



ABSW summer school

# Pitching for digital

Alexander McNamara, Editor-in-Chief, Live Science



# Choosing science stories

- Understand the publication you're pitching to
- How will readers find your story?
- What makes a good story for online
- Successful and unsuccessful pitches
- Google trends exercise

## └ Understand the publication you're pitching to

- Many publications will have information on their **About us** page that will give you a good idea of the types of stories they are looking for and how they cover them.
  - *“Our goal is to make the wonders of science and the world around us relevant, useful and interesting to everyone by informing and entertaining our readers.”*  
- Live Science
- Even better, many will have a specific page dedicated to their **pitching guidelines**.
  - These pages will often explain the article types, the content each channel covers, and the differences between each of them.
  - They may also include the specifics as to who to email your pitch to, how long it needs to be, and even how to write your subject line.
- Whether they have either of these, always **read the articles already on the site**.
  - Don't spend time on a pitch for something that has already been covered, but if you really want to pitch it, find an angle that moves the story along.
  - Reading their content will help you understand what the publication covers.

## ┌ How will readers find your story?

If you want people to find your stories, you need to understand where they are going to see them, and different article types can be targeted to different platforms. Getting this right in your pitch will help it land.

- **Breaking news:** You need to be quick, show that it's trending using tools like Google Trends, and why it needs to be covered by the publication you're pitching to.
- **Embargoed stories:** Ask yourself if it's something that's likely to be covered widely or in a niche audience. Will people be searching for it or is it something that they would likely click on if they saw it in their social feed? It can be difficult to compete with major publications, so make sure you have an angle that will differentiate your story from the others.
- **Evergreen:** Make sure you have looked at the search volumes of the main keywords. You might think you have a timeless story, but if noone is looking for it, then your pitch is going to be a hard sell. On the other hand, a clever take on a story that is dry on the face of it but with high search volumes could land you that commission.
- **Social:** What does the brand's social profile look like? If you think your story has legs on social media, then make sure you let the editor know why in your pitch.
- **Features:** Features take time and money, so no matter how interesting your 2,000 word story on black holes might be, it might just not be something some publications would produce. If they do publish features, build a complete story arc for your pitch and include any supplementary articles that might be used to support it.

## └ What makes a good story for online

Depending on the publication you are pitching to, there are a number of different factors that go into a good online story. You have the potential online to reach a broad audience, so important things to consider when looking for stories are:

- **New discoveries:** Is this a breakthrough in our understanding of something or just an iteration on what we previously knew? Both are important and should be reported, but will be of varying interest depending on the publication.
  - A story on a trial on mice for a new Alzheimer's treatment might be of interest to a niche medical publication, but gold standard clinical trial is of interest to national media.
- **Valid science:** Does the science actually hold up? Before you pitch a story, take the time to read the whole paper (not just the press release) and make sure you understand what is happening and why it's important. Do the results look too good to be true?
  - If it is controversial or speculative then have your experts in mind and ready. They can help you decide if a story is newsworthy or not
- **Human interest:** Why do we care? This is about knowing the audience. Most research is being done to further our understanding of a subject, but you have to be able to show why that matters to the people you want to read it and be able to communicate it.

## └ Online tools

There are number of useful (and free) tools to help you generate story ideas and develop your pitches:

- **Google Trends:** The go-to place for any breaking story, this gives you a really good indicator of when a story is breaking, the keywords being searched for and relative volume.
- **Keyword tools:** There are a number of sites and plugins you can use to get an idea of search volume for a query. Full products like SEMrush and Ahrefs are incredibly powerful, but very expensive. A number of free plugins like [Keywords Everywhere](#) and [Surfer](#) let you play around with different queries to see roughly how frequently people are searching for it.
- **Social media:** Follow journalists and relevant, trustworthy publications and you will get a good idea of what types of stories they focus on and produce. There are also a load of good scientists with hot takes and interesting analysis who are usually willing to speak to you for interviews.
- **Competitor sites:** Look at what similar sites have published and their takes on the story you are developing. What have they done? How much supporting content do they have? Have they created any extra features or images?

# Successful pitch

**Headline:** Shingles vaccine may protect against dementia

**Peg:** recently posted on medRxiv, 25 May 2023 <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2023.05.23.23290253v1.full.pdf+html>

**Proposed deadline:** 1st June

**Summary:** Being vaccinated against shingles in your 70s may reduce the odds of developing dementia up to 7 years later. While around 45 per cent of adults born one week after September 1933 in Wales were vaccinated - in their 70s - against shingles around 2013, nearly no adults born before that date received the shingles vaccine, due to a date cut-off that was used in the vaccination programme. Scientists analysed dementia rates of over 282,000 people born between 1<sup>st</sup> September 1925 and 31 August 1942 and found that people who were eligible for the shingles vaccine, and therefore more likely to be vaccinated, had a 8.3 per cent lower risk of developing dementia in a follow-up period of 7 years following vaccination, compared to those who were ineligible for vaccination. Another analysis by the researchers revealed that actually receiving the vaccine was linked to a 19.9 per cent reduction in dementia risk\*.

