

# 7 tips to help publicists work better with journalists

 By [Eugene Yiga](#)

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It's been almost ten years since I began working as a freelance copywriter and journalist (and just over three years since I went full-time). To date, I've published over 800 features and articles for more than 70 publications around the world. None of this would have been possible without great publicists, which is why I'll always be thankful for the opportunities and ideas they've given me.



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But there have been a growing number of frustrations over the last several months that are making things more difficult than they need to be. That's why I'd like to offer this guide of what I hope will be useful suggestions on how publicists can better work with journalists, freelancers, bloggers, and the like.

## 1. Do your research

If you come across a writer you'd like to work with, don't just add them to your mailing list and proceed to bombard them with press releases that are completely outside their areas of expertise. First, find out who they are and what they cover. Only if there's a fit should you reach out to introduce yourself, mention who your clients are, explain why you'd like to work together and ask if it's okay to keep them informed about suitable opportunities that come up. (At least find out where they live so that you don't invite them to events they can't attend unless you're including return airfare too.)

Finding out if there's a fit can be tricky, especially when you're dealing with a freelancer that covers a broad range of topics. For example, I've written about travel, leisure, food, drinks, marketing, media, television, film, music, theatre, art, books, business, personal development, and more. But anyone who follows me on social media, receives my monthly newsletter, or has taken a minute to browse through my archive will see that my focus is on people, which is why any opportunity to profile an interesting person appeals to me most. (Luxury travel is another big one and I happen to have a rare two-week gap in my calendar from 22 June to 6 July in case you've got any suggestions.)

## 2. Propose interesting ideas

Once you've established that there's a fit, you can add them to your mailing list and start sending press releases with concrete ideas. (No vague requests to meet and "discuss some things" please.) But make sure the ideas are interesting and would make for newsworthy stories. This can be tricky because sometimes it's hard to tell what will make for an

appealing feature when your clients insist that everything is newsworthy (“It’s our CEO’s birthday!”) even though this won’t matter to anyone except them.

What’s the solution? For me, besides telling stories that have people at their core, the focus is on ideas that are timely and accessible to the public. The editors I work with rarely respond to pitches about experiences that are no longer available (like a once-off event that’s now in the past) or to ideas that will still be relevant a year from now (because if there’s no urgency, then it can wait). So as much as I’m drowning in more potential stories than I know how to deal with right now, I still love getting relevant suggestions because sometimes the right idea will get bumped up the list.

### **3. Be available**

When you send a press release, don’t expect an immediate reply. In fact, don’t expect a reply at all (or email twenty minutes later to ask if the writer got your email). Unless they’re specifically addressed to a specific person with a specific request that needs a specific response, press releases should be treated as just an FYI with details on how the recipient can get more information if desired.

But the key is to be available if they want to contact you. I can’t describe how frustrating it is (or why it’s been happening so much lately) to receive a wonderful press release, get excited about it, reply for clarification or confirmation or something else, and then find that the publicist has activated their out-of-office response. In the words of [this article](#) with useful advice: “If you are the press contact, it’s pretty important that the press is able to contact you.”

The same goes for your clients. If you propose an interview, make sure the source is available. It’s beyond frustrating for a writer to have to call a subject several times at the scheduled hour only to find that they’re unavailable or else forgot about the interview. More than that, a writer should never have to contact your client directly to arrange an interview because you weren’t able to set it up. Otherwise, what’s the client paying you for?

### **4. Let the writer decide on outlets and angles**

Once you’ve agreed to work together on a story, give the writer freedom to publish where he or she sees fit. When publicists see the big titles I write for, some of them are hell-bent on getting their clients featured in specific publications even though the readership doesn’t match the story at all. Yes, circulation numbers are great, but isn’t it better to get coverage in a niche publication that will actually give your client the response they’re after? (This is one of the many reasons I’m baffled by all the short-sighted fawning over social media ‘influencers’, with thousands of vicarious and unimpressible followers that they don’t even influence or own, but that’s another gripe for another day.)

Also, don’t be fussy about the specific angles, which the writer is often in a better position to determine. Yes, it’s fine to have talking points that you’d like to address (and perhaps some areas to avoid if, for example, your client is a celebrity who would like to keep their personal life out of the conversation). But it’s somewhat insulting to use writers as your puppets. Unless you’re paying a writer to put together an advertorial (in which case it would be unethical to expect them to send this to a publication) give them the freedom to craft something for the readers they know better than you do.

