

Press ‘yes’ for information

Roberta Doyle meets a leading arts correspondent for coffee to find out what journalists want

When I was briefed to write for *JAM* about what journalists want from arts organisations, I began to list dozens of things that ‘journalists want’. But, know what? There’s a much shorter list – ‘what good journalists want is information’.

I met with Phil Miller, one of the UK’s most experienced arts correspondents who now writes for the *Herald*, the biggest selling daily broadsheet in Scotland. He was sharing some of his insights over coffee, including the one above. Phil continued, ‘people from the arts are sometimes apologetic, as if they were bothering me by letting me know about their project. Stop it. It’s my job to decide what’s newsworthy, but I can’t do that if nobody gives me any information.’

Colleagues, if it’s as simple as providing information to journalists, why are we, in the main, not as clever as we could be at doing this? Why are we so reluctant to lift the phone and engage in dialogue with possibly the most important of our external stakeholders, the press and media?

Many of us working in arts marketing today have a portfolio of functions to juggle – audience development, marketing in all its forms, day-to-day administration, meetings, meetings and more meetings. Most of our organisations simply don’t prioritise press and media work and, all too often, the time-consuming task of developing relationships with journalists slips further down the to-do list. We concentrate on releases instead of relationships. We are formulaic and churn out the same old information. We underestimate our

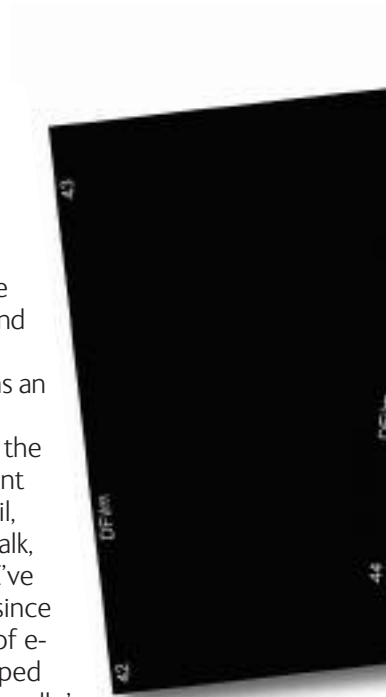
power. We are fragmented and don’t act communally as an industry.

‘Dialogue is the most important thing’ says Phil, ‘if you don’t talk, it’s no good. I’ve noticed that since the advance of e-mail I’ve stopped getting phone calls.’

What a pity that talking to journalists is one thing we don’t have time for in our frantic daily lives. We in arts and culture continue to ignore the power of the press at our peril. Our audiences – and our potential audiences – are still reading papers and magazines. Despite the rise of online and niche media, we are all still watching television and being influenced by mass media. Just look at some of the issues that we’ve debated as a nation over the last few months: cash for honours, *Big Brother* and racism, David Beckham moving to the United States.

Most of what we absorb about fashion, style, books and cinema comes to us via the UK media in one of its forms. Some of the biggest political and financial turnarounds of recent years have occurred because of media comment – think of Jamie Oliver’s school meals campaign. Or Sarah Payne’s family lobbying for reform in the laws related to child abuse; since the family’s media campaign was launched, 14 pieces of new legislation to protect children have been introduced in the UK.

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Let's get back to basics

Journalists want information – that's their currency. And when they have information, they can identify the stories – that's their bread and butter. And in case we think our stories don't matter, according to Phil Miller, 'cultural news is as important as any other news in the world'. We agree, Phil.

Whether you are fielding a topical news story about your organisation, trying to set up an interview and photo to support ticket sales or pitching a colour feature in a magazine, remember that many readers care about what we do and want to read about us in their title of choice. There is ample reader research to support that. Moreover, as an industry we are major advertisers in the UK press – the sums we contribute to newspapers and magazines all over the UK through advertising must easily run into millions of pounds. And nothing speaks louder to a newspaper proprietor than revenue.

So, if you assume that being in the

news matters, what should we be doing as individual professionals, as organisations and as an industry? Here are some of the rules we might live by.

As individual organisations:

- read the papers
- build relationships
- remember that press are not the enemy
- use your imagination
- use your power
- know the readership profiles,
- be efficient, professional and expert.

And here are some ideas in support of those rules:

'The press release is dead' one of Scotland's leading newspaper editors said recently. How often do we just churn out the same tired old information and distribute it to dozens, maybe hundreds of journalists.

'Do I know you?' Another distinguished editor says, 'If I don't have a pre-existing relationship with the person whose name appears in my inbox, I hit the delete button.'

'You can't go wrong with information' let the journalist decide whether the story or the angle works or not. Every newspaper or magazine will have a unique readership profile so make sure you know who you're aiming at.

'What's the line?' – Phil Miller of the *Herald* says 'our show is on' is not a story. Nor is 'our season will be launched tomorrow'. Try to suggest angles to the journalist but then leave it to them to judge.

'Can we talk off the record?' – only if you want to run the risk of seeing your quote in print, albeit unattributed.

'Noone from the museum was available for comment' – really? Make sure journalists have your mobile number. Many culture and arts stories emerge after board meetings which tend to be later in the day, so make sure you are available after 5pm. Make it easy.

Excellent though many of our individual efforts can be, don't we also need to look to the future as a united industry? So many other

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sectors manage to get their unified key messages out to stakeholders via the media. How many times have you seen a talking head pop up on television to speak out in support of the retailers of the UK, or of food manufacturers or farmers? Football has, of course, got its act together; the Professional Footballers' Association regularly fields a spokesperson to defend the size of players' salaries. It has become received wisdom via this method of delivering key messages that most professional footballers are paid for a 'career lasting perhaps ten years but those salaries have to sustain them for a lifetime'. Now we know why they are paid £50k a week.

And yet, in arts and culture we simply have no united voice. Shouldn't we be working together to build relationships across the media locally, regionally, nationally and internationally? Shouldn't we flex our communal muscles – reader-interest, cultural vitality and advertising revenue generation – to convince media owners of our importance? And crucially, shouldn't we promote good news by acting in collaboration?

The American poet Allen Ginsberg said, 'Whoever controls the media controls the culture.' Perhaps that's not 100 per cent true but, if the culture industry continues to de-prioritise the media, we are in danger of allowing ourselves to be controlled. Surely it's time we made positive interventions in this process – and easy ones at that. I for one will be living by Phil Miller's mantra from here on in – 'you can't go wrong with information.' ■



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