



# Why don't we make the news?

*Roberta Doyle* made a presentation to last year's AMA conference. In this edited article from that talk, she offers insights and top tips on fostering good relations with the press



## Connecting with the media

There are a number of reasons that the arts don't make the news as much as they could or should. In my view, one main reason is that we concentrate on press releases instead of relationships. Most journalists have to deal with hundreds of press releases every day. They are literally drowning in the stuff. No wonder, then, that journalists often ignore or bin anything that's been sent by someone whose name they don't recognise. To make the news, you have to get to know your key contacts and cultivate some kind of relationship with them.

Being fragmented as an industry doesn't help either. As a sector, we tend to forget that we have a powerful position as advertisers: our communal print and online advertising must amount to millions of pounds. Perhaps an even more powerful tactic would be to research how much we jointly spend as advertisers across the UK and use this information as part of the armoury of key lobbying tools that could be used to improve our relationships with the media.

## What journalists think of us

A year or so ago, in advance of the talk I was invited to give at the AMA Conference, I set up an anonymised online survey and circulated it to 35 journalists. I wanted to investigate their views of PR in the arts and I posed five questions to them.

First, I asked why the arts are not higher up the news agenda. Many reasons were offered, including the fact that news editors feel that the

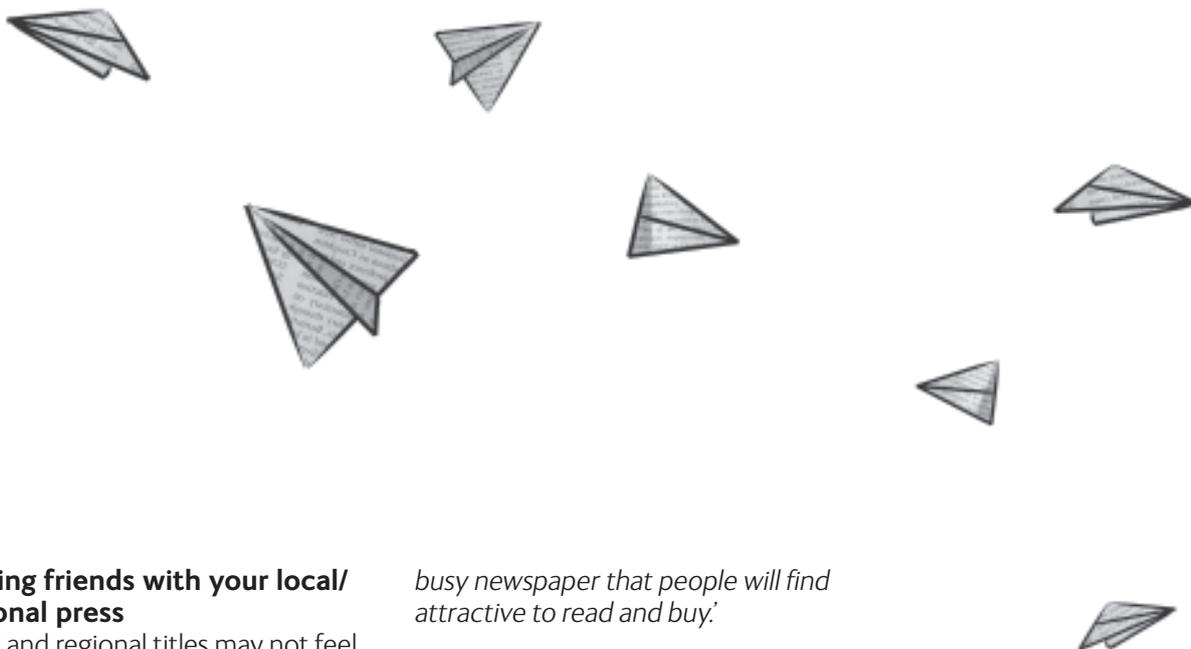
arts are 'not for everybody', or that 'art provokes good discussions but doesn't necessarily produce news'. Three of the most frustrating reasons, however, concerned the way we work rather than any hostility on the media's part:

- our inability to provide them with details quickly when they are working to a deadline
- our lack of understanding of 'what constitutes a useable publicity image'
- and a 'determination of press officers to force an official line, which demonstrates a lack of knowledge of the publication concerned'.

These responses were elaborated upon further in reply to another question in the survey, namely, 'How good are the arts at press and PR?' The general feeling was that we've all got our hearts in the right place but we don't always have the right level of experience or professional knowledge. Responses included:

- 'Most PR departments are bad at working with newspapers to get unique story lines.'
- 'Most are good, they just don't have vast amounts of experience.'
- 'Many are getting better, though there is still a tendency to say "we're putting on this show/exhibition" as if that was news enough in itself.'

Finally, when asked for suggestions as to which other industries the arts could learn from, responses varied greatly and included everything from the fashion industry to TV and publishing and from Simon Cowell to Travelodge.



**Making friends with your local/ regional press**

Local and regional titles may not feel as glamorous as the nationals or the BBC, but they do play a crucial role. Arts organisations are interested in attracting an audience or participants and that audience can often be a local one, therefore it is likely that your local or regional title is the one that you will be dealing with day to day.

Having said that, local papers often have more limited resources than other media outlets. So, don't just try to get through to the news editor, especially if you don't have a particularly strong story to sell. You might have more success with the features editor, or the picture editor. Indeed, picture editors are very much part of the solution, as the arts can often offer stunning images which are sought after by newspapers.

If you want to achieve more coverage, understanding how the newsroom works can also be helpful. Steve Mitchell, the Picture Editor of the *Nottingham Post*, who shared the AMA session, offered this advice:

*'Our newsroom operates from 6am to 8pm, with one photographer who starts at 6am. Weekends are fully booked because of all the sports coverage. There's a conference in the morning and one in the afternoon to run through the stories and get the paper ready. Everybody is on the lookout for stories that will lift the newspaper out of the mundane. This is where arts organisations can pitch in, help papers and get their attention. The arts can help us make a vibrant,*

*busy newspaper that people will find attractive to read and buy.'*

So, how can you build relationships with your local, regional or national title? There is really only one major way – get a relationship going. Meet up with your local journalists and editors and brief them on events that will be happening, brainstorm ideas and look for angles that suit their publication. Keep them up to date and be attuned to stories inside your organisation that will make the pages of their publications. And remember that what we do inside our companies is inherently interesting, photogenic and newsworthy – it's up to us to make the news. ●



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