

# How do they do it?

*Anna Vinegrad* talks about how to plan and implement a press and media strategy that really works

The media landscape may be in a constant process of transformation, and the public increasingly sceptical about its claims, but the power of editorial coverage to influence and raise awareness is as strong as it has ever been, be that print, broadcast or online. Good media coverage helps attract and retain funders and sponsors, as well as members, visitors and audiences. It can also be an extremely cost-effective way of communicating your event, exhibition or production to a wider audience, who are not yet on your database.

Like all elements of the marketing mix, PR works best when it is properly integrated into an overall strategy, working to reinforce above-the-line communication, direct marketing efforts and social media engagement. But engaging with the media and persuading journalists to write about your event is not always straightforward, and the results can be harder to track and measure. When you are not in complete control of the message, there is also the risk of negative, adverse or completely beside-the-point coverage. Not all publicity is good publicity, and if the piece doesn't include details about where and when, then it's a wasted opportunity.

## Research and planning

However small your event or news story, it is always worth making a media plan and doing comprehensive research as far in advance as possible. It allows you to cover all the bases, dig out every opportunity, and make sure nothing is forgotten. What audiences are you trying to reach and what

media do they use? What are your key messages and how will these be conveyed to your different targets?

Plan a phased campaign with clear objectives for each stage. Will you need a press conference or media event to launch the campaign? These are time- and resource-intensive so consider carefully whether you couldn't achieve the same spread of coverage through targeted calling. Establish who your spokespeople are, and what kind of access there will be to artists and performers in terms of profiles and interviews. Get this built in to their contractual agreements if at all possible.

What images are available? If there aren't any, get some. A picture tells a thousand words and strong images are crucial to any press campaign, and if you're looking to drive ticket sales and visitor numbers, you can't wait until the event to send out visuals. If you're planning a photocall, always have your own photographer as well as the wires so that you can send out images as well.

## Develop your contacts

Developing a good database of warm media contacts should be an ongoing process from one event to another. Identify key media and begin to nurture these relationships. Concentrate on those where coverage is most likely to deliver your objectives. Get to know your contacts and what interests them, and what doesn't. Nurturing the conversation and sending relevant information pays dividends and will get you better responses in the long term. Twitter can be a great tool for building these relationships, using it

as a less formal and more subtle way to open conversations, following your contacts, and tweeting about what you're doing. In the digital arena, get to know the relevant blogs so that you can seed stories effectively.

Media partnerships can be fruitful avenues to explore, and should have mutual benefits compelling enough for both parties. Make sure you plan your offer carefully before you approach a potential partner, and bargain hard for what you will get in return. If you are placing advertising or inserts into a publication, make your marketing spend work harder by leveraging editorial on the back of it, offering an exclusive story and/or images, and ensuring that any editorial appears at the right time.

## Content is king

With so many arts stories the challenge is how to stand out in a crowded arts landscape. Know when you've got a strong story and bargain hard. More often than not, you will have to be persuasive. What's new, different or unusual about your event? Is it a UK or world premiere? Are there unseen images? Is there a human interest or behind-the-scenes story that gives insight into the event you're publicising?

Be creative and think laterally beyond the arts pages. Where else can a story be placed to good effect? Are there similar events going on that you can build a trend feature around? What angles can be developed to really give it an edge? The research you've done will help you to do this, while keeping on top of the news agenda is vital for spotting opportunities around current



issues. How does your event fit into the broader context of what's going on? How can you make your arts story news?

Content is arguably even more important where digital platforms and blogs are concerned, and images a must. With blogs it is less a question of selling the story, but providing great content that is totally relevant.

**The media release**

Your release should lead with a headline that conveys the event, place and date, and should summarise the story in the opening paragraph, before fleshing out the detail. Be succinct, avoid hyperbole and don't send unsolicited attachments. Follow up your mail-out with direct calling to key media contacts. Personalised approaches naturally make more impact than blanket ones – show that you know the respective audiences. Think about your campaign in phases and what you are looking to achieve at each stage: whether you need to send out just one release or if a headline release needs to be followed by further releases or news alerts.

**Timing**

When approaching the media timing is key, both in terms of publication lead times, and when you want coverage to appear. Again, consider your objectives and what you want the coverage to achieve. Memories are short and the impact of a feature or artist profile in terms of driving

footfall or audience numbers may be lessened if it appears too far in advance. On the other hand, early tickets sales for headline events may be crucial. Pre-brief key contacts before sending out a release. If the release is time sensitive, you may want to embargo the release while you set up exclusives.

Create a schedule, working back from launch date or other campaign milestones. How far back you go depends on who your media targets are, and whether you are releasing a news story or building a broader campaign around an exhibition or event. A four to six-month campaign will allow you to reach all your targets, from long-lead consumer magazines to supplements, broadcast, weeklies, listings, and news and picture desks. Preview listings and online publications are critical for driving footfall, as are reviews. Print and broadcast features are great for raising awareness and profile. You will need to approach each sector sequentially, and keep following up to get results.

**Evaluation**

And finally, has the campaign worked? Keep monitoring media feedback and evaluate as you go along. Be ready to reassess and change tack if you're not getting the responses you need.

Collect all the coverage you've generated and set up Google Alerts to monitor mentions elsewhere. Analyse coverage content for proof-

points such as key messages, sponsor and stakeholder cut-through, correct credits and boilerplate details.

Media monitoring through an outside agency is expensive. However, it can be extremely useful with larger campaigns that generate a lot of coverage. Many of the monitoring services also provide data analysis tools and statistics that can help calculate opportunities to view and advertising value equivalents, should you want to do this as part of an overall report.

Ultimately, a campaign's success should be measured by the objectives you set at the start, and whether these have been achieved, be they box office sales, generating and increasing footfall, or general awareness and profile-raising among your target audiences. Media coverage complements and amplifies other marketing activity and media relations should be seen as an essential part of your overall marketing strategy. ●



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