

2024 State of GovCon Journalism Report



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ABOUT THE SURVEY

As a government contractor PR and marketing firm operating for more than 40 years, Boscobel Marketing Communications closely monitors public relations trends and best practices in our industry. We regularly reach out to reporters, other PR professionals, and PR associations to learn what’s happening in GovCon media. To hear the collective voices and perspectives of GovCon journalists, specifically, we initiated this State of GovCon Journalism survey.

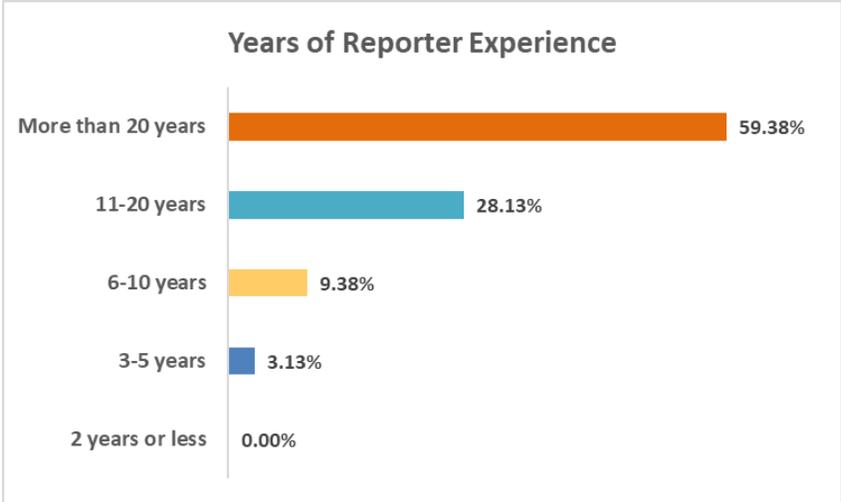
From late January through early March 2024, we surveyed GovCon journalists about how they work, stories they care about, their preferences and priorities for working with PR pros, and their sentiments when it comes to federal journalism today.

PROFILE: MOST REPORTERS HAVE 20+ YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

This year’s pool of GovCon reporters is even more experienced than last year’s. In fact, most have more than 20 years of experience! They cover the breadth and depth of federal government, defense, and technology news and analysis.

Experience: Nearly 60% Have Been Journalists for More Than 20 Years

All of this year’s survey respondents have been reporting for at least three years, and 88% have over 11 years of experience.



Beats: Defense, Technology, Aerospace and Space, Security, Government, and More

When asked what beats or types of news they cover, reporters said the defense and military sector; space and aerospace; government; technology; defense and national security; cybersecurity; and workforce issues. GovCon reporters’ beats range from a deep focus on one branch of the military or one technology area (e.g., space technology) to a broad perspective on all defense news or all government contractor news.

2024 NEWS STORIES AND TRENDS

We asked, “What news stories, innovations, or industry trends are you most looking forward to covering this year?” A full 50% of reporters answered this open-ended question with “artificial intelligence” or “AI.” Another hot topic for 2024 is the presidential election and its aftermath. Multiple journalists mentioned climate change, cybersecurity, and workforce issues.

Other stories and trends include:

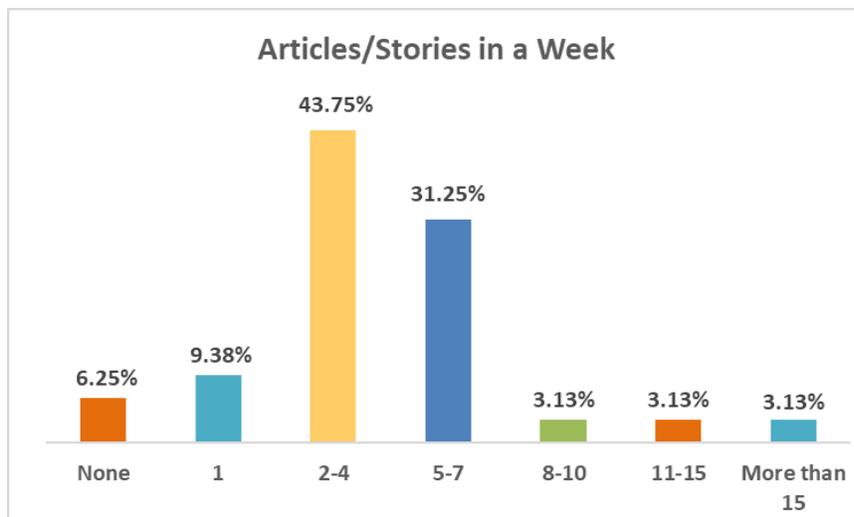
- Anything that involves reducing the carbon emissions of aviation
- Army modernization
- CJADC2
- Defense budget
- Defense equipment R&D
- Mergers and acquisitions
- Pentagon’s Replicator initiative
- Return to the moon
- Russia-Ukraine
- National security
- New entrants to the GovCon market
- Supply chain
- Veterans’ issues
- Workforce development/university innovations

