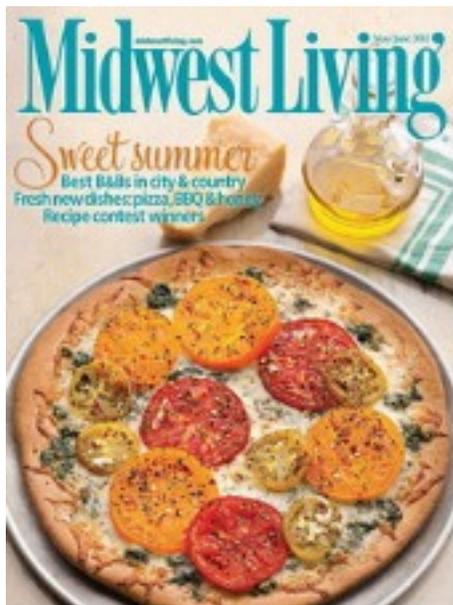


How To Pitch: *Midwest Living*

Win over these editors with a specific Midwest hook on an evergreen lifestyle topic

By Kate Parham – June 17, 2011



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Circulation: 950,000

Special issues: Annual "Best of the Midwest" travel guide

Frequency: Bimonthly

Background: *Midwest Living* began in 1987 as a regional magazine covering travel, food, home, garden and the general lifestyle of living in the 12 Midwest states. Since its launch more than 20 years ago, the publication remains the only magazine focused exclusively on this region. *Midwest Living* has had only two editors-in-chief in its history: Founding editor Dan Kaercher directed the publication from 1987 to 2007 and Greg Philby took over the EIC position in 2007, after serving as the magazine's executive editor for five years. Says Philby, "The states we focus on, and the content categories of the magazine have remained the same, but we've been having more fun with the way we tell stories, being more exploratory and first-person in our adventure narratives, and being proud of the great discoveries we find in our

region."

The magazine's M.O. is to provide readers with "the richest reflection of what matters most to them," says Philby. Coverage includes home and garden, family, travel, food and other lifestyle areas. "We present it all with a distinctly Midwestern focus and flavor. As you can imagine, there is an intensity of pride about where one lives, and our readers are no different. We inspire them about the cool things in our region, and we compel them to take action to get out and experience them." In terms of readership, these Midwesterners are mostly "mid-lifers" -- some still with family at home, some that are empty-nesters. But, says Philby, they all share a passion for wanting to get out and try a new restaurant or jump in the car for a spontaneous weekend road trip. "They have the means to stay at the top-notch places we describe, but they also have the down-to-earth sensibilities to try out a small family-owned resort." He adds: "In editing this magazine, we have a blast that our readers are very impulsive in following our advice -- often showing up to a destination with the magazine in hand shortly after we send it out the door."

Because of the niche focus of *Midwest Living*, there are no direct competitors, though the pub does compete with city magazines whose coverage may overlap: "In covering what's new in that particular locale, we compete in part with culinary titles with our own food content, with shelter magazines and our home content, and with travel magazines and our travel content," says Philby. "Basically, a lot of people compete with portions of our content, but no one competes with what we have as a complete package. *Midwest Living* has a depth of regional knowledge that makes us unique." *Midwest Living* doesn't write about a restaurant or a destination unless they have checked it out firsthand: "We stand behind everything we write. We test our food content, similarly, in our test kitchen to ensure that every recipe meets our standards for quality and will satisfy the Midwest taste buds," says Philby.

What to pitch: "We rely on freelancers in two ways: We will pay freelancers to 'scout' or check out locations for us, and to provide us with detailed write-ups of what they discover," explains Philby. Some elements of a scouting report might find their way online or into print, but they're mostly used in-house to feed the magazine's general knowledge bank and provide background for stories. "Because we are a regional magazine, we rarely hire writers who live outside our region," says executive editor Trevor Meers. "Increasingly, we rely on writers who cover primarily the area where they live, so Indiana writers do our Indiana scouting, and so on."

Midwest Living rarely accepts unrequested finished stories or feature story pitches. Says Philby, "We have a strategic blend of content in our

magazine, and we carefully plan to ensure all of our regions and content categories are covered. That's why we tend to come up with the ideas in-house and then assign either a staff writer or a freelancer to execute it." *ML* editors prefer to have freelancers send examples of their writing styles, as well as outline for them any areas in which they have particular expertise, so they can best match their skills with assignments as they arise. But don't let this process discourage you -- though Philby says the mag uses a core group of freelancers (doesn't everyone?), he says, "We are definitely in the market to build upon that with new talent." So where's a first-time freelancer to start? The travel category offers the most opportunity for newbies, but *ML* does use freelancers in the food, home and garden departments, as well. "If you do want to share some specific story ideas along with your writing experience and interests, keep it brief, and think small," says Meers. "We've heard of all the big destinations in the Midwest, and we've covered them from many different angles." For travel, editors prefer to hear about a specific business or development that they might not have known about without you (the writer) keeping your ear to the ground. (i.e. a new restaurant, a worth-the-drive antiques shop, a cool boutique or a special B&B in a town most tourists don't find.)

What not to pitch: No sections are closed to freelancers; however, writers should familiarize themselves with what *ML* does and pitch accordingly. "You can tell almost immediately upon reading a pitch if the writer is familiar with the publication -- the different sections and columns in the magazine, the tone of our content, the types of destinations and products we're interested in," says Meers. So make sure you do your homework before pitching.

