

Love thy neighbour

Katie DuLake reports on her battle to win over the local press

Between September 2003 and 2005, Arnolfini was closed for major refurbishment to improve accessibility and visitor facilities and to increase the quality and number of project spaces. I was often asked during this time what we were doing – surely we were just sitting around with our feet up? In fact this period was incredibly valuable, giving us the time and space we needed to address key strategic issues.

One such issue was our lack of a cohesive PR strategy. It had never been so crucial – we had to ensure we were communicating the project's progress and that our audiences returned when we reopened. Also, research conducted pre-closure showed that while national and arts press thought Arnolfini was a great asset to Bristol (and could only bemoan the fact they couldn't get out into the sticks more often to see us), local press frankly thought we were a bit of a joke. Local journalists described Arnolfini as 'faceless', 'elitist', 'exclusive', 'niche' and 'irrelevant to Bristol readers'. For them the only time we proved newsworthy was when our programme contained something particularly shocking or outrageous. There was a real risk that local press would be negative about the multi-million pound redevelopment.

It was clear that we needed to forge better relationships with local press if we were going to be able not only to maximise visitor figures upon reopening, but to win Bristol people over towards the new-look Arnolfini.

Our first step was to create a list of how we wanted press to view us. We employed a local PR agency to support us through the workload and

to bounce ideas around with. Julie Peacock and Rona Fineman were invaluable – Julie with her experience of the regional media and Rona for her audience development focus. Together we drew up a strategy and action plan that covered national, arts and local media.

So what did we do? We made friends. Ringing round our press lists, we found they were very out of date. So we updated our contacts – and used them! We forged relationships with previously negative media by offering exclusives and advance notification of reopening stories. We kept in touch and invited them to sneak previews of the building work.

The building work and reopening gave us opportunities to demonstrate that we could be of interest to local readers. Since then we have continued to ensure we highlight things such as local artists' or community involvement. Several times we have managed to get coverage for difficult performances/exhibitions by featuring our education projects rather than by simply using a formal 'artist's' release.

We got creative. We invested in a new media contacts package which offered a searchable database. This gave us a much wider target audience and made us more creative about how we created and pitched stories: for



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example, adding food and lifestyle, construction and design slants to our stories as well as photo stories.

We established a spokesperson for Arnolfini. Our director was quoted for major stories and made TV appearances. In this way, we tried to make sure that there was a face for the organisation. We always made sure she'd been briefed and had notes highlighting our three key messages: the opening date, that entrance to Arnolfini was free and that all were welcome.

We reviewed how we spoke. Press had previously been baffled by some of our releases. We now try to make them as simple as possible and we try to avoid jargon and artist-speak. One way we did this was by asking programming staff to talk to us about projects rather than letting them write copy for press releases.

Finally, we gave them pictures up front. Local press know they can rely upon us to get them lots of photos

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and we've tried to remember that they would always rather have shots of people engaging with art works than installation shots.

We've been open over a year now and have greeted over 600,000 visitors. Recently, we repeated our research to find out how successful our re-branding and PR work has been. Local press were much more positive, now seeing Arnolfini as more relevant to Bristol. They still see us as challenging, but in a positive sense. Words quoted included 'exciting', 'essential', 'experimental'. Much better than last time. We can see this new attitude in practice too – since

opening we haven't had one 'Has the art world gone completely mad?' story, unlike before, and we've also managed to avoid negative reporting on controversial touring shows that have affected other venues. Now – just need a way to get national press out of London and down to Bristol ... ■



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