



Pitching the national press from the regions

It has always been a challenge to get national media attention for arts and culture outside London. But this need not be a daunting task. I want to show that by using imagination and planning, blended with a bit of relationship building, you don't have to be a major venue with a blockbuster show to achieve good quality national media coverage.

So what are our challenges?

Access to journalists

Knowing the person at the end of the phone or email really helps both parties when pitching a story or idea. With the majority of journalists in the national media based in London and with the industry having experienced drastic staffing cuts, it is more difficult than ever to meet up with them and pitch to them face to face. The time that journalists have available to travel out of London is limited and this becomes more difficult if you are based away from major cities and direct train routes.

Limited resources and time

Having small budgets can limit mailings, press views and being able to provide travel support for visiting journalists. Media relations is also very time consuming and if it's not your primary role how do you build it into your whole marketing activity in the most effective way?

Lack of stories or feature ideas

Sometimes, you might think you don't have any decent stories or ideas, yet your artistic director or curator may have unrealistic expectations about the amount of national media coverage they want you to achieve.

Lack of profile

You can get caught in a vicious circle – you need national press coverage

Arts organisations located outside of London struggled to get their fair share of national press even before the news industry entered crisis mode. Don't despair, says seasoned arts PR *Catharine Braithwaite*. With the right approach and some good planning, culture in the regions can still make the national pages.

to raise your profile, yet you can't get press coverage because as a small regional arts organisation you haven't got the profile.

This work takes a positive and imaginative approach so it's important to not only focus on the challenges but also the opportunities:

Forward planning is at the heart of any campaign so before you plunge into writing and sending press information, take a step back and think about what you want to achieve and what you have to offer. Setting these objectives with colleagues at this stage will help you manage expectations of the amount and type of media coverage you can obtain. Make sure they understand the importance of your deadlines so that you can secure coverage. What you can accomplish will vary, dependent on each event's relevance to the target media, journalists' and editors' perception of its newsworthiness and what else is competing for space in the media at that time.

What's the story?

You don't always have to have well-known names to get a journalist or editor interested in covering a show or event. We are communicators working in a creative world – use those skills to develop a list of concise, descriptive and compelling points about your event, as well as the key messages you wish to convey. Think how they might relate to a particular journalist and their readers or viewers.

Think outside the art pages

Maybe some elements of your programme just won't ever be reviewed but fit better into a consumer or science story, or something that chimes with current affairs. This is great because it also means that media don't have to visit to feature your organisation as they would with a review. Take time to research different kinds of media, and topical events to help you tailor your approach. Remember, the more relevant you make your story to the media, the more likely that you will get coverage.

Stop spamming

Your contacts receive hundreds of emails a day, many of them untargeted and this quickly becomes irritating. Many arts correspondents divert the worst offenders' mail straight to their junk folder! So make sure you get the stories you really want seen by only sending them to the people you know will be genuinely interested. Also note how a journalist likes to be contacted; phoning can often be a better option. Be brave and don't take things too personally – if a contact sounds ratty it may simply be that they are on deadline.

Reject the scattergun approach

Pitch one idea to a few knowing this is a topic they will want to cover. The reality is that if you are not one of the large national arts organisations, you are unlikely to get blanket coverage – but that's also okay. A

well-placed story with one national correspondent is just as good, and they might be more likely to cover if you can give them an exclusive.

Think timing

Always alert the media in time, even if it's under embargo, so that journalists have time to do something with it – but don't send so far in advance it gets lost. Get to know media deadlines and when you should pitch. If you don't know deadlines, ask. It's another excuse to get in touch with journalists. Bank Holidays are a great time to get national coverage, if you can hang on to a story. Or perhaps offer them on a Friday for Monday, when daily newspapers are pleased to have stories in the bag straight after the weekend.

If you have little time, at least make sure you are sending out regular information such as your organisation's advance programme. You can update it and send it out every few months if you wish, ensuring that your organisation's events are foremost in journalists' minds when they are planning advance features. Arrange your press list in 'lead time' order to ensure that you send press information out when your contacts working on different kinds of media need it.

Get information on the bigger picture

Explore national events calendars and ask specialist magazines to send you their advance features list. Take advantage of any matches to your programme by sending relevant information to the appropriate journalists in time. It will also help you to avoid clashes with big events in the national calendar.

Getting to know you

There is no better way to build a good relationship with journalists than by showing them that you

know what they write about or what they are interested in (or even what they detest). This can be done by monitoring their output but also via channels like Twitter. I often run ideas past certain contacts and ask their opinion. They are usually helpful, offering ideas or helping to unpick content to find other stories. And I'm not offended if they don't cover everything I offer them. They also regularly recommend stories to colleagues if they think it's a good one.

Nothing beats meeting in person, so engineer ways to meet:

- desk-side meetings can be good if you have clear content to pitch,
- press trips targeting those willing or with time to travel,
- cultural PR conferences with 'meet the media' panels (there's an annual one in London),
- hosting media networking socials and inviting locally based national journalists along are a great way to meet potential contacts without the hard sell.

Seek out locally based national journalists – or at least ones that are based closer to you than London. For example, there are many producers and correspondents at BBC North

looking for stories and content further afield than the big cities. Use locally based freelancers too, and those trying to make their name; they are often on the way up and will remember your generosity.

Look after your locals!

We all acknowledge that there's nothing better for shifting tickets or driving visits than our wonderful regional media. But it's also useful to note that some of the journalists working in your area now will move on to national media positions. And others often have friends in the national media, who use them to source which local arts and culture organisations to cover.

Two (or more) heads are better than one.

Working collaboratively allows you to share ideas and to combine resources – to fund a press trip, for example. Many cities and regions choose to work together to offer media contacts a visit to sample the overall cultural offer, giving them more reason to leave their desks. It is also helpful for smaller organisations that might not have the pull of the bigger venues to have the opportunity to be included. ■



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Catharine's varied and high profile clients include Manchester Art Gallery, Tate Liverpool, Manchester International Festival, Tate, Liverpool Biennial, Manchester Museums Consortium and The Hepworth Wakefield as well as a number of museums and galleries across the North. She has been Associate Lecturer in Marketing at University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies since 2002 and is a Trustee of HOME, Manchester's newest arts centre which will launch in 2015.