Online opportunities: The online pipeline follows the same channel as the print one: editors will assign tasks to freelancers based on what they see in a writer's abilities. "Websites devour content so we never have enough here, and we do rely on freelancers to provide the majority of it," says Philby.

Percentage freelance-written content: 10 percent. "We use primarily our core freelancers for larger projects, and we assign them; New freelancers begin with smaller projects." As for the percentage of locations scouted by freelancers (checking out a restaurant, hotel, region etc.), Philby estimates about 70 percent of those assignments are given to freelancers, the other 30 percent being by staff.

"Scouting is an absolutely integral part of our travel coverage, and we have really wonderful relationships with our writer-scouts, whose on-the-ground perspective feeds every story that appears in the magazine," says Meers. "If you want to see interesting places, eat interesting foods and hone your writing skills behind the scenes, we're a great place to do that. But if all you want is a byline, we're probably

not the place for you."

Percentage of freelance submissions accepted: Varies. About 20 percent of pitches for Midwest "discoveries" are accepted, such as new great stores, restaurants, hotels, shops, events, etc. that editors may not know about. "We love the ones that are on target, that catch us by surprise, and are truly of interest to our readers. Some freelancers have a knack for finding these types of things," says Philby. "This is a perfect way to get started with us." However, *Midwest Living* very rarely accepts pitches for large features or concepts -- fewer than five percent of those pitches make it into the magazine.

Recent freelance stories pitched and published: In May/June 2011, *ML* is publishing a short piece called "Lake Escape, and All That Jazz." Travel editor Hannah Agran explains, "A freelancer tipped us off to a resort in northern Wisconsin that hosts an annual jazz camp. She's a music enthusiast and was interested in scouting it for us, so we sent her up to audit the camp and write a scouting report with no expectations of a byline -- our usual system. However, when I sat down to write the byline-less blurb about the camp, I liked a lot of the phrasing Barb used in her scouting report, so we basically trimmed the report down into a small story and gave her a byline."

Going back a bit, in July/August 2009, *ML* published a one-page story by Gustave Axelson called "Wild Child." It was a first-person essay about a father taking his son camping in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota. Axelson pitched the concept before he hit the road, and *ML* took him up on it. "That's pretty unusual for us. We don't do much personal writing, or writing about kids, and we rarely pick up actual stories. But we knew he'd do a nice job with it," says Agran.

Etiquette: Since *Midwest Living* prefers to get to know the writer -- versus just getting a one-story proposal -- the pathway to pitching is a bit different. It usually works best to send via email "a brief, articulate, yet conversational letter that introduces who you are, your background and what you hope to do with *ML*, either broadly or with specific ideas," says Meers. Attaching clips is fine, but links to online clips (PDFs on the writer's website, for example) are great, too.

In terms of following up, "If we sent a pretty clear 'no,' then don't follow-up, but if we left the door open and you haven't heard for five or six months, it's reasonable to try again with a brief 'Remember me?'" email," says Meers. "Certainly, if you send a pitch and don't hear anything at all, write back within two months, because it probably means your email got deleted accidentally or your envelope got lost in someone's office. We do try to reply to everything."

Lead time: Four months to one year. Because *ML* is seasonal, most feature stories are done a year in advance. This means, for instance, they may have someone write about autumn along the Lake Superior

Coast one year, and it would appear in the fall issue the following year. In the front-of-book sections, shorter, newsier items in every category are done about four months ahead of the publication date.

Pay rate: Typically \$1.25 a word, plus expenses. However, Meers emphasizes that *ML* rarely assigns stories, so the per-word rate is something most of its freelancers never see. Their scouting fees are based on a rate card that takes into consideration the time involved and the complexity of the assignment (distance traveled, number of businesses visited, etc). *ML* decides a flat-rate payment in advance, rather than having writers bill them afterwards.

"In determining a payment, we think of things roughly in half-day increments, as our travel editors have a very good handle on about how long it takes to scout and write a report for a business or town, but I hesitate to be more specific because every assignment is different and we try to be flexible," says Agran. "Suffice it to say, we believe our writers' time is fairly compensated and, most notably, we cover all travel expenses. And, unless major revisions are required, we pay upon receipt of the assignment so the money comes fast. From what we hear from our writers, both those 'perks' are pretty unusual."

Payment schedule: On acceptance. "We pay upon receipt of work. The receipt of work is either when the first rough draft reaches us (if it's quite clean) or when we receive your revised rough draft (if it needed some reworking)."

Kill fee: N/A

Rights purchased: All rights

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Direct pitches to the appropriate editor:

For travel, travel editor Kendra Williams: KENDRA dot WILLIAMS at MEREDITH dot COM or assistant travel editor Hannah Agran: HANNAH dot AGRAN at MEREDITH dot COM

For home and garden, senior home and projects editor Carol Schalla: CAROL dot SCHALLA at MEREDITH dot COM or assistant home editor Sara Reimer: SARA dot REIMER at MEREDITH dot COM

For food, senior food editor Diana McMillen: DIANA dot MCMILLEN at MEREDITH dot COM

For general inquiries, executive editor Trevor Meers: TREVOR dot MEERS at MEREDITH dot COM

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