Overall, 35,307 participants included in the study developed dementia in the follow-up period. Further analysis revealed the protective effect of the vaccine was much stronger in women than in men. Receiving the vaccine did not reduce the occurrence of other common causes of death or disease such as cancer and diabetes, and no other public health programmes are known to have used the same date cut-off. The authors say this suggests that the shingles vaccine protects against dementia, and that randomised controlled trials should be carried out to test if the vaccine could be used in this way.

**\*I'd want to clarify exactly how this latter analysis works because the reason they did the initial analysis - that compared people eligible vs ineligible for the vaccine - was because it controls for factors that correlate with choosing to take or reject the vaccine).** So, I'd be open to chatting to the author first to scope the story out a bit more as a potential commission if you're interested, but yeah if it's a no straight off no then that's fine.

**Why for LiveScience:** People are interested dementia and ways to prevent it.

**Keywords:** {dementia} 301k, {shingles vaccine} 165k

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**Sources to interview:** study author, two independent experts given its about dementia and not a randomised control trial?

## ┌ Unsuccessful pitch

And here's one from the same writer, which although was interesting we didn't publish because the sample size was too small and the search volume, although high, was all mostly recipe related\*. It is also pretty niche for our audience, which skews much younger than the recipients of the study.

**Headline:** Cocoa bean chemicals may improve heart health in elderly

**News peg:** recently posted preprint, link <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2023.04.25.23289076v1>

**Embargo:** none (posted 27 April 2023 on preprint server medRxiv)

**Summary:** Scientists recruited 68 healthy people aged between 55 and 79 years to take a cardiovascular fitness test by cycling on a bicycle before and after a 30-day period during which roughly half were randomly assigned to either take pills containing chemicals extracted from cocoa beans – called cocoa flavanols – twice a day, or take placebo pills. The team found that taking cocoa bean chemicals for a month significantly increased participant's exercise capacity – how well their heart and blood circulation performed during a maximum level of sustained exercise – from an average score of 141 to 161, and decreased their blood pressure from 137 to 132 millimetres of mercury. Meanwhile, placebo pills had no significant effects, suggesting cocoa flavanols could improve heart health and exercise capacity in the elderly.

**Why for LiveScience:** the findings add support to the idea – which is in need of more evidence - that cocoa bean flavanols could improve heart health and the capacity for exercise in the elderly.

**Sources:** Study authors, independent expert

**Keywords:** {cocoa beans} 245k, {cocoa beans health benefits} 50\*

**Proposed deadline:** Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> May



# What sort of story might you want to pitch for these?

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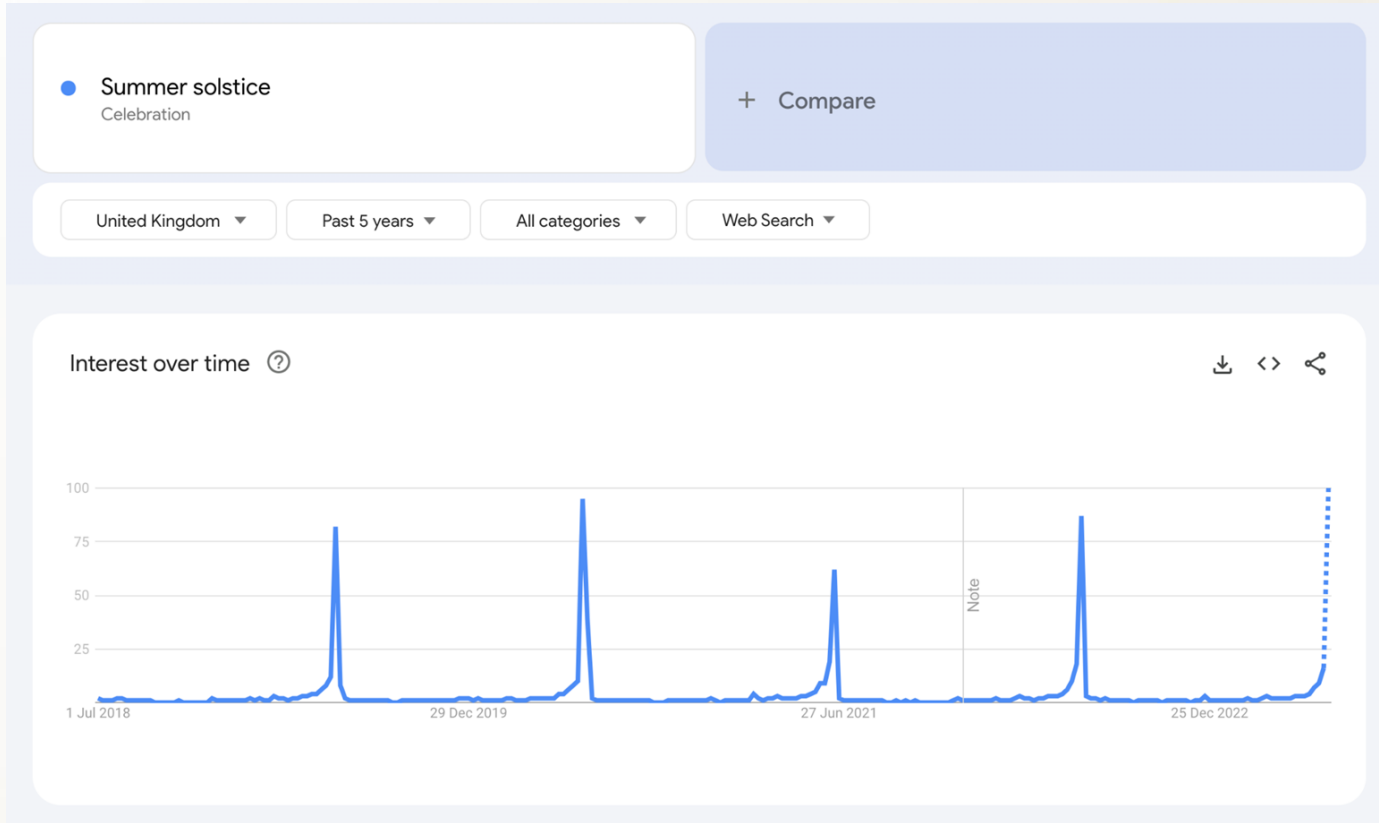