HOW REPORTERS WORK

Though the reporters cover a variety of beats, there are some clear similarities in how they work. We looked at reporters’ workload, where they go for story ideas, and the rhythm of their week.

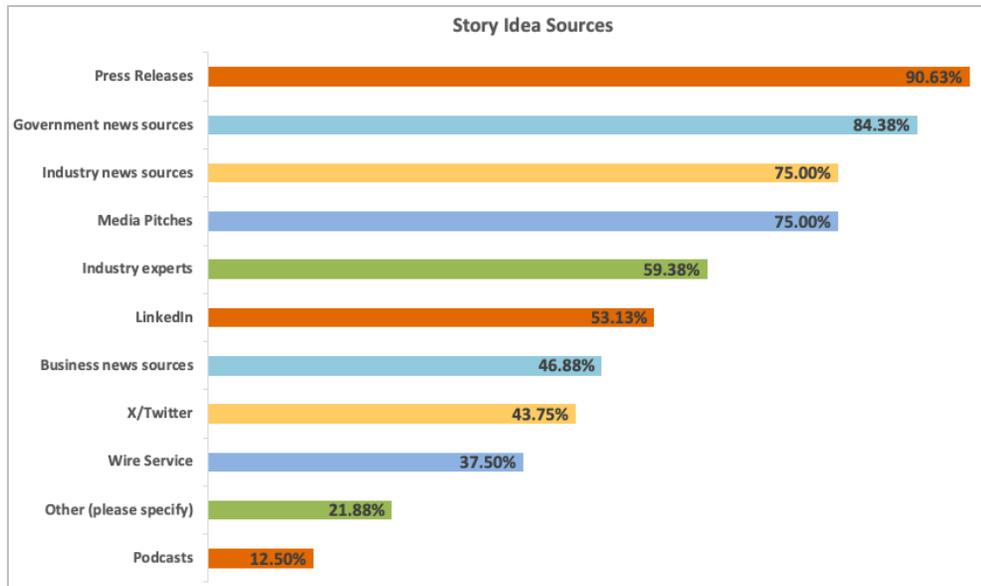
Workload: Perpetual Deadlines

How many articles are journalists writing in a typical week? As with last year’s survey, most (44%) write 2-4 articles weekly. About one-third turn in 5-7 stories every week. Less than one-tenth (9%) are writing 8-10 stories weekly.



Story Sources: The Press Release is Still No. 1 for Story Ideas

Consistent with last year's report, press releases (91%) are the top reporter source for story ideas, followed by government news sources (84%). Industry news and media pitches are tied for the third most-utilized source. LinkedIn (53%) is the top social platform for story ideas. Other sources specified include conferences, one's own network of experts, YouTube interviews, and television news programs.



Reporters Are Listening (to Podcasts)

New this year, we asked about podcasts. 62% of reporters are listening to podcasts, spanning those relevant to work and some that are strictly for personal enjoyment. One-third of reporters have their own podcast—with another 20% considering creating one.

Here's a sample of podcasts reporters are listening to and/or publishing:

- Aerospace Nation
- Aviation Week's Check 6
- BBC World Service
- Constellations
- CyberCast
- Defense One Radio
- Disruptive by Design
- Dr. Zero Trust
- Federal Tech Podcast
- GovCast
- The Daily by NYT
- The Daily Scoop Podcast
- The Journal by WSJ
- WT 360

Top 2024 Trade Shows and Industry Events

One way reporters source news stories is to attend trade shows and industry events. We asked about their plans to attend some specific shows this year—and for others on their list for 2024. Defense events filled out the top three spots. 56% of reporters are planning to attend the Association of the U.S. Army’s AUSA event in October. 52% will go to Air & Space Force Association’s Space & Cyber event in September, followed by 48% going to Navy League of the United States Sea-Air-Space in April.

