

Getting the Most From Your Public Relations Program



From Courting Critics to Timing Your Event Listings, Drawing Media Attention to Your Theatre Can Bring Immediate Results

BY JANET BAILEY

IT'S OFTEN REFERRED to as "free" media. Getting coverage for your theatre in your local media is a great way to draw attention to your shows, tell interesting stories about your organization that you could never fit in an ad, and have those stories told by a supposedly impartial theatre writer or critic. Of course, we all know there's really no such thing as "free." Public relations, or PR, activity takes time, attention, knowledge and skill.

The first and easiest type of publicity is the basic listings in the events calendars or entertainment sections of your local newspapers, radio and TV stations, and Web sites. These listings are essential if your event is going to be considered among the options for theatre goes in your market, and they really are as close to "free" as anything can be. Securing listings should be a simple matter of keeping track of the formats, deadlines and submission guidelines for the media outlets in your market, and then doing it.

The other kinds of publicity – previews/reviews of specific productions, and institutional publicity or news about your organization in general – are much more valuable to you in the long run, but are getting harder and harder to secure. Most cities are down to only one major daily newspaper, local television stations have largely abandoned locally produced programming except for evening newscasts and radio stations are increasingly owned and programmed by large conglomerates.

Media companies are fighting their own battles to stem the loss of readers/listeners/viewers – especially younger ones – in a world in which information sources are much more fragmented. What this means for you is that whatever space is devoted to arts and entertainment now has to be shared with the relentless encroachment of popular culture—Britney's baby, who wore what to the Oscars, or the latest reality-show star to get voted off the island.

But although the arts coverage pie may be shrinking, there are things you can do to ensure you can lay claim to your fair share.

UNDERSTAND WHAT'S NEWSWORTHY

Your first step is to be very clear about the messages you want to convey, and to understand what is and is not newsworthy. Ironically, the production that is your biggest seller at the box office -- the annual run of "A Christmas Carol," for instance -- may have a "same old, same old" feeling for writers who are looking for something fresh. You need to find a hook to interest writers-- something that makes this production distinctive and interesting to people outside your own organization. Is it a regional premiere? Are there "name" actors in the cast? Does the playwright have local ties? Is the director taking an unusual approach?

MAKE YOUR WRITTEN MATERIALS CLEAR, CONCISE AND FACTUAL

Remember the journalists' mantra -- *who-what-when-where* -- and include that information right up front where it's easy to find. According to Boston Globe correspondent Karen Campbell, "Remember that although I might know exactly where your theatre is, I have to put complete information into the article I'm writing. It's helpful to me to have the street address right in the release, so I don't have to search around for it." This also includes details like ticket prices, box office phone number and hours, and Web addresses.

State your messages clearly in the body of the release, remembering that you are trying to convince the reporter or editor who is reading it that your event is newsworthy and interesting. It's best not to assume that the reader is a theatre expert, so a bit of context and description or a sentence about the history of the piece or the time in which it was written might be helpful. If the company or production has won awards, by all means say so.

A press release is not the place for marketing hype, however. You should describe something as "groundbreaking" only if it actually breaks new ground. A production is unique only if it really is the only one of its kind. Adjectives like exciting, thrilling, fabulous -- and anything with an exclamation point after it -- should be saved for your marketing materials. According to Campbell, "I'm suspicious of press releases that include too many flowery adjectives, as if the writer is trying to tell me what to think. I'd prefer to let the piece speak for itself."

THINK VISUALLY

"Any editor will tell you that a great photo is more likely to get you in the paper than a great story is," says John Michael Kennedy, director of public relations for Boston's Huntington Theatre Company. This means that you can't always wait until you have your official opening night production photos. "We recently had the opportunity to get an advance feature on our production of *The Real Thing*, but we didn't have any photos yet," says Kennedy. "I just took a digital camera over to the rehearsal hall and took some photos of the actors rehearsing a few scenes."

The best photos are shots of two or three people in some kind of animated interaction. Wide shots of the entire stage or of large groups of people are less attractive for publications, and standard headshots are virtually useless. The good news is that high-resolution digital photos can be distributed easily and cheaply to

the media, either via email or by placing them in a photo section on your company's Web site. But don't automatically attach a high-resolution photo to every emailed press release that goes out. The large file size can overburden your recipient's email system, and many media companies are wary of unsolicited attachments.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Keep track of who covers what and the type of topic they like to write about. This is a simple and obvious idea, but it can be cumbersome in practice. In the days before email, if Susie left her

