Have you ever had a key component in your story that is hard to actually get in a pitch? This guest post by Erick Mack at Public News Service begins is first of a three part series to strengthening the key components of your story and getting more press attention.

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Key Components to Telling Your Story (and Getting the Press and Public to Listen) Part 1 of 3
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There's one type of person in this world that I can guarantee you finds themselves overwhelmed on a daily basis - a reporter with an e-mail account. Press releases, teleconference invitations, newsletters, reports, even Facebook friend requests from all manner of advocacy groups come in DAILY by the tens for those of us who are lucky, and more often by the hundreds each day. Here are five key components that can help your story or pitch to really stick out of the massive e-pile and pique a reporter or editor's interest. And the good news is, although many of these will seem like common sense - very few communications professionals use all these tools regularly to really boost a story's appeal - so if you start honing your craft now, odds are your issues and campaigns will soon be rising to the top of the slush.

1. *Find 'real people' to tell your story:* It's the longest-held rule of news writing, but it's also become increasingly forgotten or ignored as the pace of the news cycle has continued to accelerate - find real characters to tell your story.

Ninety-nine percent of the population can't relate to the concerns of a policy wonk, and what's worse - thanks to the mainstream media's oversaturation with purported 'experts,' people don't really care about what they have to say anymore. But people CAN understand the struggles of other everyday folks who've seen their favorite hunting and fishing spots torn asunder by energy development, or suspect that their children's asthma is linked to the cement plant down the road.
It's critical to find these people and let them tell the story of your campaign - they're the best salespeople you can find.

And of course, I don't mean to say we should throw out all the experts and policy people, but think of how you're USING THEM in telling your stories. They should be validating, backing up or helping to explain the causes behind the experiences of everyday people, not the other way around. When people talk about the issues of the day, no one says: "Did you hear what the President of (insert acronym) said about Uranium mining?" Your mother is far more likely to tell you: "I read this horrible story about what's happening to people in New Mexico." Those are the stories that inspire action - stories of real people.
2. *Make it relevant:* Another basic tenet of news and communications in general, but one that's often left out because it's all too often assumed that EVERYONE finds this kind of important stuff relevant to their daily lives like we who know the facts do. While stories of real people CAN inspire SOME to action, most people take a little more prodding.

That's because the truth is that the truth is overwhelming; lots of people put blinders on when it comes to anything that doesn't directly affect the block they live on or the route they take to drive the kids to school. It's the job of advocates and journalists to tell the public why they need to get off the cell phone and pay attention because this story affects THEM. I'll admit, this can seem like a really hard component, but it's as simple as thinking about the bigger picture and/ finding the context that applies to the average person.

Here's an example: If an energy company wants to re-open uranium mining on the Navajo Nation, that certainly sucks for the Navajo, but many people might say "things have always kind of sucked for them, now at least maybe they'll have jobs... otherwise, maybe it's time for them to move, anyway, right?" ...and the blinders go up - "it's not in my backyard, not my job to care, got my own worries.'

Don't misunderstand me here, certainly don't hesitate to tell the story of those Navajo people, but don't forget to put it in a larger context, too. What does this mean for the likelihood of Uranium mining near the Grand Canyon or other places the general public is more likely to be familiar with/care about? And just how far downstream did the radioactivity get when that uranium tailings dam broke in the '70s?

The media has no problem with devoting entire stories to how a seemingly local story affects larger populations, in fact it's preferred. Because, again, those local stories are more likely to have great characters and stories from real people driving them. These days, the good news for you is that the media doesn't usually have time to chase down those sort of 'explainer' big picture stories themselves, let alone think them up, so a fresh, bigger picture angle on a story may actually be welcome in that reporter's jam-packed inbox.

Key Components to Telling Your Story (and Getting the Press and Public to Listen)...Going to The Dark Side, and Coming Back

*Part 2 of 3*

*Eric Mack, Public News Service*

Today we look at two more components of good storytelling that can help your story or pitch rise to the top of the heap and pique a reporter or editor's interest. In my first installment we looked at the importance of finding real people to help tell your story, and seeking out angles to make your issue or campaign relevant to the average person. Here, we'll build on those two necessities and then talk about the importance of going to the Dark Side. But first things first, let's get started with the third component to tell your story right:

3. *Bring it Home to the Kitchen Table:* Once you've found everyday sources and stories the general public can relate to, along with a relatable angle or point of view, it's time to bring it all the way home. Like the election consultants say, you've got to talk about your 'kitchen table issues.'
These are the issues that affect daily life in a direct way, the issues that dominate serious discussion at the kitchen table.

It's pretty easy to pin these issues down - usually they're related to finances, employment, health, education and other things that directly affect a household's quality of life. It's our job as communicators to explain how the issue or campaign at hand is a part of that kitchen table discussion, and you might be surprised at how simple it is to do, and how powerful the effects can be. In most cases involving the environment, it's going to come down to health or money.