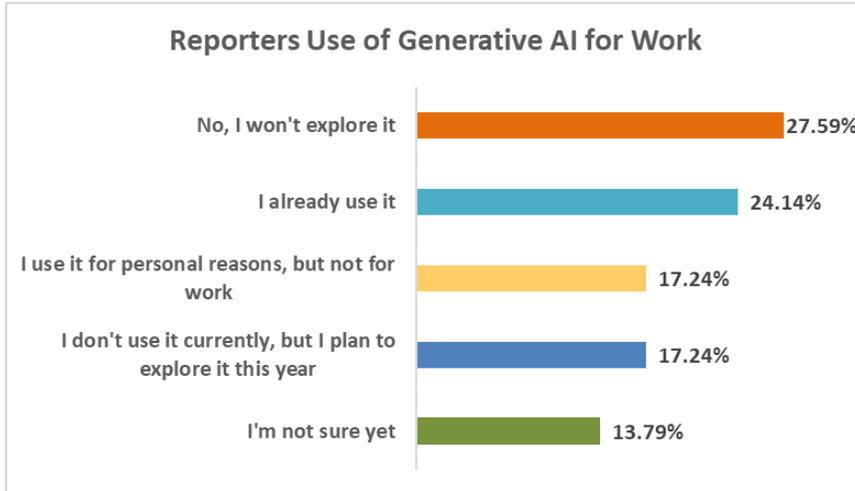


Other events reporters are scheduling for 2024 include:

- AFCEA
- BBGA Conference
- EBACE
- ElasticON
- Eurosatory
- Farnborough Air Show
- GITEC
- International Astronautical Congress
- MSPO
- Quad-A
- SAF Investor
- Satellite 2024
- Satellite Show
- Small Sat Conference
- TechNet Emergence
- UK conferences by DefenceIQ and SAE

Mixed Report on Generative AI at Work

Also for the first time, we asked whether reporters are using—or plan to explore using—generative AI at work. While 28% do not plan to explore using tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini (formerly, Bard), or DALL-E, 24% are already using it at work. 17% are using AI in their personal lives, only, and another 17% plan to start using it this year. The rest, 14%, are simply not sure whether they will utilize generative AI in their work.

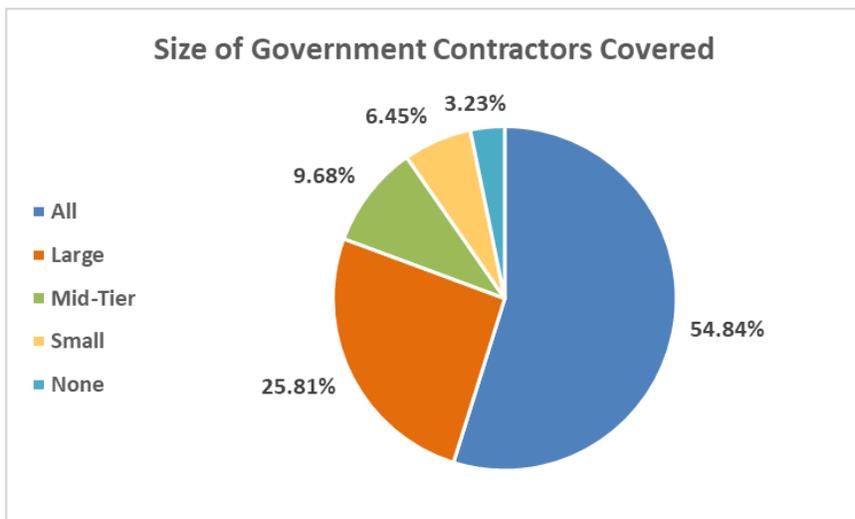


REPORTING ON GOVERNMENT CONTRACTORS

This year, we dove a little deeper into how reporters cover government contractors. We asked about the size of the companies they cover, what sources they check when writing about GovCons, tips for small and mid-sized companies to get more coverage, and best practices for announcing M&As.

