

How to pitch for Film and Print Advice Sheet

This advice is largely tailored towards small independent expeditions, although the principles remain the same, the scale somewhat different...

There are a variety of reasons for wanting to communicate your expedition through newspapers, magazines or television (broadcast or internet). These range from a hunger for fame and fortune to raising awareness about a specific issue, or a simple desire to tell a great story. The internet provides a whole host of new opportunities for writing, publishing and airing films and we'll consider some of these too....

If you are determined to write about or film your expedition, there are a few basic principles to bear in mind. Firstly you need to go through some clear strategic thinking that define what you do and how you do it. Answer the following questions:

- What's my **story**? (*In order of importance, you should be able to tell your story in a headline, one sentence, one paragraph, one page and perhaps even 10 pages*)
- Who is my **audience**? (*Think age, demographic, interests etc*)
- What is the best **medium** to reach that audience? (*Print, TV, internet, education etc?*)
- Within that medium, what do you need to produce? (*i.e. TV: internet content, educational films, news-worthy reports, documentary etc*)
- What skills, kit, personnel, money etc do you need? **Can you do it!?**

INTEGRAL TO YOUR EXPEDITION?

If communicating your project is to be an integral aim of the expedition, then it will require the same attention to detail in the planning phase as every other facet of your project. Before you depart, you need to have a very good idea about what it is you want to communicate and to whom. For example, a conservation expedition may want to raise awareness about an endangered habitat. This can be achieved on a local, national and international level both from the UK and from the country in which the expedition is taking place. Decide what is realistic and then target the necessary media outlets including television, radio and the press. Once you have a list, find out how each media outlet prefers to receive information. Do the research: read a copy of the newspaper or magazine or online, and watch the television series. Find articles or films similar to the one you want and follow their lead. Look at media organisations' websites. These often contain huge amounts of information. Wanderlust magazine (<http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/magazine/writing.html>) is an excellent example.

DEFINE RESPONSIBILITY

It is a good idea for a specific member of the team to take responsibility for public relations (PR) and communications. Ideally, a second UK-based individual will act as a contact person for the media whilst the expedition is taking place.

UNDERSTAND & ACCEPT THE ROLE WITHIN YOUR EXPEDITION

Secondly, individual team members need to be willing to film, photograph and write about what is taking place. Teams that successfully record their expeditions are clear from the outset about the reason why they are writing an article or making a radio or television documentary. For you to be effective in the field, this needs to be decided and agreed upon pre-expedition, and factored into the expedition planning to fully account and implement necessary personnel, equipment and financial considerations.

CAN WE MAKE MONEY?

From a financial point-of-view, it is safest to assume that no profit will be made from articles or a film. Cost recovery is perhaps the best result that most expeditions can hope for. It is vital that the expedition can be seen as a standalone success without a feature in Geographical magazine, or the six part series on the Discovery Channel.

BENEFITS TO SPONSORS

One of the most popular reasons for generating publicity is to help generate sponsorship. Sponsors will more readily part with goods, services or cash if they think that they will get a good return on their investment in terms of favourable advertising. Examine their products, their online and offline presence and think creatively about what media 'assets' (film, photography, writing etc) you can generate that will compliment their existing PR and media campaigns.

WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

The first step, therefore, is to draw up a press release. There are a lot of useful resources online ranging from WIKI (<http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Press-Release>) to guides with helpful templates (<http://www.publicityinsider.com/release.asp>). The easiest way to start is to think of what the headline of the expedition is, and how to tell the story in 1 or 2 sentences max. The story angle of the press release is vital; make it interesting to the lay reader and you will be more likely to attract the attention of the busy news editor.

Successful press releases include quotes from the expedition leader and/or team members as well as full contact information. If you can, try to have quotes from sponsors and expedition patrons as well. This type of third party endorsement will lend more weight to your press release. Issuing a high quality transparency dupe or high-resolution digital image with your press release will increase the chance of your expedition being publicised. Offer editors access to further high resolution images to entice editors who are always on the look out for free pictures to illustrate their copy.

THINK LOCAL

Don't just aim to get your story into the big national magazines and newspapers but also consider their online publications. It is also much simpler to secure coverage in the local press. This can then be used to ramp up the exposure as and when necessary. Many sponsors have some kind of PR team; be ready to supply them with accurate information and engaging stories. Offering to check sponsors' press releases for factual accuracy will provide you with the opportunity to maintain some control as to how your expedition is being publicised, and allow you to take steps to prevent it from being over-hyped (which could lead to your credibility within the expedition community being weakened).

HOW TO GET YOUR FILM COMMISSIONED?

Be realistic! It's incredibly difficult to get your film commissioned before you leave on your expedition, but not impossible. Be realistic that the odds are heavily stacked against you. There are two ways to have your film commissioned before you leave: either work with a proven production company; or set-up your own production company and go straight to the broadcaster. Through working with a production company you have a greater chance. There are pros and cons with both approaches. If you are worried someone might steal your idea, then it's worth registering a copy of your 'treatment' with a lawyer and keeping a good track record of all communications with a paper (or email) trail.

Working with a production company

The crucial step in working with a proven production company is to choose the most appropriate organisation. Watch any documentaries that are similar in content to what you are proposing. Look out for the production company in the credits and contact them. Write up the television pitch that describes your film and submit it to appropriate production companies – the person you want to get to is the Head of Development. This pitch needs to be written in TV speak – i.e. written in a way which translates to TV – use visual language etc – although the most important thing is the story and characters. Stress these, dress it up, sell it – and know who you're trying to sell it and use the appropriate language: Is it for mainstream TV? Is it for an education audience? Scientific? Young? And when it's written, share it with 5 people that represent the audience you want to see your film. Would they watch it? What ideas do they have?