### **5. Be a pleasure to work with**

First, don’t insist on approving the story beforehand. Sometimes it might be acceptable when you’re dealing with a lot of facts and figures that need verification, but you should trust that the writer you’re working with isn’t out to crucify your client. If you’re not sure, you shouldn’t be working with the writer at all.

And if you have concerns, make sure your clients have enough media and interview training so that they won't say the wrong things. Better yet, insist on an email interview (which I prefer so much more to telephone ones because there's no need to coordinate schedules or interrupt my day) and check the transcript yourself before you send it to the writer.

Second, don't keep asking when the story will appear. While this is easier to know with print magazines, I often have zero idea when my newspaper articles will be published until they are. (Hint: set up a Google Alert and you'll be notified when your clients are mentioned online.) Once you've given the writer everything he or she needs, let them get on with the work.

Third, don't call unless it's urgent (e.g. you're standing outside my building with a delivery or need me to confirm new logistics for an event that night). The only way I get through the day is by keeping my phone on silent or flight mode when I'm working, which is almost all the time. I also check my email only once a day (and not on my phone) so there's no point in following up at the slightest delay. But if you do need to text, send a standard SMS and not a message on WhatsApp, which I find too personal. Speaking of which, please don't add writers to WhatsApp groups, unless it's to coordinate a trip.

## **6. Keep your promises**

This should be simple – keep the promises you make and don't make promises you can't keep – but sometimes it's not. I know it's not always within your control when you're speaking on behalf of finicky clients but the only way for writers to trust you and want to work with you is if you're reliable.

I've lost track of how many times I've been to social engagements or professional events, where I'll meet people who immediately ask for a card when they find out what I do. After gushing about their restaurant or business or client or whatever, they promise to get in touch and invite me to experience it or review it or interview it or whatever. But do I ever hear from these people again? Nope.

Professional publicists should be different and yet sometimes they're just as bad. If you promise to send pictures, send pictures (or, better yet, include a link to a public Dropbox or Google Drive folder when sending a press release). If you promise to send product samples, send product samples. I'm often coordinating so many stories that my likelihood of pursuing something new decreases in proportion to how often I have to make requests for it.

## **7. Build a long-term relationship**

This is another thing that should be simple but isn't. The worst publicists I've worked with are those who want an immediate tit-for-tat. If you don't give them the coverage they expect, they'll drop you at the first sign of trouble and never contact you again. Honestly? Good riddance. If you want someone to jump through hoops, find a new and/or desperate blogger who still finds novelty in free stuff. But if you want a writer who will take the time to create something impactful beyond ephemeral tweets and Instagram posts, be prepared to work with them for longer than a hashtag trend.

My favourite publicists are those who have worked with me for years and have learned to trust my reputation. They invite me to experiences without insisting on specific coverage or even expecting anything in return at all. They give me the freedom to craft the stories as I see fit, which is why I've sometimes written up to half a dozen or more features from a single trip. Yes, I understand that clients want coverage and put pressure on you to get it, but you have to educate them about the process. It takes time.

Indeed, the only way to build a long-term relationship is to understand that sometimes you have to give without expecting

anything in return. For example, when I launched my new travel blog, some of my favourite publicists were happy to give me tickets to offer as prizes to my readers; they didn't even stop to ask what their client would get in return (although they ended up getting great coverage and engagement anyway).

Contrast that to the publicists who sent press releases they expected me to promote but went radio silent the minute I asked if they could offer prizes too. Again, I know this isn't always in your control when your client only gives you a certain allocation of freebies, but the lack of response (read: respect) is telling.

## Where do we go from here?

In conclusion, I'd like to reiterate that I love publicists – my career wouldn't exist without their help and support – and would love to work with more quality ones. But we need to understand that it's not a one-way process of throwing press releases against a wall and seeing what sticks. It's about building professional relationships over time. More than that, with the media landscape in a state of constant change, it's about finding creative ways to work together going forward.

As I've continued to make a shift into other forms of media over the last year and a half (television, voiceovers, etc.), I've had to say no to dozens and dozens of invitations to wonderful opportunities for the sole reason that my schedule is too unpredictable and I don't want to be the kind of unprofessional who says yes to something and then has to cancel the day before or the morning of. And while some publicists have simply taken me off their lists, others have found new ways for us to keep working together.

For example, because I often can't attend launches of new products, publicists who still want coverage (albeit much cheaper because they don't have to incur the expense of hosting me) will simply send me samples to review at home. I'm even working with others to create custom content that their clients can own and use as they see fit. In other words, there are always solutions to problems, as long as you're prepared to stick with them and keep your eyes open for great ideas.

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello.

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