Most Reporters Cover Small, Mids, and Large GovCons

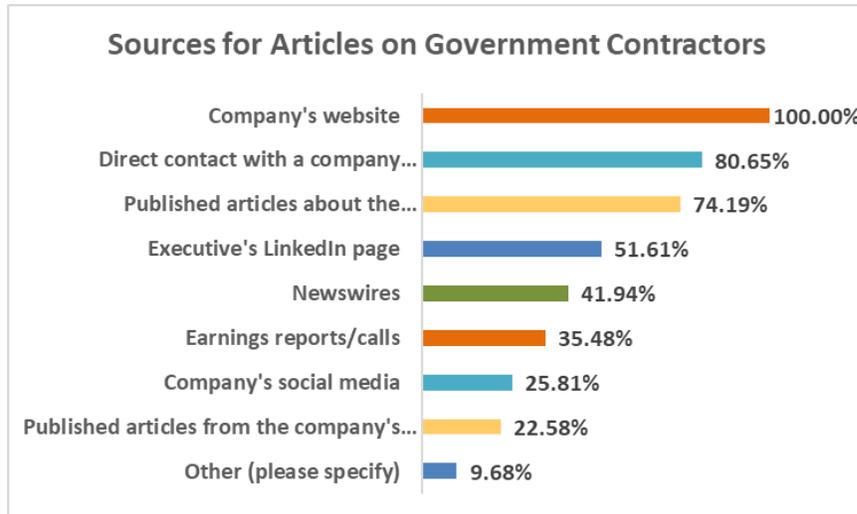
Most GovCon reporters (55%) cover government contractors of all sizes, however, 26% of reporters cover large companies.



All Reporters Review the Company Website, As Their Go-To Source

Before writing about a government contractor, what sources do reporters check? All of them, 100%, check the company website! Most reporters also directly connect with an executive or spokesperson

(81%) and read articles about the company and its leaders (74%). Other sources added by the reporters were conferences and events resulting in face-to-face discussions, statements about a program's status, and YouTube.



For Smalls and Mids, Coverage Comes From Newsworthy Pitches and PRs

Reporters shared numerous suggestions and encouragement for small and mid-sized contractors to get more coverage.

Many emphasized the need to consistently communicate timely, relevant news:

- Be newsworthy
- Have a news hook!
- Convey a compelling angle for news trends.
- Being publicly traded helps but is expensive. Otherwise, announcements on contract wins, product deliveries.
- Lead with the problem you are trying to solve and its effect on agencies.
- Press releases with specific updates or announcements rather than general information
- Create a pitch that helps the listener solve a specific problem. E.g., What do the changes in CMMC mean to companies?
- Make news. Be bold. Don't wait for the customer - that will usually be dated info. Try to shape the discussion rather than just react to the customer.
- We focus on deals, M&A and funding stories, so stories that fit in those areas are most important to us.
- The company's work needs to connect with a larger issue. It is unusual for us to write about the company for the sake of the company.

Other tips provided insights on connecting with reporters:

- Make pitches short and clear; don't burden reporters and editors with insistent interview pitches.
- Understand who you are pitching.
- Be tenacious in contacting journalists; have 'real news' ready to share for coverage, have SMEs ready for interviews
- Find out which type of media/publication is really interested in your business. As in sales, don't try to sell how wonderful you are, show how you are solving/meeting a user requirement without the sales pitch. Trust your experienced people - we do not want to hear or put on the record anyone in marketing or comms.
- Engage with us -- let us know why you're interesting/different in the market or how your company fits into an industry trend.
- Try to understand how media works. And, from my perspective as a freelance, spend a bit of time understanding the nature of freelance journalism and self-employment. Up-front advice about a forthcoming announcement would give me enough advance notice to go to my editors and to stand a chance of successfully pitching.
- Be persistent.

