



Introductory guide to media relations

Published by All About Audiences

This is a guide for those new to working with the press that takes you through the key stages of developing media relations campaigns. It provides a detailed look at each step, starting with an organisational audit, how to find positive stories, researching media contacts and writing a press release. It highlights the need for maintaining a consistent message, and the importance of organisational buy-in to a long term commitment.

The Audience Agency is a not-for-profit organisation created out of the merger between All About Audiences and Audiences London Plus in 2012.



Introductory Guide to Media Relations

This introductory guide is aimed at organisations or individuals who are relatively new to media relations, or as a reminder of the key points for those who would like to reassess their work in this area.

It is focused on proactive media relations campaigns to increase positive coverage about the work of your organisation.

Media relations and public relations

Media relations play a key role within the wider public relations context. But what is public relations?

Public relations (PR) is about your organisation's reputation with your public and other stakeholders. It is concerned with their understanding of what you do and what you're about. PR activity uses all types of communication channel.

The media are one of the key communication channels in PR activity, and this guide focuses on how you can work with them effectively.

In the arts and cultural sector, good PR is key to 'selling' your offer, and influencing and increasing audiences and visitors. It is essential in establishing a good relationship with other stakeholders, influencing factors such as funding.

Effective PR activity is also essential to help to safeguard against negative a reputation, and to maintain your reputation as best as possible through any problematic times.

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations' definition of public relations is as follows:

"Public relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you.

Public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics."

Understand your organisation

Start with an organisational audit

Good media relations should be part of your wider PR strategy and reinforce your key messages.

How do you think people perceive your organisation? Think about both internally and externally.

What messages does your organisation currently give out? Are they consistent? Think about all the communication channels you use, your branding, the way your staff talk about your organisation and the media.

How would you like people to perceive your organisation? What are your key messages? What are your Unique Selling Points, i.e. those things that are particular to your organisation and make it worthy of people's attention?

Who would you like to reach with these messages and why?

Target the media

Find stories

Find stories and angles to tell people about your organisation or event. These need to be newsworthy and interesting for the media you are targeting; interesting for those reading, listing or watching it; and an appropriate message for the audiences you are trying to target.

Be clear and consistent in your core messages. Position yourself truthfully and in line with the way you would like people to perceive your organisation.

Newsworthy angles are those which are relevant to the particular media and the people who read, watch or listen to it. For example:

- Local media look for stories with a local theme, or of interest to local people as it's happening in their area.
- National media are looking for stories which will be interesting to their readership at a national level – so 'firsts', big names, topical themes of national importance etc.
- Think about the particular type of media you would like to contact – radio and TV will usually be looking for someone to talk on air, printed press and websites may want to talk to someone and want some great pictures. Can your story provide all of this?
- Specialist media are looking for stories relevant to their readers/viewers/listenership. E.g. a magazine aimed at families is looking for stories which are relevant and of interest to families.

Talk to people involved in your events, such as artists, performers and writers. Question them, find new angles, quirky stories etc. that may be relevant to particular media or help to make your story a better one.

Research media contacts

If budgets allow, subscribe to a media directory. This is directory listing journalists and contact details at different media, divided into various different categories. These are provided by a number of different companies (e.g. www.vocus.com, uk.cision.com, www.gorkana.com). You can also find more limited information for free at www.mediauk.com

Read/watch/listen to media. Find out who the relevant journalists are. See how they report, what they cover. Find out current topics and styles.

Search the web. There are many online magazines which might be interested in your stories.

Be aware that broadcast researchers in radio and TV tend to change a lot. These are the people based in the production team who seek out information and material for radio and TV programmes – so these are the people you want to be giving your information to.

Make sure you're clear on the difference between features and news pieces and find out who the features journalists and who the news journalists are in the media you want to contact. Take a look at one of the national weekend broadsheet papers to see the difference. News stories appear in the main news section of the paper, whereas the extended articles in the newspaper supplements are features.

Talk to people, such as visiting artists, about any relationships they already have with journalists that you may be able to use.

Write a press release

See the examples in the appendix for illustration of the points discussed below.

Catch attention – your title should catch attention, but not attempt to be the 'headline' or be too cryptic – it should be clear what the release is about.

The first paragraph should include what, where, when and who – make sure a journalist doesn't need to read any further to know the essence of the story.

If reproducing your press release as you've written it, journalists are likely to cut from the bottom – another reason to make sure all the most important information is at the start.

Write in the third person (e.g. using 'they' or 'the organisation' not 'I' or 'we') as that's how journalists write.

Adding a quote from someone relevant and respected can be useful additional information which the press may wish to use. This can be written in the first person ('I' or 'we'), adding a personal dimension to the press release.

Keep your press release short and to-the-point, without compromising important and interesting content.

