

Helen Nugent

How to build a good relationship with the press

On any given day I receive an email approximately every 60 seconds. About one quarter of those messages are deleted instantly, another quarter are filed away to 'answer later' and the remainder are (hopefully) dealt with by tea time.

As a freelance journalist working out of Manchester, my name is on a lot of lists. Add personal emails into that mix and the inevitable spam and it's a full time job just keeping on top of my inbox. And I'm not alone in this: I know many journalists who block delete press releases and marketing messages at the end of each week.

I remember the days when press releases and letters of introduction came via the post and the fax machine. But in 2013 it has never been easier for an arts organisation to get in touch with a potential contact – and never easier for that contact to dismiss the message.

So, how do you go about building a relationship with a local press who, pardon the pun, are increasingly pressed for time? Well, before you hit the send button or pick up the phone, make sure you understand how journalists operate.

Just ten years ago, it wasn't uncommon for a journalist (regional or national) to have just one deadline to meet every day. Now there are a myriad of deadlines, both digital and print. This may sound simple, but don't call or message the reporter at their deadline time. This will just irritate the journalist and make them think you are bad at your job. Find out when they are least busy – that's your window.

Familiarise yourself with your contact's publication. You'd be surprised how many PR and marketing people contact me with little or no idea of who I write for, what that organisation wants or what I've written recently. Do your homework.

And, when getting in touch for the first time, don't act like you're the writer's best friend. There is nothing more annoying than faux friendliness, emoticons and kisses from someone you've never met before.

In terms of establishing a good rapport with a new contact, there's little to beat face-to-face contact. I am much more likely to respond to a voicemail or email from someone I've met in person and who has taken the time to get to know me and my publication(s). I call this the face-to-face factor.

Unlike general news reporters whose area of expertise changes on a daily basis, arts writers are a specialist bunch. They've probably spent years getting to where they are, driven by a genuine interest and love of culture. And a regional arts reporter is likely to have built up an impressive network of arts contacts in the local area— your goal is to be one of them.

In many ways, dealing with an arts journalist is like pushing at an open door. You're selling a product that is (most of the time) something they are keen to buy. Almost certainly you will not have to give them a hard sell – just be honest about what your organisation does and why you think it is important. Journalists respond to an open and frank approach.

Before you make contact, prepare to offer something special. Depending on where you work, this could be anything from an interview with a director, a chat with a key artist or a tour of your venue. Anything that sounds vaguely 'exclusive' will have the writer on-side and they will be more likely to take time to talk it through with you.

The bottom line is this: be honest, be enthusiastic and be professional. Journalists have naturally enquiring minds so all you need do is make sure you are well informed and friendly. It's that simple.

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