A few reporters had suggestions for engaging in the market and gaining visibility beyond news stories:

- Join a membership organization with a media component.
- Creating ads and special services that people would want to use, try, or even talk about.
- Get an advertising budget
- Be proactive on social media
- Hire professional communicators

M&A News: It's About the Strategic Importance of the Deal

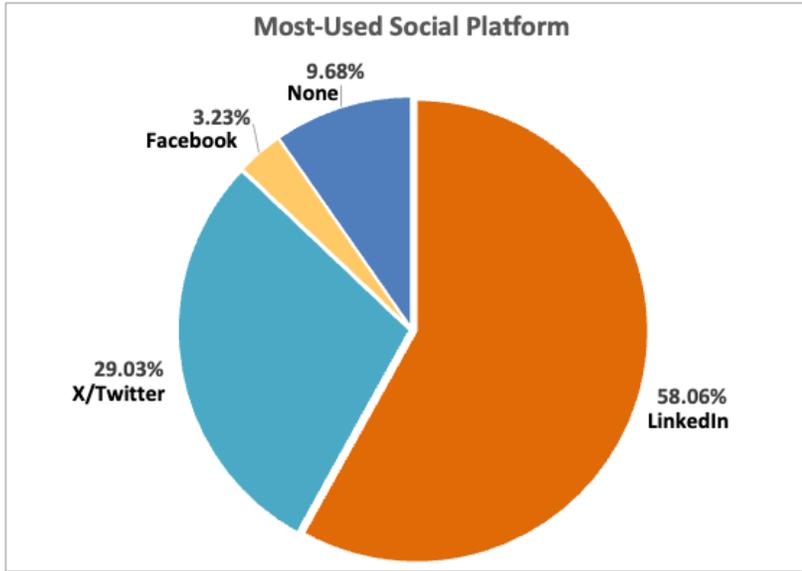
Specifically for merger and acquisition announcements, the reporters who cover GovCon M&As stressed the need to communicate the strategic value and the terms of the transaction.

- Focus on what it means -- how it benefits both companies, how it benefits customers, why the combination is significant, what new opportunities will be created.
- Provide all the main deal terms, including amount, acquiring company, and background of previous transactions.
- Create and build distinguished storytelling about why this merger or acquisition is happening.
- Hold background calls to explain the significance before the announcement.
- Lead with the benefits of the M&A deal, its strategic importance, the market impacts and provide the pertinent financial information of the deal
- Just normal journalism best practices -- we also do everything we can to request information about financial terms, if company names and/or leadership will change, etc.

SOCIAL MEDIA HAS A MAJOR ROLE

LinkedIn Usage is Up 8%, X Down by 9%

When asked, “Which social network platform do you use the most for work?”, the answer was clear: LinkedIn was selected by 58% of reporters, up from 50% one year ago. 30% are using X/Twitter, down from 39% last year. None of the other platforms have any significant use, with 10% of reporters saying they don’t use any social platform for their work. No one reported using Instagram or a platform not listed.



DEALINGS WITH PR PROFESSIONALS

As a GovCon PR firm, we keep a finger on the pulse of reporters, so we can be respectful of their time and how they like to work. We asked two questions about working with PR professionals.

Nearly Half of Reporters See PR Pros as Beneficial

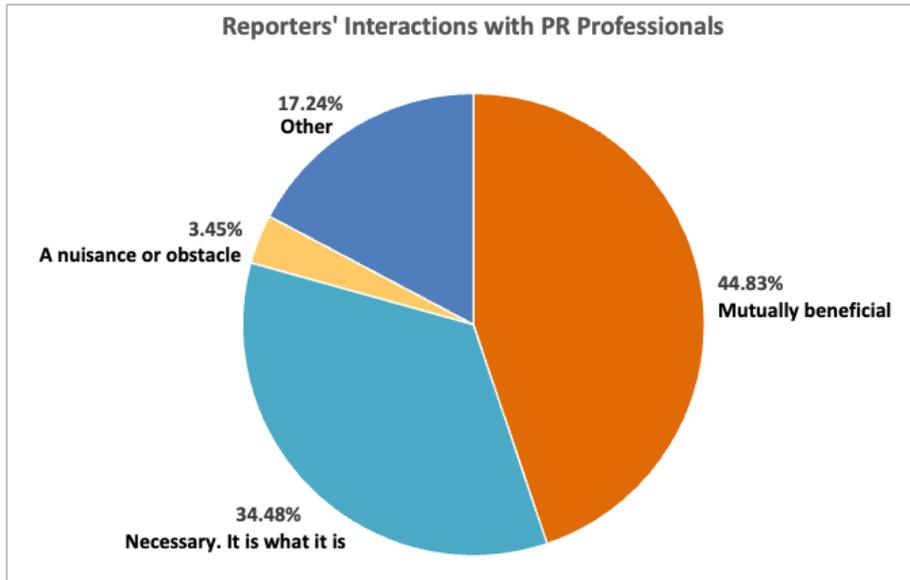
We asked, “How would you characterize your interactions with GovCon PR professionals and PR firms?” Most (45%) see the relationships as mutually beneficial. 35% were neutral, saying the interactions are “Necessary. It is what it is.” That’s a decrease from 50% last year. Only 4% characterize those interactions as “A nuisance or obstacle.”

