

Getting a good word

The critics are waiting in the wings with the power to make or break your show with a well chosen phrase. How do you make sure they give you a review? **Jo Caird** finds out

When it comes to attracting audiences to your work, whether it's a piece of new writing, a musical, a puppet show or Shakespeare, press previews are invaluable. A well-placed feature has the potential to reach a far greater number of people than even the best funded marketing campaign.

The problem is that journalists, whether they are staff writers, editors or freelancers, receive dozens of press releases a day – getting them to pick up on your project can seem like an impossible task. There are things you can do to maximise your chances, however, to get that much needed publicity. Read on for a journalist's guide to getting the press on side.

The first step is to think critically about your project. For some projects attracting media attention is impossible – that doesn't mean they're not great work, but it does mean it's better to avoid courting the press when a different approach might be a more successful route to attracting audiences

the past or that you feel might appreciate it in the future. Read their work regularly and get a feel for publications you like. Invite individual journalists to performances or into rehearsal to give them a better idea of what you do. Any impression you make now can pay dividends when you're looking for coverage for your next project.

A crucial aspect of getting to know particular publications is an awareness of how far in advance their editorial teams commission and accept material to be published. The time between when an article is commissioned and when it appears in print is known as the lead time, and this depends on the type of publication.

Check exact lead times before you begin a relationship with a writer or a freelancer who writes for a particular publication, but assume three months for monthlies and six weeks for weeklies. Daily papers and online publications tend to be more last-minute in their scheduling, but they'll thank you for giving them plenty of notice



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If you're dealing with editors, remember that they'll be swamped with approaches from companies, PRs and freelance writers. If they can't see an 'angle' from which to write about your show, it's very unlikely they'll commission anything on it.

If you're approaching freelancers, remember they need to be able to persuade an editor to commission them. Goodwill alone is unfortunately not enough. The only exception to this rule is blogging – an enthusiastic freelance might decide to blog or Tweet about your project. This can be very useful coverage, but is unlikely to attract as many people as a mainstream publication.

Once you've thought about whether or not your project has media legs, it's time to consider who to contact. Don't just blanket email everyone in your address book. If what you're telling them about is completely unrelated to their interests, it will only make them blind to any future projects that might genuinely appeal.

Make an effort to get to know the journalists and publications that have expressed an interest in your work in

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Send releases through well in advance and consider sending reminders as the dates approach. Make sure that dates are very clear on your press releases – this is almost the first thing a journalist will look for as it tells them what priority to attach to your project.

How you approach a journalist is almost as important as when you approach them. Email is the best method in 90% of cases. Don't phone unless you already have a relationship with them, if in doubt, ask – there is nothing like the irritation of being interrupted when you're writing to a deadline.

Don't start sending releases through the post without checking either. Most journalists these days prefer email so you'll just annoy them by cluttering up their desks with paper, as well as wasting your money.

If you want to flag up your press release before you send it, consider contacting the journalist on Twitter or Facebook. Be careful not to bug them though, as not everyone will appreciate this sort of approach.

After making initial contact, consider sending a follow up email



a few days or weeks later (depending on the lead times involved). If you're expecting more details to be confirmed, wait until they are, so you have another reason to get in touch. It's a good idea to acknowledge in the follow up email that you've been in touch before – no one likes to be bombarded without explanation.

If they don't get back to you after the follow up, assume they're not interested. This could be for a variety of reasons, so don't despair of contacting them with your future projects. If they're never interested in what you're offering them, however, think carefully about why you chose to contact them in the first place

When it comes to getting in touch, try and present yourself as well in print as you would in person. Rigorously spellcheck your emails for

grammar and facts, as well as your releases. A misplaced apostrophe won't necessarily turn a journalist off your project, but it might.

In terms of tone, be wary of overfamiliarity with journalists you don't know – avoid exclamation marks and don't begin emails with 'Hey', or sign off with 'Love'. Keep your style professional and to the point.

Finally, to maximise the chances of a journalist picking up on your project, consider what else is going on in the arts and news that might share themes with your show. This could be a television documentary, a news story or another show on a related topic. A good journalist will make these links themselves, of course, if they find your project interesting and want to pursue it, but it doesn't hurt to give them a head start.