

Guide

How to talk to bloggers

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Introduction

*We all understand that there's a brave new world of blogs, webzines and social media sites turning traditional journalism upside down. But it can be a challenge to navigate as the rules of engagement are still being written. These seven tips cover the most effective ways to reach out to bloggers and webzine editors and get them engaged with your arts organisation – from the perspective of arts blogger and cultural webzine editor **Kate Feld**, who runs the Blog North Awards.*

If you still think of bloggers as people with way too much time on their hands tapping away on their keyboards in their pyjamas, you're woefully out of touch. These days writing your own blog is a time-tested pathway to professional success. It used to be that an ambitious young cultural writer would begin their career in an entry-level job in publishing or the press. These days, those jobs are scarcer, and the way we consume media has changed so much that it often makes more sense for talented individuals to self-publish and build their own following on social media and, eventually, through links with more established media platforms.

The benefits for arts organisations working with cultural bloggers are clear: they are passionate about the arts, they tirelessly promote their content across extensive social media networks, and their readers are typically younger, engaged local arts consumers who get their cultural news online rather than on paper. But what's the best way to engage with these individuals, who operate very differently than traditional, professional journalists? And there are just so many blogs out there – where do you start?

1. Know your blogs

Lots of people in the arts complain that their work is ignored by bloggers when they're actually guilty of ignoring bloggers themselves. If you don't read blogs or hyperlocal sites and don't maintain a presence on Twitter (where much of the discussion happens these days) you won't understand who's already writing about your organisation or who you *want* to be writing about your organisation, and the kinds of things they're interested in. Read their posts. Maintain (and regularly update) a list of relevant blogs/webzines/hyperlocal sites and keep up with their output. Leave comments on well-written posts or share stuff you especially like.

2. Treat them like professionals

Magazines and newspapers may be on the wane, but blogs and webzines are booming. The traditional model of professional critics specialising in one artform is changing into a free-for-all in which volunteer bloggers and contributors to web-based magazines are the new cultural critics. Add bloggers you like and respect to your press list, send them press releases and photos, set up interviews for them and field their queries just as you would any other journalist. They are part of “the press” in the 21st century, and you have nothing to gain from treating them as second class citizens. But expect them to act like professionals in return. A blogger who enjoys press tickets but never posts a review isn't playing by the rules, so feel free to call them on it.

3. Take a personal approach

If your organisation is producing great quality work, chances are people will already be blogging about it. But if you feel you're being overlooked, get in touch and invite bloggers to come by and experience it in person. A personal email or a simple invite via Twitter, rather than a standard bulk-mailed press release, can sometimes get better results. The most widely-read bloggers are inundated with press releases and may tune them out after a while. If a blogger's talking about going to your exhibition on Twitter, invite them to discuss it afterwards over coffee with someone from the curatorial team. Don't be afraid to get to know them, and engage in casual back-and-forth conversations with them on Twitter. They're just people, after all.

4. Lay out the welcome mat

Inviting bloggers into your home means you have to actually ask them in. It goes without saying that you should already be inviting key bloggers to press nights, press previews and exhibition openings. Get to know the blogging networks in your area; these could be geographic organisations like the Blog North Network (which I help run), or associations on interest lines like the parenting-based Bloggers up North or the Manchester Foodies network. Offer to host a gathering or blogmeet at your venue, or think about arranging a blogger-specific launch or event as part of a larger campaign; For example, The Blog North Network has organised successful blogger events at places like The Hepworth Wakefield, Tate Liverpool and People's History Museum in Manchester. Once the event is over, follow up with them. You may get lots more coverage as a direct result or you may not, but at the very least you're building awareness of what you do and building a positive relationship with a highly influential community.

5. Know who you're dealing with

Most cultural bloggers and contributors to cultural zines won't be getting paid. They'll be writing in their spare time, because this is their passion. So keep this in mind when you're dealing with them. They may be harder to reach during traditional work hours, and slower to post reviews than professional writers. Some bloggers aren't great at photography, so be sure to let them know you have press photos they're welcome to use (and be specific if they need to credit someone.)

6. Respond and feedback

If a blogger is critical about your organisation on their site, either respond in the comments or, if you prefer, email them a response. Keep things friendly and professional and you reduce the risk of confrontational exchanges. People have a right to publish whatever they want on their own sites, but if you don't think someone is being fair, or if they are publishing something that's inaccurate you may want to bring it to their attention.

7. Share and share alike

If a blogger publishes something you like about your organisation, do everything you can to promote it... link to it on your Facebook page, retweet it on Twitter, do a post on your own blog linking to it. They will appreciate the boost, and more people will see that good content. If there's a blogger who you develop an especially good relationship with, consider inviting them to submit a guest post to be published on your organisation's blog, if you have one (with a link back to theirs, of course.) This is great exposure for them, and it's good content for you, too – it's always refreshing to have the perspective of an interested outsider on your programme or activity.