17% fall somewhere in an “it depends” category, sharing this feedback:

- Difficult to generalize. Depends very much on the quality/skills/personality of the individual
- Mostly they're mutually beneficial, but those who view their job as primarily to limit or control media access often become obstacles. Those willing to view members of the media as potential allies in getting messages communicated are always much easier to deal with and,

in my experience, always end up with more and better-quality, better-informed, more accurate and insightful coverage across all the media they work with.

- The connections are important and useful. PR teams help link me to information and people I need for a story.
- While I find them valuable, some are so bad at what they do that there is quite a bit of noise.
- I'd like to say mutually beneficial, but it depends on the person and company. Some are great, some inundate us with releases we wouldn't cover, and we have had others berate us for doing our jobs and accurately reporting the news.



Most Frustrating PR Pro Behaviors

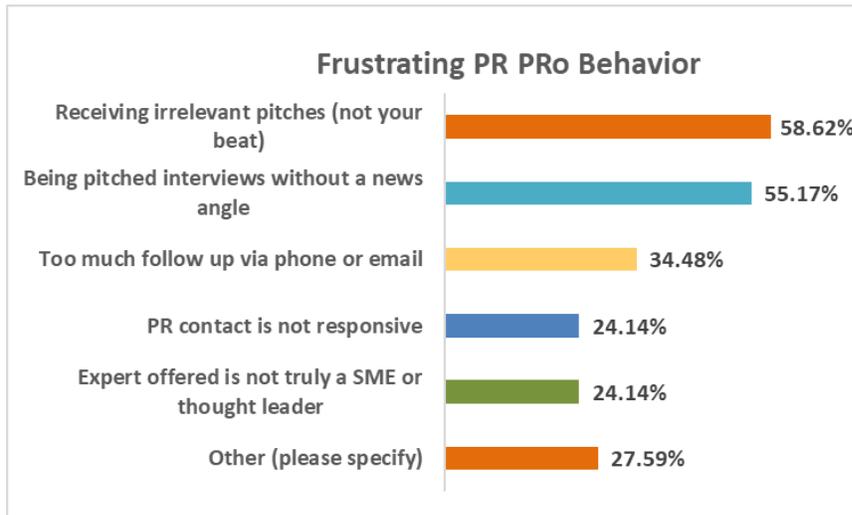
We asked, “When a PR person is pitching a story to you, what behavior is most frustrating?”

Receiving pitches that are not relevant to a reporter’s beat was the top response (59%), followed closely by receiving pitches without a news angle (55%). Too much follow-up comes third on the list, at 35%.

Reporters added these frustrations to the list:

- Interviews pitched without a proper bio or link. Often, it's the person's background that makes them interesting, not what job they have now.
- Surprisingly often, people pitch a time-sensitive story, offering interview access, then take days or even weeks to be able to find an available interview timeslot.
- Being told about something that I could have attended and gained insight from, but only after it's happened, when it's too late to do anything
- No or little research into what I do or how I write.
- The pitching is not clear, and the person is not doing the homework.

- Being transactional and pitching something without reading or understanding what we do.