Recently, campaigns to preserve wilderness and other public lands in the West have been nothing short of brilliant in their ability to unite disparate demographics and rally support for protecting some pristine areas, even during the height of the Bush administration's push to drill, log and develop wherever possible.

Those campaigns, often targeting lands near conservative strongholds, succeeded because they were able to shift the debate away from being a left vs. right, red vs. blue, green vs. industry argument. The key was to make wilderness protection a kitchen table issue by hammering on the economic value of leaving those areas the way they are. Even business owners that couldn't give a hoot about wilderness or habitat protection were quick to change their tune when faced with the serious prospect of saying farewell to valuable tourism dollars spent by sportsmen and other wilderness enthusiasts in local communities.

Putting this component into play may sound like hours of research, but the good news is that if you've already found the right 'everyday' sources and angles for your story, it should flow effortlessly onto the kitchen table.

4. *Going to the Dark Side:* This is probably going to hurt just a little bit. Another key component of telling your story that I almost never see in all the press releases I get is the other side of the story. Somewhere along the way, perhaps in childhood or maybe during that really tough first job, the idea formed for many of us that the best way to deal with the opposition is to pretend they don't exist. But in today's world of information and disinformation overload, that approach just doesn't make sense anymore.

When you pitch a reporter or editor a story, you are essentially asking that journalist to trust you - to trust that you are a credible source of information - and it can be tough to trust someone who wants to tell you a story, but deliberately leaves part of that story out. So when you tell your story to reporters, tell the WHOLE story, including the other side. But don't fret, I'm not asking you to transform yourself into an investigative journalist overnight - when you tell your story, you can still tell it from your perspective, which journalists will expect, just don't commit sins of omission.

In addition to presenting a more well-rounded story that will seem more credible in the eyes of editors, acknowledging the other side in pitches, releases and editorials also provides another tremendous advantage - it allows you to respond. Is that coal plant really going to create that many more jobs? How is that company's track record when it comes to running the responsible operation it touts? You get the idea. By presenting and rebutting the other side's claims, you're now several steps ahead of the game, and if you've got the attention of the reporter or editor, they're now beginning their reporting work entirely from your frame of the debate.
In my first two posts, I covered some of the more conceptual components of the perfect pitch, including finding the right voices, angles and framing for telling your stories, and not forgetting to tell the other side too! Now, for this final installment, let's get down to a few of the remaining nuts and bolts - taking those key facts that hold an entire story together at its core and making them really pop out of your release.

5. **Highlight your key facts:** I mean literally highlight them. Put those important tidbits, statistics, numbers or other data in a box or a bullet list or at least boldface. Do something to make them stand out. Putting together a box or even a graphic is also enticing to publishers that are always looking for some extra 'fill' material for print or their web presence. You might even put together a bulleted list of short anecdotes or summaries of supporting points that help make your case. While providing that filler, this also serves to summarize your pitch for an overworked and underpaid journalist - so make sure that you're highlighting only the juiciest tidbits to entice the reporter to read the entire release.

There is one caveat to all this and this is probably a debatable point, but in my experience, it's essential that all the facts you choose to highlight are just that - objective, verifiable facts. In my experience, unless you're highlighting the opinions of some major newsmakers, boldfacing or listing your major arguments or emotional appeals is a turn off. If you've done your work, the facts will be compelling enough and you'll gained my interest if you just lay them out and let them speak for themselves.

6. **Tell your reporter "where to go" next:** Hard to believe but too often I see a release in my inbox without any contact info for further information. Other times, no one answers the contact phone number and/or there's no further information about reaching anyone quickly. This can kill an otherwise brilliant pitch. Most people reading this post wouldn't dream of sending anything to a reporter without an office, cell and e-mail contact at minimum, but going the extra mile to help lead a reporter in the right direction is likely to pay big dividends over a longer period of time. And falling short not only wastes an opportunity, it lessens your credibility for the next time.

Next, if your pitch or release has succeeded in piquing the interest of a reporter, the next thing she/he's likely to do is pick up the phone or get on the web to start researching.

This is a key opportunity to point your intrepid journalist in the right direction, so on the original pitch don't hesitate to include possible interview sources, relevant reports or surveys, websites, other media articles, photos, Youtube videos or just about anything else. Of course, there is a danger of overdoing it - try to cram as many resources into as little space as possible is tricky so be discerning. Forwarding several large documents or articles in the body of an e-mail or attached to multiple e-mails is likely to lead to deletion, either by a spam filter or a human. Links are gold, shortened links using a tool like TinyURL are even better. A good rule of thumb is to limit your list of links and additional resources to less than half a page, well labeled and organized.

I look forward to receiving your perfect pitches soon!