10 Tips to Energize Your PR Program

- 1** News releases should always answer who, what, where and when.
- 2** Place the most important information in the first paragraph. Releases get cut from the bottom up.
- 3** Always leave an office phone number, cell phone number and e-mail address in case the reporter has questions and needs to reach you immediately. Change your greeting every day stating the date and where to reach you if the caller needs immediate attention.
- 4** Use simple language, avoiding acronyms or jargon that takes the journalist extra time to research or understand.
- 5** Be a media guru in your geographical area by watching the news, reading the paper and listening to the radio so you know who covers what, and what kind of story might appeal to which reporter.
- 6** Briefly introduce yourself to those reporters, but be concise and focus on the benefits of your story to them. State why an association with you and your theatre is advantageous to them, their reporting and their audience.
- 7** Don't think that one size fits all. Ask your various media contacts how they would like to receive information from you and their preference for receiving photos.
- 8** Be sensitive to their deadlines. Most television stations are busy in the afternoon, while afternoon papers have morning deadlines, so pick your contact times wisely when the reporter will have time to listen to your pitch.
- 9** Target your pitch by the audience the media serves. Aim your news to special sections in a newspaper or to the right radio or TV station to reach that group.
- 10** Timing is everything. Weekends, Mondays and holidays tend to be slow news days, so gear your pitches to when you may have the best chance to be picked up.

job at the newspaper, the press releases you mailed to Susie's attention would end up on the desk of her replacement, Joe. Email doesn't work that way, though, and the press release you email to Susie might just end up in the cyber-equivalent of the dead letter office. Moreover, much arts coverage now is done by freelancers, who may have email addresses at their homes, not at work.

As the media landscape changes, so too does the roster of people writing for publication. Be sure your press list includes content providers for Web sites or theatre bloggers in your area. It also helps to think about writers other than those who cover the arts scene. The economic development potential of a theatre company in a neighborhood might be just as interesting to a business writer as it is to an arts writer, for instance.

Your PR activity should be folded into your production schedule in the same way that you schedule set design, rehearsals and all the other activities connected with producing your shows. Daily and weekly newspapers and calendar listings generally look for information about four weeks ahead of time; monthly magazines usually have a two-month lead time, while TV and radio work on much shorter schedules. Your best bet is to directly contact the most important media outlets in your market and find out from them how far in advance they want to receive materials, and whether they prefer to receive things via email, fax, or snail-mail.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Cultivating reporters who cover theatre in your town is similar to cultivating donors or investors. In all these cases, you're trying to convince someone to give you a scarce resource – in the case of media, this means space in their publication or program – in exchange for a benefit to them that is uncertain, or at least hard to quantify. The better you know them and the better they know your organization, the more likely it is that they will understand what you are doing and want to write about it.

"I spend a lot of time visiting with reporters in their offices or over lunch," says Kennedy, "and that includes people who write for smaller papers as well as the major ones. Major media outlets today are using more freelancers, and writers jump from one paper to another, or even from one medium to another. You never know when a good contact might become a great contact."

Relationship building is especially crucial if you are seeking the kind of institutional publicity that goes beyond coverage of your current production. There are many situations that can be exploited to generate coverage about your institution in general: a milestone anniversary, a new artistic director, a move to a new venue, the launch of an unusual outreach program. It is much easier to interest reporters and editors in this kind of story if you can call on strong relationships that have been built over time.

PR IS NOT MARKETING

Finally, remember that PR can't supplant marketing, and that a theatre company can't rely on free media alone to build an audience. You don't control which critic (if any!) the editor will assign, or what the critic will say, or the day that the review will be published, or how many other articles it will be buried under—or how many people are actually going to see the review anyway! Yes, a good review can give your ticket sales a nice boost, and a bad review can put a damper on sales, but it is basic marketing – audience research, a clear brand strategy, attractive brochures and ads, interesting promotions – that sells tickets and secures audiences for the future. **db**

Janet Bailey is founder and owner of Janet Bailey Associates which provides marketing, strategy, development, organizational and communications consulting services to arts and other nonprofit organizations. For information, visit www.janetbaileyassociates.com or call (617) 971-9383.

If you would like to comment on this or other articles, please visit the discussion forum at www.dramabiz.com.

Public Relations Resources

Bacon's Information

www.bacons.com | 800.972.9252

Bacon's MediaSource simplifies the process of identifying the media most interested in your press materials by using a targeted database. News can be distributed quickly either from your desktop or as an extra service provided by MediaSource. Media outlets are monitored for mentions and coverage of your theatre.

BurrellesLuce

www.burrellesluce.com | 800.368.8070

MediaContacts is an online database that gives you segmented access to the media, distributes press materials either via fax or e-mail and monitors coverage in the media. The editorial coverage

module will notify you of any appropriate pending editorial to help you tailor your pitch or increase your chances of getting a placement.

Business Wire

www.businesswire.com | 888.381.WIRE (9473)

EntertainmentWire can be segmented to cover media exclusively following theatre. Coverage can be in a specific geographic region or a wider coverage of newspapers, television, radio, magazines, trade journals, Internet information and news sites, portals, search engines, content syndicates, wireless providers and research databases. Explore the use of photography, multimedia and multilingual capabilities to increase the impact of your message.

ListLogix

www.listlogix.com | 212.279.5112

ListLogix integrates media list development, management and distribution of press materials with media outlets in the U.S. and U.K.

PR Newswire

www.prnewswire.com | 800-832-5522

US1 Entertainment Premium Newswire distributes your press release to thousands of journalists covering the entertainment industry. In addition, coverage includes keyword searches on Internet search engines and reports on keyword usage. MediaRoom is a newer addition in which the media can access your Web site for releases, bios, backgrounders, production notes, photos, etc., in a self-serve fashion.