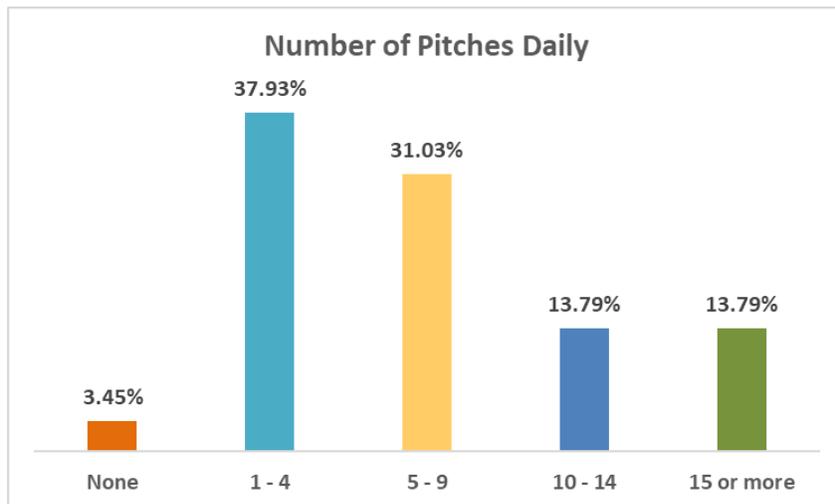


THE INS AND OUTS OF PITCHES

To understand the best practices for sharing pitches and press releases with reporters, we asked a series of questions.

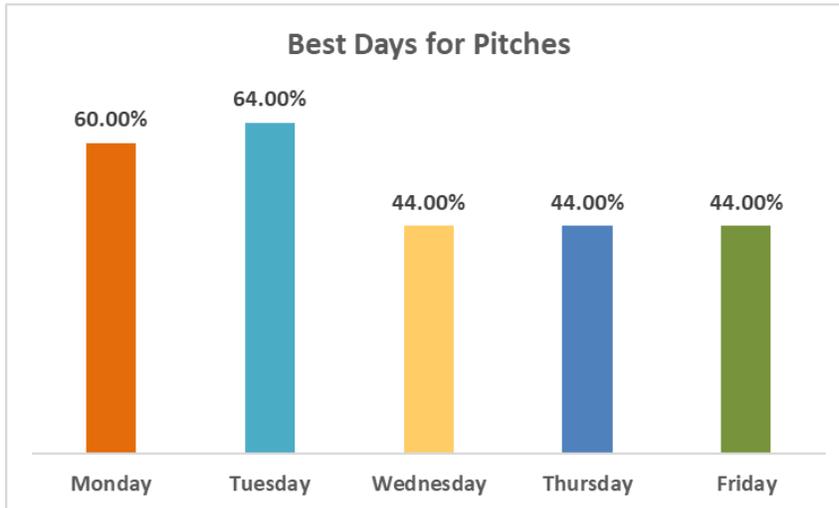
Understand that Reporters Are Swamped with Pitches

Sifting through pitches is a daily occurrence. Most reporters (38%) receive 1-4 pitches daily and 31% receive 5-7. Another 28% receive 10 or more daily.



Best Days for Pitches

Tuesday is the most-favored day to receive pitches (64%), followed closely by Monday (60%). The remaining three days of the week are acceptable for reporters.

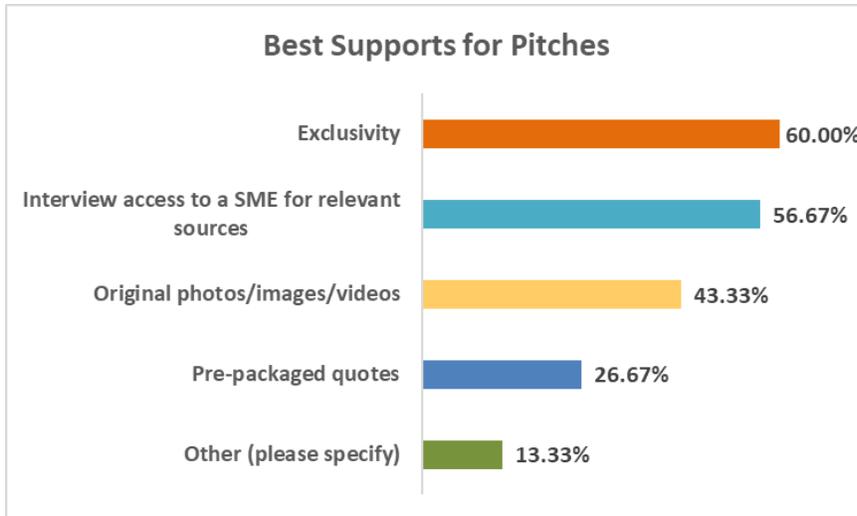


Best Supporting Elements for Pitches

When sending a pitch to a reporter, what are the most useful supporting elements? 60% of reporters would like exclusivity on the story. 57% are interested in speaking to a subject matter expert who can talk about the news. Photos, videos, and/or quotes are also valued.

