

SEVEN PUBLICITY ACTIVITIES THAT BRING RESULTS

by Chris Laning, STAGE DIRECTIONS, October 1996

At times, publicizing your theatre can be a discouraging task. Although you are working hard, some of the things you do don't seem to have much result. It may seem as though you've been wasting your time.

In this situation the logical thing would be to stop doing these things. However, here are seven seeming time-wasters that can pay off:

1. Sending a publicity notice when you think it's too late.

Send it anyway, and don't apologize. (At least, don't apologize too much.) Sure, it's better to get your information in on time, but perhaps you didn't know when the deadline was, or perhaps unforeseen events intervened. This way, even if the deadline is past, your press release, article, or announcement at least will be there if suddenly a hole needs to be filled. And at worst, you still have reminded someone at your local newspaper, radio, or TV station that your company exists and does interesting and worthwhile things. That will help next time. (And next time, make sure you do get it out on time.)

2. Sending news releases to TV stations, even if they never seem to respond.

Local TV stations are extremely busy places. When they put their broadcast together, they never know ahead of time exactly what will happen that day. They have to choose just a few from a multitude of good stories. [Don't try too hard] to court television stations. But keep sending them your news. While you shouldn't expect them to cover everything you do, you never know when you may be their perfect local tie-in to a story on "Arts Funding Cut Everywhere" or "The Magic of Make-believe." Even if you don't hear from them, they do read what you send them. They're looking for news. Give them your best.

3. Taking and sending good photos, even if they don't always get used. Remember that all media, including print media, are visually oriented these days. Sending good photos with your releases gets your people's faces known in the community, and shows (better than telling) that you're out there doing interesting things. Even if they can't use your photos every time, the reporters and editors see them, and believe, me, they notice good photography when they see it.

If you can't pay for photography, perhaps you can strike a deal with a professional photographer for volunteer services in return for cost of materials and a little free advertising. Developing a reputation for providing sharp, clear, and witty photos is worth the time you put into it.

4. Displaying a sense of humor.

Besides making your publicity job a lot more fun, using humor helps your name stick in community members' minds. Don't feel you have to reach for gags. Just loosen up enough to let the natural spoofs and irreverence in your troupe come out. Your job is to ride herd on the humor and pick the things that will add to, not distract from, your message. Henry V in costume, acting imperiously at your press conference, is in...Henry V in costume with face vampire teeth is out.

5. Holding press conferences.

If you've had inquiries from several reporters about a particular story, consider inviting them to all come at one time and hear about it. That's all a press conference it. It's an especially helpful way to do things if there are several people the reporters should talk to, since you can have all of them there at once.

Still, you shouldn't count on everyone you invite actually coming to your conference. (Providing snacks and coffee may help.) Set it up, have plenty of background material ready, but don't exhaust yourself over it. Every reporter who does come gets more and better material than if they had just talked to you on the phone, and more good material means more likelihood of a good story. Don't forget to take your own photos and write a good story yourself, while you're at it.

6. Setting up personal interviews.

There is really no substitute for talking to people face to face. In your job, you are seldom in a position where you can make people publicize your organization. Instead, you must persuade them. And most people find it a lot harder to say "no" to someone they know personally. Yes, of course, it takes time, and your time is limited; but use some of it to cultivate your contacts within the community, local papers, and news stations.

Similarly, it's well worth your while to arrange for a reporter to interview people in your organization directly. You can coach them ahead of time about what to say (and not to say). But just because you're the PR person, don't feel you have to be the only one giving out all the information. News is freshest straight from the mouths of participants, and if your reporter's any good, interviews will make for a better story.

By the way, think carefully about the facts you give, since you will probably not have a chance to see any article about you or be able to correct any errors before it goes to press. Like it or not, few reporters can give you that opportunity.

7. Cultivating carefully chosen small markets.

If you've got the major publicity avenues covered, think next about where you can reach out to smaller groups who will be especially interested in what you're doing. If you do a lot of musicals, are all the local music teachers on your mailing list? What about church choir directors? Do the local centers for Senior Citizens (the "grandparent" market) know about your shows for children? If you do productions

with social-justice themes, can you get into the newsletters of community groups with that kind of focus? It's hard to measure how many tickets you sell this way. But certainly anytime you have people in the community thinking about you, especially in a positive way, it have to be good.