

Pitching National Geographic

Tips from senior editor Christine Dell'Amore

BY KELSEA HARRIS-CAPUANO |
MISSOULA, MONTANA

WEARING A BLUE T-SHIRT and silver earrings shaped like bumblebees, Christine Dell'Amore, the senior editor for the animals desk at National Geographic, appeared casual and approachable while recalling her early experiences pitching stories. Most of them were cold pitches. “I would say I was a graduate student working on this story, I've interviewed these people. It's amazing to me that they actually wrote back” said Dell'Amore, leaning back against a red couch with a space-themed blanket draped over the back.

It's nice to hear that someone like Dell'Amore, an accomplished writer and journalist, had her share of struggles with the pitching and publishing process.

Dell'Amore published some of her early stories locally in Boulder, Colorado, where she attended an environmental journalism program at the University of Colorado. The program is no longer around, but that education launched Dell'Amore on her path to National Geographic, where she's been for nearly 14 years.

PITCHING THE BIG PICTURE

Dell'Amore's approach to writing her own pitches in graduate school was similar to how she views the many pitches she receives at the animals desk today.

“I would spend sometimes eight hours crafting a pitch and making sure that there were no superfluous words. I'd done some pre-reporting, I had a few good quotes and I would include a proposed headline and sub-headline. I treated my pitches as mini stories,” she said.

On average, Dell'Amore said she spends three hours a week reviewing pitch submissions looking for succinct, well-crafted teasers that she thinks will resonate with the National Geographic audience.

She added that for freelance writers and those just starting out, pitching is an essential skill. Besides having all the tools to craft stories, being able to distill an idea or story into a concise elevator speech can be the deciding factor in publication or rejection.

For Dell'Amore, credentials don't matter near as much as the **quality of the writing** in the pitch. A writer pitching for the first time has the chance to get published if they can show their stuff in that single pitch.

“I didn't go to an Ivy League school. I don't feel like you need a fancy degree or bylines from the New York Times to get published,” Dell'Amore said.



Dell'Amore and her fellow editors at National Geographic publish a lot of freelance work. She estimated that the content from the animals desk is about 75 percent freelance writing and has been that way since she started working there.

Besides its flagship magazine, National Geographic has a huge online presence, with its writers churning out weekly and daily stories. Their coronavirus coverage has received a lot of online traffic, keeping the organization busier than ever.

Dell'Amore said the organization needs a balance and constant flow of story types and lengths. For the animals desk, this includes short copy about unique animal adaptations that can go up daily, news stories about an animal discovery or in-depth features on issues like poaching.

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Though a big-picture, concisely-written story idea is the real meat of a pitch, there are a few details that can make a pitch stand out.

Dell'Amore really likes **proposed headlines** to be included for pitched stories.

Creating a catchy headline, even if it isn't used, may still serve as the hook — catching the editor's eye to get them to keep reading. She doesn't have a lot of time, and it makes her job easier.

Most editors, including Dell'Amore, won't stand for sloppiness, so pay attention to obvious spelling and grammar mistakes. Check for slang or language that's too casual. Abbreviated language that so often appears in text messages is not a good way to get a writing job.

AVOID THESE MISTAKES

Recently, National Geographic editors added a page to the main National Geographic website with guidelines. This includes general “how to pitch” recommendations along with specific details for National Geographic's different desks, which focus on science, environment, animals, travel, history and culture and kids and family.

Despite the useful road map, Dell'Amore said that pitch quality doesn't seem to have improved, but the number of stories that they receive has skyrocketed. Writers seem to still make the same mistakes, starting with **not doing their homework like reading the guidelines**.

On the upside, this goes to show that a well-written pitch will stand out.

One of Dell'Amore's pet peeves is lazy writers. She's received emails from more established journalists who forward publications from science journals instead of pitching a well-formed idea.

A lot of science stories written for a more general audience stem from these types of publications, but the lack of effort to put together a pitch, regardless of the writer's status, is a red flag for Dell'Amore.

“It doesn't matter how long they've been doing it. They still have to sell the story and tell me why we should be publishing it. Even if it's someone I know can write, I'm going to be a lot less likely to accept it if they didn't even bother to sell me on this idea,” she said.

Once rapport is established with freelance writers, it's likely they will have more chances to write for National Geographic. If Dell'Amore needs a story reported for the animals desk, she might reach out to someone she's successfully worked with to see if they want the story.

HANDLING REJECTION

One of the biggest mistakes writers make, especially early on in their careers, is taking rejection personally or assuming it means their writing is bad.

There are a number of reasons a pitch might be rejected that don't have to do with writing quality. Maybe a similar topic was covered in a recent publication, or someone on staff is a go-to expert for that topic. National Geographic in particular is photo heavy and has stories that are driven by its photos rather than writing. Or maybe it's just not the right publication or target audience for the story idea.

Creating a catchy headline, even if it isn't used, may still serve as the hook — catching the editor's eye to get them to keep reading.

“It means being confident in your abilities and confident in yourself enough to realize that having a ‘no’ to a pitch doesn't mean that you're not worth publishing,” Dell'Amore said.

— Kelsea Harris-Capuano is a writer, outdoor adventurer, educator and OWAA intern. She's currently pursuing a master's degree in environmental science and natural resource journalism at the University of Montana.



ABOVE: Christine Dell'Amore, Senior Editor, Animals Desk, National Geographic. Email: christine.dellamore@natgeo.com. Photo courtesy of National Geographic

Christine Dell'Amore is the senior editor for National Geographic's animals desk, where she edits and writes stories for digital and the magazine. She has reported from all seven continents and visited all 50 U.S. states. Her journalism expertise is in biology, environmental science and polar issues. She started at National Geographic in 2007 as a news editor on the website.

Dell'Amore has worked at United Press International and Smithsonian magazine and has written for a variety of publications, including the Washington Post.

Dell'Amore holds an undergraduate degree in environmental science and policy from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a master's in journalism with a specialty in science and environment reporting from the University of Colorado, Boulder.