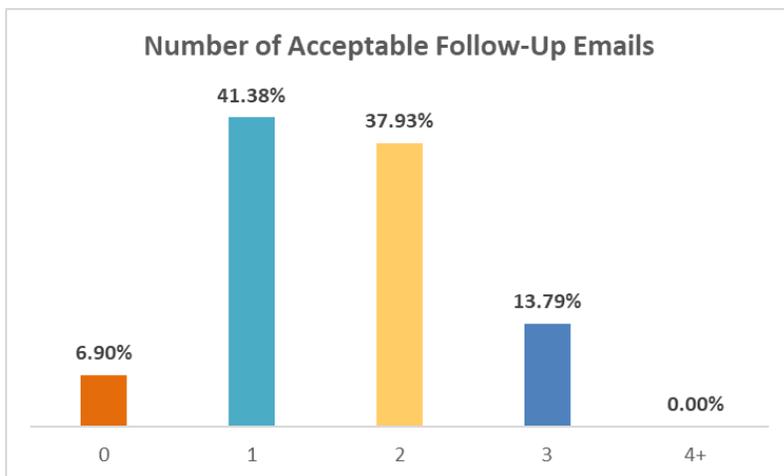
Timing was prominent among other valued elements:

- I can only be in one place at one time, and while I'm fairly flexible, I do have things that I agree to do, some way in advance – so if you tell me about an opportunity to do something tomorrow, or the day after, the chances of me being able to do anything with it are significantly reduced versus if you'd mentioned it to me even a fortnight ago.
- Access to important individuals for at least 20 minutes
- Back it up with a budget for (separate) advertising / marketing



Tips for Following Up on Pitches

When it comes to following up on a pitch, one email is recommended by 41% of reporters; 38% find two emails acceptable. None find more than three acceptable. As for timing, 62% of reporters recommend following up between 3 and 7 days after the original pitch. 36% prefer 1-2 days after the original pitch. None find follow-up after the first week acceptable.

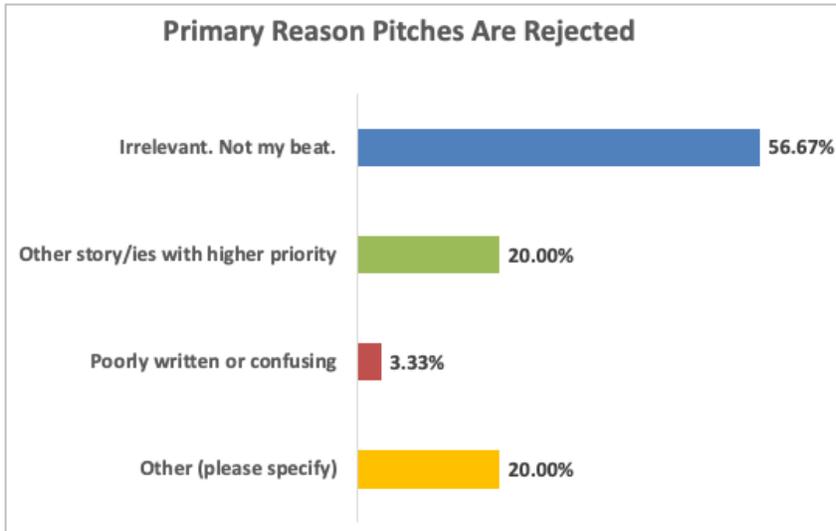


Irrelevant Pitches are Rejected

The overwhelming top reason (57%) reporters reject a pitch is that it's irrelevant to their beat. Only 20% of the time stories with higher priority prompt a reporter to reject a pitch. Among other reasons, reporters called out lack of newsworthiness as a reason for rejections:

- Often not really newsworthy

- There's insufficient access, notice, or relevant content to enable me to make a successful pitch to an editor.
- Usually, it's either because it's irrelevant or we don't have staff bandwidth. We have to prioritize what we cover and consequently we make a lot of tough calls about what goes by the wayside.
- No reader interest or hook
- Standard of writing



FEDERAL JOURNALISM OPTIMISM

To find out how GovCon reporters are thinking and feeling about federal government journalism, we asked two questions. As one reporter put it, "It's a great market to cover."

