

Bitter foes, bedfellows or brothers in arms?

Stacey Arnold considers the relationship between PR and marketing and its implications for arts organisations

When I was asked to consider how to integrate press work into marketing plans I was left with a sense of unease – why? For one thing, I'm not sure I've ever seen it successfully achieved. I have often felt that trying to bring the two together is like mixing oil and water. While marketing is, for the most part, planned and deliberate, press can feel decidedly intangible. You can influence, but not ultimately determine, the coverage you achieve, when it will run and what it will say. Similarly, a lot of the coverage achieved can be reactive, or appear without any prior knowledge. Attempting to write press plans into a marketer's Gantt chart can, at times, feel like trying to marry an art and a science.

There have been times in my career, and observed in those of my press peers, where the working relationship with marketing has been fractious and even competitive. I've worked both within a marketing team and in a separate press team (one that frequently asserted its independence). When looking to establish yourself as a specialist in your field it can feel exasperating to be perceived as simply a small part of someone else's larger repertoire. As a result I started my career borne into a battle for legitimacy – desperate to establish a level of credibility for press work on a level with that of my marketing counterparts.

Public relations is a contested terrain. To PR, marketing is both its bedfellow and its biggest adversary – a lack of boundaries between the two being a major factor. Before the 1980s the two disciplines were seen as distinct, but a move towards 'marketing PR' in that decade brought PR into the marketing realm. The concept of 'integrated marketing communications' in the 1980s and 1990s merged the two together. No wonder we're confused.

Several PR theorists have recognised that marketing creates a role for PR in the marketing mix: supporting cost-effective promotion through the publicity of products or services; achieved through press or media relations work. Here, press fulfils a marketing objective and can therefore be perceived by some as tactical. This view of press as just a subset of marketing specialist skills is something I've long been uncomfortable with, for the way in which it favours marketing while 'ghetto-ising' press. Johanna Fawkes (2004) recognised that marketing often presides over PR; and it has also been suggested that once the function and perception

of PR is 'fixed' in an organisation, historical precedent keeps it there until a major event forces its re-evaluation.

PR theorists inevitably see the role of PR a little differently. PR and marketing are identified as different functions with different purposes that can often intersect. PR is focused on developing relationships with stakeholders and managing reputation – a strategic role that is frequently overlooked. In this worldview media relations is just one part of the wider 'PR mix' that includes, among other things, stakeholder relations, issues management and public affairs.

In 2008 I undertook my own research with seven cultural organisations to see how arts organisations were using PR and the relationship between the two functions. It was as suspected: PR in arts organisations was used to deliver media relations work in order to drive attendance.

My findings also showed that:

- There were only dedicated PR specialists in the four largest organisations; the other three were marketers. No one I interviewed worked within a dedicated PR team. In six of the seven organisations PR work sat under marketing planning.
- All interviewees at senior management level were marketers.
- Only one interviewee felt their line manager had any significant PR experience.
- The key stakeholders, identified by those interviewed, were audiences and funders. This showed that audience and financial targets were primary concerns; it also helps to explain why marketing has been given preference.
- Stakeholder communication was taking place in these organisations, but was not being undertaken by PR specialists. When asked why they thought this was the case, historical precedent and a lack of PR expertise were key factors.

The research shows it to be true: the PR taking place in our arts organisations is at odds with the 'excellence' models that PR theorists advocate. I used to struggle with this marketing-led view of press in the arts, but now recognise that where financial and audience targets have precedence, press will inevitably support marketing. It's a *fait accompli*.

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My research showed marketing and PR do not have a hostile relationship, simply an imbalanced one. Of the marketers I interviewed who held a senior management position, all were satisfied with their PR function, which would suggest that press work is all that they seek. This is the crux of the bigger issue: without a sense of the wider role for PR and without sufficient desire for change, this status quo will prevail. Media relations will remain a tactical marketing tool, stakeholder engagement will happen elsewhere and the wider strategic role of PR will go by unnoticed. This calls for nothing short of a PR revolution.

So what about this wider role of PR – is there any call for it in the arts? Recent political and economic change reminds us of how important it is to maintain relationships with our stakeholders. Whether it is by making the case for funding, exploring what the ‘Big Society’ means with local authorities and communities, or by embarking on peer-led assessment, the need to seek the support of partners and stakeholders is crucial for creating stability in these changing times. My research did recognise some small steps in this direction, mainly in the larger organisations where advocacy was being used to gain stakeholder support.

So what does the future look like? How are marketing and PR to happily and effectively co-exist? I see two important steps. First, it would be useful to honestly acknowledge that most press work is part of the marketing mix (I have). Then we need to open up discussion and build greater recognition of this wider PR role. If not, we will continue to develop arts PR professionals with only one ‘press’ string to their bow. Like marketing, PR is a multi-faceted discipline with lots more to offer than it currently gives.

We need more PR training at a more sophisticated level. Some training needs to be for managers and marketers too, or the struggle for validity will continue. For me, the holy grail would be to establish independent, but mutually compatible, functions that can work together when needed. This means reaching a point where marketing and PR are on an equal footing and valued at a strategic level. There’s still a way to go.

But, differences aside, there is a growing reputational crisis affecting both marketing and PR – a battle that should be fought in tandem. As the coalition government look for savings, to make public spending more transparent, and with organisations under pressure to reduce ‘admin’





costs, spending on marketing and PR has become an easy target. In the public sector, staff have been cut and budgets have already been frozen. This August the Cabinet Office revelled in the news that they had reduced marketing and advertising spend by 52% and made 287 redundancies. And now we are under attack from within our own circle. As the sector faces imminent cuts, many arts organisations are looking to their PR and marketing teams for 'efficiencies'. We are fast becoming bywords for waste. Playwright Mark Ravenhill recently wrote in the *Guardian* that 'the knife should slice through marketing and development but leave the artists untouched'. With the prevailing mood set against us, perhaps it's time we joined forces to argue the value of our work; to show how crucial those relationships with attenders, MPs, local authorities, sponsors and communities are in supporting art and artists – in helping the arts to thrive and be seen by the broadest possible audiences. Let's stand shoulder to shoulder – we're best-placed to get the word out. ●



Stacey Arnold is Communications Officer for Arts Council England and has recently completed a Cultural Leadership Programme placement as Advocacy Associate at the Museums Association. Prior to that she has worked as a press officer for Tate Liverpool, Nottingham Playhouse and West Yorkshire Playhouse. In 2008 Stacey completed her Chartered Institute of Public Relations Diploma.



I'm a marketing person, working in a senior planning and advocacy role. I've been an AMA member for twelve years; I can thank it in large part for both my own professional development, and for the fact that arts marketers now find themselves in such roles.

Tim Wood

Director of Communications,
The Place

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... is a not-for-profit organisation, with a turnover of just under £500,000?

... relies primarily on earned income from membership, events and services and does not receive any revenue funding?

... spends just 21p in each £1 on overheads, leaving the lion's share, 79p, to be spent on supporting its members' professional development?

... provides its diverse range of services from an average subscription income of £75 per member?