. They'll want to know that you have thought of an interesting way to turn your idea into a story. Next, they'll want assurances that your story will be a success. By that, I mean, will you produce an end-product. If you were to say you will go and speak to criminal gangs, but you are not sure if they are willing to talk..then the news editor might worry that this will be a waste of time and energy without producing an end-result. They would prefer to know that you will have a story at the end of it all. Finally, they will compare your story with the current news agenda. If they have recently done lots of stories about farming, they might not be interested in yet another similar story. On the other hand, if there is a hot topic and the audience is hungry for more,

stories about that subject will be more likely to be commissioned.

If you are ever stuck and can't find a story, we all have those days when it feels like nothing is happening, here are a few ideas. Go back in the new diary for 6 months or a year. See what stories were being covered then and then make a few calls and see if there is an update. In news, we are often guilty of covering a story non-stop for a few days and then moving on to the next story. If you go back and see what has changed you can usually end up with a new story to tell. Another method is to go and speak to people in jobs where they deal with lots of different people. Taxi drivers and hairdressers would be an example. See what their customers are talking about. Sometimes there may be an issue or trend which is worthy of a story. We spoke about social media, but there are specific tools like Crowdtangle which lets you quickly spot what is trending and if there is a news story brewing. One final approach is to look at a particular problem your society is facing and look to see if any other town, organisation, or country has done something to successfully tackle that problem. Comparing the two responses to the same problem can make an issue-based story. So if you keep your eyes open, look at all sources of stories, turn your idea into a good proposal before pitching it, you should have no trouble getting good stories approved.