When appropriate, tailor press releases for different media – pulling out important information and targeting the interests of that particular media. For example if you're targeting family press make your family message clear. Although it's time consuming to do this, it will help you to get a much better response.

Don't assume journalists are experts – as with your target audiences they may know nothing at all about the artist, artform, issue etc. that you are talking to them about.

Be concise, but give enough information to be meaningful. For supplementary information not core to your main story, such as general details about your organisation, it's often best to include a 'Notes for Editors' section to avoid cluttering the main press release.

Mark the end of your press release clearly, e.g. ENDS. Everything above this point should be your main release. Below it should be the contact details for the media and any supplementary information in 'Notes for Editors'.

Include your contact details for journalists to find out more – put this below the ENDS statement.

Fact check what's in your press release, make sure it's accurate.

Occasionally you might need to send a press release out which is embargoed until a particular date and time. This means that the media cannot report the story until that date and time. If this is the case, you should clearly state at the top of the release 'EMBARGOED UNTIL [TIME] [DATE]'. For example, organisations might use an embargo when they have just been awarded funding and want to announce it as quickly as possible, but the funder has set a date and time in the future when they want to make details of its funding programme public.

If an embargo is not stated, then the media will assume they can report the story in the press release immediately. Sometimes press releases are marked 'for immediate release' to clarify that there is no embargo.

Paste press release text straight into emails as well or instead of attachments – it's quicker for journalists to read, and if they can't open your attachment they will probably just delete your email.

When sending emails to multiple people make sure all the addresses are in the BCC box.

Make sure you have further information, appropriate spokespeople and good images ready every time you send out a press release, to ensure you can respond to enquiries quickly.

Think about sending out a season press release, perhaps by post with your new brochure, each time you announce a new season of work. This can really help journalists with their forward planning.

Circulate press releases within your organisation so that everyone knows what's happening and when.

Get some images

Make it clear at the top of your press release if a photo/filming opportunity is available (and don't send it to radio contacts!) (See examples in appendix.) Include briefly where, when and exactly who and what will be available to photograph or film. It should also give a name and contact details for the person to ask for on arrival.

Whether or not you are arranging a photo opportunity, it is important to have your own images available to represent your story. Press may not be able to make it to your photo opportunity and if you don't provide images they might not cover your story.

It's a good idea to provide a range of images in different formats (landscape and portrait). Bolder images usually work best, particularly in newsprint - if there is too much detail it will get lost, especially if the image is reproduced quite small.

If sending out images, be sure to include any credits that should accompany them. If sending them by email, it's a good idea to ensure that the title of your image file contains the credit text – if you just put the credits into an email they often become separated from the images and the credits aren't used.

Send out separate listings

Listings information is often dealt with differently and/or by different people – it's a good idea find out who they are and send out regular listings information in addition to press releases. Most of the national newspaper listings are coordinated by the Press Association. You can find contact details for different event types at www.pressassociation.com/listings

Be ready to take on a big commitment

Effective media relations is timing consuming. It should be a long term strategy and it's important to consider this versus the quick wins you may be under pressure to achieve. In order to be a real success, your media strategy needs organisational buy-in to a long term commitment.

Build relationships with journalists and keep them up to date with relevant information, without bombarding them. These relationships don't always have to lead to coverage of your events. Taking time to build good relationships with interested journalists will help to make sure your organisation receives good quality, positive coverage longer term.

Find out the deadlines for sending information to individual media and send/follow up press releases in enough time. Deadlines can sometimes be surprisingly long - for example a monthly magazine will usually be looking for information over 3 months before its publication month.

Establish yourself as an organisation which is always reliable, organised and appropriate in dealings with the media. Send out clear and relevant information, respond quickly to enquiries and have images and spokespeople ready every time you send out a press release. This will help to establish trust and journalists will be more likely to cover your work as they know you will always deliver what they need when they need it.

Follow up press releases where possible with an email or call to journalists. Check they've received it, ask them if it's something they may be interested in covering and offer more information, images or an interview as appropriate.

Journalists are busy people working to constant deadlines. Try to make sure all your communications are concise so that they understand your point straight away and you don't waste their time. If you call and receive a brusque response it might just be that they're busy. Once you establish relationships with individual media it will be easier to build up a picture of the best time to call them.

Don't bombard journalists with press releases, emails and phone calls. When you contact them make sure you really have a story and ensure your communications are relevant, targeted and likely to be of interest – they're much more likely to take notice of you!

Lastly, it's important to be realistic. If you've followed all the principles of good media relations but are finding it difficult to get coverage, try not to get disheartened. It's very competitive, especially in the national media – just think about the thousands of arts and cultural organisations across the country also trying to get coverage for the interesting things they're doing. But if you keep your communications targeted, interesting and relevant, and concentrate on building relationships, over time you'll start to see the results of your hard work.