

## **How Can Theatre Groups Get the Word Out?**

By Karin McKie for Chicago Artists Resource, now Chicago Artists Coalition

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."* -Margaret Mead

The more public relations and marketing work I do, the more this quote by anthropologist Margaret Mead resonates. Sometimes I think I should get a tattoo of it. Then, of course, I'd save another pound of flesh to sport my company's motto, *no se vende lo que no se ensena* (translates to "you can't sell what you don't show") my tongue-in-cheek nod to PR being a bit like prostitution. These quotes speak to my philosophy of getting a message out—in a community, in Chicago, in the states, and in the world-at-large. At Tree Falls Productions, we believe most paramount that you and your group can make a difference if you get your message out in a clear, concise manner.

**Be accurate with your facts** (always carefully proof your "who, what, where and when"), and **be transcendent with the all-important "why"** of your particular event: Why are you doing this play? Why now? Is it a world premiere? Is it a new translation? Do you have an all-female cast? Is it partially in American sign-language? Does the script have a Muslim focus?

Help the media do their job of getting information out to the public by **being correct**, and giving them a reason to focus on your story.

I'm a fan of a "call to action" in any correspondence, from "please write about this story now to correspond with the commemoration of Kristallnacht" to "you can get two-for-one tickets to this show on Valentine's Day" and "receive a \$5 discount with a donated can of food for the Greater Chicago Food Depository." There is a glorious abundance of arts in and near our city, and it's our job as advocates of our particular group to let everyone know what's different, what's special, what's topical, what ties into current news, what will benefit our community in the work we're doing. And our media compatriots can't do a thing if they don't receive materials in a timely fashion.

I like to fax, snail- and e-mail written pieces a bare minimum of eight weeks out. Other show supports, such as pre-production and production photos, video footage, audio scenes & original music & PSA's on CD, should also get out the door as soon as humanly possible (and always clean, well-labeled and along with postcards and releases).

These go under the auspices of your spot-on, frequently updated database, which lists all your contacts' complete info, including how they like to receive their materials, in what format, and the like. Always start with who and what you know. Internal communications come first—make sure your ensemble, board, funders, friends and supporters have all your information so they can continue to support you (and, of course, you've thanked them handily for this in your e-newsletters and lobby signage, right?!). Keep your website updated, make sure your outgoing voice-mail message is accurate, all those vitally important "calling cards" within your control.

Then the concentric circles move out—make sure your community newspapers have your calendar listings and photos. Invite them to openings and special events. It's about relationship-building, plus what's in it for them? Of course you'd like local reporters to write about you, but really do take the time to do things for them—offering them free tickets, taking them to lunch, and so on. Don't just talk non-stop about your organization, listen to them too, and glean their needs, interests, writing styles. READ

what they write about so you'll know what to pitch to them and frankly, it's just complimentary to them to know that people are interested in their point of view.

Make sure you connect with your peer institutions for flyer trades, shared advertising and other points of contact that work well in the barter system, especially if there are fiscal limitations.

So now your ducks are lined up in your offices, your neighborhood, aligned groups. Make sure you're in touch with others around the city, and link what you're doing to different media beats. Maybe you are promoting a dance concert, and the choreographer used to teach elementary school, so you've got an angle for the education reporter. Your new art gallery is in an old YMCA gym, so perhaps you can pitch the sports writer who mentioned in a previous article that she used to play there.

Then start spreading to the suburbs . . . Do you have an actor who grew up in Deerfield—who went to high school there, and whose parents are still residents? Well, you better make sure the Deerfield papers have your production info, plus this individual's info and photo. A lot of outlying papers might use your info verbatim as it's of interest to them (but they don't have the staff to do specific coverage).

It goes without saying the advent of the Internet has made this type of targeted research quick, easy and fabulously free. After that, out to universities and colleges. Alma maters love the "our boy does well in the big city" features for alumni publications and what not. Collect that info from your performers and creative staff and e-mail away. This type of PR often cross-pollinates with marketing—a high school English class might buy out the house for a night of "Hamlet" (which they're studying in class, which you've found out from your networking); Alzheimer's groups might purchase a block of tickets to your senior care-themed play to give away at their benefit (and you've encouraged them to list your production on their Web site, in their newsletter, etc.).

Again, this is about a "call to action" offering them a menu of choices of all the different ways they can support your work, which is in turn helping their cause/message/mission, and so on in a big love-fest of community service. It's the right thing to do, plus it's good PR and will usually garner you more column inches in the listings.

The founder of one of the first public television stations in the country once told me, when I was fearful of sounding like a vagabond when asking for support, that "you're not begging; you're giving people an opportunity to be philanthropic".

Truer words never spoken. People want to be generous, and your job is to place your info clearly in front of them (or to a media person).

Finally, we have the national and international markets. Do your due diligence and again find out what's the angle for this national publication? Relate your organization's story to the countrywide stage, and support the pitch with details, interview subjects, and photos.

Always keep an eye on deadlines, as most monthlies need info 3-6 months in advance to even consider a story. Use a "pitch script" to organize your thoughts when calling a reporter with simple questions like "are you interested in this story? If not, what types are you likely to write about?" As with any communication, get to the point (and the first question you should always ask a reporter on the phone is "Are you on deadline " can I have two minutes of your time?").

The web is a wealth of info for happenings around the globe, so do check to see if there is a festival or conference you can bring your work to . . . if you've never been abroad, it's well worth exploring options for a cultural exchange. And keep an eye out for what you can leave in the community you're visiting . . . when I took two shows to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, I also found an at-risk youth program where we gave writing workshops based on the 1940s radio shows we were producing. My experience was certainly deepened by helping others in their own milieu, supporting the old bromide that I took away more than I brought.

So anything is possible, from your own backyard to far-flung latitudes. I never let the business cart get in front of the artistic horse, and I do start all these journeys with some simple questions: What's my audience and what's my budget? What's my message, mobilization and money? What do I want to happen, and what makes this a success? Is this good?

And never expect coverage—it's a privilege, not a right, so make your work worthy of coverage. See that it's well-expressed with a notable hook, supported by written, audio, video, photographic, podcast, Web-streamed materials. And, of course, lots and lots of pithy tattoos.

*[Karin McKie](#) has been working in public relations, marketing and special events planning since 1987. Since moving to Chicago in 1993, she has run her own firm, [Tree Falls Productions](#), which provides public relations and marketing, as well as writing and editing services, primarily for non-profit Chicago-based theaters and arts organizations. She was honored as one of Today's Chicago Women Magazine's 100 Women Making a Difference for her HIV/AIDS education promotional work, and has received a PBS Advertising and Promotion Award and a Capital Region Emmy Award. As an actor, she has worked with Chicago Shakespeare, Steppenwolf, American Theater Company, Lookingglass/Walkabout, The Hypocrites, Stage Left, Famous Door, Collaboraction, WBEZ's Stories on Stage, and Boom Chicago in Amsterdam, to name a few.*

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