Straight to the broadcaster?

You'll need good contacts within the broadcaster to let you into their world. Expeditions that decide to go straight to the broadcaster, but which have little or no track record, have often resorted to creating the impression that they are well connected. The first step with this approach is to get one or more well-known corporations on board. Some expeditions have achieved this by asking video and photographic manufacturers for film and lenses. Having secured at least one brand on the expedition banner, it is possible for things to snowball until the point when the expedition gathers its own momentum. However,

all this takes chutzpah and is not a route recommended for the faint-hearted. Once the project has reached critical mass, a few expeditions have enjoyed success by going straight to the broadcasters and presenting them with plans for the next 'unmissable' media event. If you want to pull this off, you need to have an existing track record in documentary production and film-making – and if you do, then you'll probably not reading this!

To make sure that your idea is the one commissioned and broadcast, you might want to consider the current trends in expedition filmmaking. The BBC has invested big bucks in their own expeditions with great success (Land of the Volcano, Land of the Jaguar). Expeditions films have more traction in the smorgasbord of satellite channels, although they have smaller (or sometimes no) money to fund the production. Characters, notably celebrities, excite broadcasters. Rightly or wrongly, trauma currently sells. Confrontation sells. Character driven narrative sells. Uniqueness sells. Sadly, the breeding habits of an obscure owl may not (unless you are targeting nature-style programmes), nor will the fact that the size of pebbles changes over a series of terminal moraines (but might if you have a GCSE geography audience in mind). It goes without saying that there is a price to be paid for partaking in character-driven programmes; a serious consideration if your aim is to build a united team working towards a common goal. Harmonious expeditions do not necessarily make for gripping expedition films.

RETURNING FROM THE FIELD WITH FOOTAGE

If you are returning from the field with endless footage and are wondering what to do it – work out what your audience is. If you're hoping to edit and broadcast it yourself through youtube, vimeo etc then crack on with the edit. If you need an editor, then you can always try asking a local film or art school/department if anyone is interested to try to edit it. They need material to edit to practice on, and some of the students will be the professionals of tomorrow. One Giant Leap used this method with huge success, winning awards for their film, especially the creative and original editing. www.youtube.com and www.vimeo.com are both good places to store your films online – VIMEO allows for larger files including HD quality. Everyone now knows the success of break-out successes from youtube, and if this is a path you want to take, then there are plenty of other materials online professing to show you the route to success.

STILL WANT TO SELL TO A BROADCASTER?

If you whether it could sell, first try to make a rough five-minute taster tape and along with your revised one page treatment, and try and get some professionals in a production company to have a look at it. Have a look at the different programmes currently in the portfolio of the media organisation you wish to approach. If your footage is important to you, make a back-up copy of the original tapes.

The whole process may appear to be a lottery, but the fact remains that some expeditions do succeed in securing coverage. Oliver Steeds, independent documentary maker, and presenter for Discovery Channel offers hope to the budding expedition filmmaker. "It may seem improbable, but it is not impossible. There is always a way of getting a good story on screen."

PITCHING FOR PRINT, PAPER or ONLINE

Many of the same principles apply for getting something printed in a newspaper or magazine. Nick Smith, former Editor of Geographical magazine, explains that one of the problems is that many articles are "Very interesting, but just not right". Speaking about the Geographical audience, he pointed out that his focus is "The popular enjoyment of geography" rather than the minutiae of counting frogs in Venezuela. As always, it is important to do your research and to find the right magazine or newspaper for your expedition.

Henry Hemming chose a novel way of cutting through the competition to get articles about his Middle East artistic expedition published. "We had to do something that would make an impression, and so set about sending miniature hand-made booklets to each relevant person. We would follow this up with a barrage of calls, most of which were answered by the individual's P.A. who said things like his or her boss was 'in a meeting' or 'away from his or her desk', until we finally got through to the person we were after. Most of the time if the person had seen the booklet we had sent they would ask to see the actual book. We would offer to come round with the book, which allowed personal contact. Again, this made the article more likely. After yet more calls or emails someone would be dispatched to interview us. We ended up with five pages in Metro, features in The Times, The Sunday Telegraph, The Independent, The Big Issue,

Geographical, i-D, Trace, The Sunday Sun, Islamica, and a number of other smaller magazines." Persistence pays.

Consider three main questions.

1. Am I a field researcher or a journalist or filmmaker?
2. Why do I want to have a film broadcast or an article published about this expedition?
3. What articles and films do I think are good and how can I emulate their style?

Paul Deegan, who has for ten years earned a living from writing about expedition and travel-related subjects for magazines and newspapers, believes that "Writers need to think like an editor. What unique angle can you put on your story to make it a 'reason to buy' the magazine? Crack that conundrum and you will maximise the chance of attracting the attention of the editorial department."

WRITE 'ON SPEC'

If you have no previous track record of being published, offer to write it 'on spec'. This means that whilst the magazine has no obligation to publish your story - and will only pay you for if it does get printed - at least it will have shown a firm interest in the article. This will at least help you to demonstrate to your sponsors that your expedition has received definite interest from the media.

If you can't write, make yourself available to be interviewed by a staff writer. You will not get paid, but you will fulfil your obligation to your supporters. However, whether the publication agrees to name check your sponsoring organisation is an entirely different matter!

Many thanks to Paul Deegan, Oliver Steeds, Henry Hemming and Nick Smith for their contributions.