

To get on reporters' radar,  
focus on pitching where they're  
already looking

# How to Spotlight Faculty Experts and Score Home Runs with the Media

By STEVE HARTSOE

Here's a scenario familiar to many higher education communicators: You're at a conference listening to a panel of reporters from major media outlets bemoan how flaks like us shouldn't bother them with pitches. Any email you send will be too long, and don't even think about calling. They don't have time.

Despite the contravening vibe we sometimes get from journalists, many need what we've got: Experts on a variety of topics who can provide insights and perspectives that enhance their stories and inform their readers. The trick is cutting through the clutter that's competing for media attention.

Topic, timing, relationships with reporters, and name recognition help determine whether your pitch is successful, but none guarantee it. No matter the size of your communications operation, you can get your institution's faculty experts quoted in the news more often.

More than a decade ago, Duke's University's Office of News and Communications shifted its efforts to a more strategic focus on the issues that reporters are covering and the topics that interest readers. We formed a rapid response team to pitch faculty experts to media covering breaking news in an effort to capitalize on journalists' scramble to include authoritative voices in their coverage. The goal is to entice reporters to contact our faculty for additional comments by presenting the kind of sources they need when they need them. While our North Carolina institution already had good name recognition and many faculty experts who appeared as sources in stories by major news outlets, initiating this approach more than doubled our media hits within a year. Our experience developing the rapid response team offers some insights on how to bolster your chances for success.



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### STAR STATS

Dr. Feldspar has been quoted in *Scientific American* and *The Times* of London and has appeared on *Good Morning America*.

### AREAS OF EXPERTISE

- Fracking
- Water Quality
- Structural Geology



Dr. Feldspar was published in *Geochemistry Today* and *Applied Geological Research* in 2014!

### GO WITH THE NEWS FLOW

"Most people, even people who work at the university, don't wake up and say, 'Gosh, I wonder what university X is doing today,'" says David Jarmul, Duke's associate vice president for news and communications and the person who initiated the changes. "They're interested in what's happening in Syria, or Washington, or with their favorite football team, or the latest Hollywood blockbuster. If you want them to pay attention, you have to meet them where they are instead of focusing solely on institutional news."

To be sure, our office continues to distribute stories about research discoveries, campus events, and other university staples. We know some people will read them and many others will not, which is why rapid response is at the core of Duke's efforts. If you want to draw attention to your institution's work,

you have to think about what attracts eyeballs. Just as reporters scour social media for story ideas and sources, institutional audiences are increasingly getting their news from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other channels.

Twice a week, a team of Duke news and communications staff members, a communicator from the university's Islamic Studies Center, and a colleague in our Washington, D.C., office meet for 30 minutes to discuss news stories that we can leverage by aligning them with our faculty members' areas of expertise. These topics often include high-profile court decisions, international conflicts, and hot issues in areas such as politics, medicine, health care, and the environment. We also monitor upcoming anniversaries and other timely events that reporters are likely to write about in advance, such as a G-7 summit, papal visit, or impending policy debate.

## INVITE FACULTY IN

Faculty members and our communications colleagues in departments and schools across the university are essential partners in this effort. We regularly visit with unit communicators and encourage them to invite faculty members to these news meetings so that we can learn about their expertise and they can better understand how we call attention to their work. The better our relationships with faculty members, the more nimble our responses when news breaks. But group meetings aren't enough. Some helpful practices include:

- Spending time with professors individually. Find out what they study. Is any of their research on unusual yet potentially newsworthy topics? Maybe a professor is an expert on a particular animal species that's in the news—or, in our case, one that's entertaining enough to feature in films, such as the 2014 IMAX movie *Island of Lemurs: Madagascar*, and on television, such as the long-running PBS Kids show *Zoboomafoo*. Duke's Lemur Center, a partner on both projects, has the world's largest and most diverse collection of these endangered mammals outside Madagascar. Through these meetings we also learn which faculty members are about to publish articles or books and the subject areas they cover. Knowing your

faculty's areas of expertise makes it easier to quickly respond both to individual media inquiries and to those circulated by services such as PR Newswire's ProfNet and Help A Reporter Out. (We subscribe to both, but we prefer

to directly deal with reporters rather than be in a race with other sources to answer an online inquiry first.)

- Asking professors to participate. Find out if they're willing to be an expert source for reporters. Explain how your office can help promote their work and provide them with media relations support. Emphasize that agreeing to be a source means they must promptly respond to incoming media inquiries.

- Preparing them for the media spotlight. Faculty members need media training so that they'll be ready when their specialty hits the news. We offer a 2.5-hour media training workshop each year to teach faculty

members how to communicate their expertise in video interviews, on the phone, and via social media. More than 500 faculty and graduate students have participated, with several dozen typically attending each workshop. We also conduct standalone media training sessions for schools or institutes upon request.

If some professors are uncomfortable speaking with a reporter but still eager to participate, ask them to consider writing short op-ed pieces. We host an annual workshop to help faculty members write effective op-eds, and we pitch submissions to a network of regional newspapers we've cultivated in recent years. (For more on this idea, read "Start Spreading the Views" in the November/December 2013 issue of *CURRENTS* at [bit.ly/SpreadTheViews](http://bit.ly/SpreadTheViews).) While some professors won't like any of these options, others will welcome the opportunity to share their knowledge with a wider audience.