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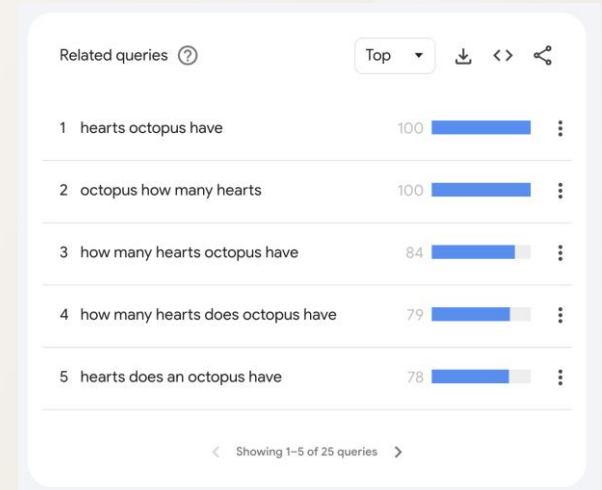
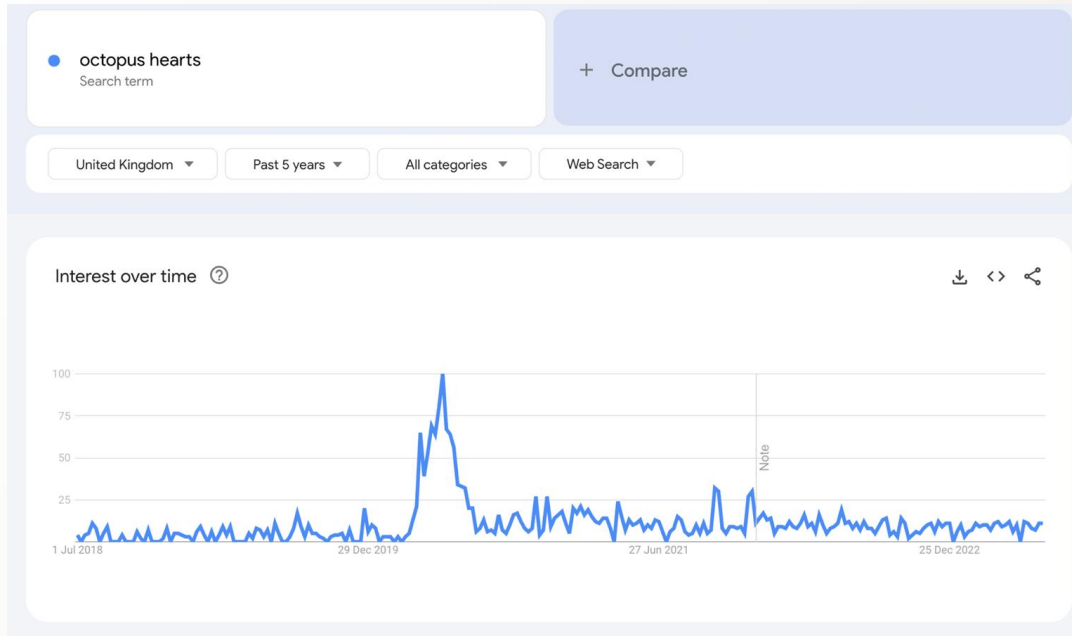
# What sort of story might you want to pitch for these?

2.



# What sort of story might you want to pitch for these?

3.



# What sort of story might you want to pitch for these?

4.