## IMAGINE, ITERATE, REPEAT

The principal way we position Duke faculty members within the news cycle is through brief news tips that we send to print and broadcast reporters ([bit.ly/DukeU\\_newstips](http://bit.ly/DukeU_newstips)) covering everything from the White House and foreign affairs to pop culture. A typical tip includes a topical quote from a faculty member, a short bio, contact information, a link to his or her webpage, and video or audio clips, when available. The tips, which we try to send by noon, usually take less than an hour to produce.

With fewer reporters covering more territory, we've noticed an uptick in the number of times these quotes appear verbatim in news stories. In August 2014, for instance, we issued a news tip quoting a medical ethicist on the dangers of using untested drugs to treat people infected with the Ebola virus. The physician's top quote was used in its entirety the same day in a widely published Associated Press story.

As time-crunched journalists look for more ideas and sources on social media, our office has incorporated more channels to disseminate our information. We apply the *create once, publish everywhere* model to our communications efforts and experiment to see what works. We now tweet most tips from the @DukeU Twitter account as well as our individual Twitter accounts. Before we release the results of a study or when we have advance notice of a high-profile story, we try to accompany any text with a video, which we post on Duke's YouTube channel.

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In spring 2012, we began hosting occasional Google Hangouts where faculty members could address major stories, such as the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. Our office also hosts Twitter chats with subject matter experts during major political events, including presidential debates and national party conventions, or policy announcements, such as State of the Union addresses and President Obama's September 2014 speech regarding U.S. strategy against the Islamic State group.

But when something isn't working, we're not afraid to change it. Last year, we began analyzing how often the media use our news tips. From December 2013 through May 2014, they were not generating as much coverage as we had hoped. Of the roughly 40 news tips we distributed during this period, reporters used about half of them. A well-planned tip prepared for the Sochi Winter Olympics quoted experts on human rights, sports medicine, and human anthropology, but it fell flat. Why? A glut of experts flooding the media landscape, lack of interest in the topics we selected, and poor timing (we sent the tip a month before the opening ceremony) are probable reasons. One tip that performed well, however, was sent in late May 2014, a few days before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was slated to release a proposed rule regulating greenhouse-gas emissions from existing power plants. Environmental policy professor Tim Profeta was quoted in nearly 30 media outlets, including *USA Today* and BBC News. We usually consider one to three media hits to be a success; we attribute the greater coverage to being in front of the news with the right expert at the right time.

The lackluster findings motivated us to improve our work. We're more prudent about which news stories we pursue now. Rather than sending tips tied to a pop culture anniversary, for example, we mostly stick to our topical strengths, such as politics, law, and the environment. Since instituting this change, reporters have used nearly every tip we've disseminated since June 2014. We've also reformatted our news tips to feature the most compelling quote at the top. (Before, the quote came at the end, below the faculty member's name, brief bio, and contact information.) And we're working to add more video links to interviews with professors so that TV producers can see what the person will look and sound like on camera.

We've also punched up our headlines. Instead of writing "News Tip: Expert Available to Comment on

Supreme Court's Affordable Care Act Decision" we would opt for "Health Care 'Now in Jeopardy,' Says Health Policy Expert." This style makes sense on social media, including the Duke News Tumblr we launched in October 2014 ([dukenews.tumblr.com](http://dukenews.tumblr.com)).

The mobile-friendly and graphic-rich platform extends our media outreach, creating an accessible direct feed for journalists. It provides an outlet for aggregating the myriad stories we spotlight with an attention-grabbing headline, a quick quote, and a link to more information.

We distribute our news on social platforms with growing user bases to raise the profile of the institution and our faculty, but none of us should wait and hope that journalists take notice. All our efforts to find willing professors and groom them for media interviews are wasted if our press contacts are weak. We build and refine our media lists continually. For example, when reporters use our tips, we review their list of Twitter followers to identify other journalists to add to our database. So search the news, take note of who is writing about what, add them to your lists, and reach out with useful information. Because the media need what we provide, even if they don't like to admit it. 

Steve Hartsoe is a senior editor in the Office of News and Communications at Duke University in North Carolina. Prior to working in higher education, Hartsoe was a reporter and editor for The Associated Press as well as several newspapers.



**Duke News**  
A Tumblr for Duke news tips and expert quotes.  
Contact Info Faculty Experts Resources for the Media

### Can You Prevent Aggressive Children From Being Violent?

"We can prevent serious violence and psychopathology among the group of children who are highest-risk. That's the essential finding from this study."



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— Kenneth Dodge, a professor at Sanford School of Public Policy and director of the Center for Child and Family Policy

Read more at Duke Today: <http://bit.ly/YOON9E>.

0 notes 2 months ago kenneth dodge duke sanford

child aggression psychopathology violence prevention duke news

**BITE-SIZE NEWS BAIT:** Launched in October 2014, the Duke News Tumblr ([dukenews.tumblr.com](http://dukenews.tumblr.com)) features university experts' insights on timely topics in a mobile-friendly manner.

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