

To win or escape the cover story

Presented at the ICOM MPR conference in Tampere
30 August 2005

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Many museum people are complaining about low media coverage of their museum. The truth is that museums get the media coverage they deserve. But this is not always true.

I would like to share with you some practical advice of how to improve the potential of media coverage. The interaction between the communications director and the media is a kind of game. But it is not a game without rules. And if you stick to these rules, or hints, you might improve the chances of winning the cover story.

On the other hand there is the totally opposite situation. There can be days when you do not dare to walk pass the news kiosk in fear of the first pages on the tabloids. Days when you would do anything to get out of the media's spotlights. Days when people get suicidal thoughts whenever a journalist calls. It is when some journalist has found something negative, something embarrassing

There is also advice on how to behave in such situations. I cannot guarantee that they will work, but there should be at least a chance.

Receiver orientation

Be honest with yourself. What was the true reason for your latest museum exhibition? Was it made to present the results of recent research at the museum? Or was it made to exhibit material that you would like the audience to see? Some rare objects that had been stowed away for generations? Or on the other hand - was it made to fulfil a desire from you visitors? In today's corporate marketing, they speak of marketing orientation. Every product is made to suit the needs of the customer. You look at what the user wants and then design the product. Most museums look at what the curator knows, or what the collections contain and design the exhibit in reference to that. In corporate marketing this is called product orientation and regarded as something from way back then.

One thing to remember when you promote such an exhibit is that you compete with people that have designed huge events with only one purpose: To suit the journalists' needs. They make large surveys to present scientific material supporting their statements. They arrange interviews with the rich and famous to promote their campaigns

When promoting a museums exhibit you have to sort out what might be the winning story. You have to put on the journalist's hat and see it from his point of view. And you have to present the material in a way that makes it attractive and easily accessible for the media.

In the following, I will concentrate how the news desk is thinking and how they are prioritising. There are many formats of media coverage, like debates, chronicles and so on, but the hunt for the good news is a basic principle in most media coverage.

Information bombardment

Every day, a news desk receives huge amounts of information. It has to be sorted, and only a small portion is attractive enough to be published news. You can imagine how this sorting process is done. Think of yourself in from of the mailbox at home when it unloads itself by pouring advertisements, bills and maybe a postcard on you feet. You have a crying kid on your shoulders and the wastebasket within reach. Most of the ads end up right there - in the wastebasket. And it's the same thing happening at the news desk. Most of the stuff goes down the drain. End with e-communications is it even easier. Block mark and delete!

Your duty as a communications director is not to end up in the wastebasket. But it is a hard game. Today's media coverage is extremely focussed on individuals. The young, rich and famous have the best chances of winning the cover story. And most museums are neither young, rich nor famous. Museums in general are reckoned as dull and boring. And have you ever heard of a world famous museum curator? The only one I can think of is Indiana Jones.

News criterions

To sort out general rules for what is worth the cover story is impossible. It changes from day to day. But still, there are certain criterions that in many cases can distinguish between what is news and what is not. But even if your story fulfils these criterions, you're not guaranteed media coverage. It is like making a movie. Most movies have a common layout. But the most genius movies are those that break these conventions.

News Categories

News can be sorted in hard news, soft news and sport. I feel that sport is taking over more and more of the time available and the coverage of other news is becoming fairly limited. Hard news is politics and economy that affects many people, maybe the whole population. Huge accidents, wars and riots also come in this category. News from the cultural sector is normally categorised as soft news. It can be the opening of a new exhibit, interview with an expert on arts and so on. Broadcasted news should be composed by both hard and soft news. So even on a day with a major incident that puts aside all other hard news, there might be room for cultural news, since it comes in a separate category.

Exclusivity Freshness and Sensation

What is news? What is special about the stories that journalists are willing to write about? To a certain extent, we can mention three characteristics that can carry a story through the news desk. These are Exclusivity, freshness and sensation.

Exclusivity

A news desk that knows they are alone on a story will be more willing to publish it. It is the dream of every news desk to write: Read it - only in this magazine! You can offer a story exclusively to one journalist, and he will be easier to convince that your story is worth publishing. You fill him in with background information, images and interviews with involved persons. The journalist can then work in depth with the material, knowing that no one else is about to publish the same story. Just remember to set a deadline for how long the journalist is alone on the story. After that deadline, you can send out press releases worldwide.

The hunt for exclusive news makes press conferences the worst thinkable place to present news. Press conferences are for huge incidents, where the only controllable way to communicate information is to give it to everyone simultaneously. A Saturday dinner party is probably a better place to spread the word about your new exhibitions than a press conference.

Freshness

News is to be served fresh. At the news desk, all incoming stories are discussed at the morning meeting. The stories that are not taken on end up as dead. The next day there are new stories, and no one will read yesterday's news. Consequently the perfect timing is essential if you want your story covered. Some days the news desk is full of stories, other days it is rather empty. If you want your story published, you should try to sort out the empty days. It is not always easy to find the empty days. But calling a journalist on a Friday afternoon is normally not a good idea. You might get the impression that journalists do not believe in a life after the weekend. It is better to call him Monday morning. At the beginning of the week there is more time and space available, and if you get your story published in one newspaper early in the week, the other papers have a chance to follow up. And a communications director should get up early in the morning. Back home, morning meetings start normally around nine. And you should assure that some has had the time to look at your story before that. I do prefer to send out press releases around six in the morning.

Sensation

Every news desk has a deep desire for the big sensation. Only sensations win the cover stories. But what is sensational? It depends on the situation, the timing and many other circumstances. But there are certain characteristics that many sensations have in common. And I will try to describe some of them.

Close to the action

Newspapers, radio and TV have defined areas that they cover. Incidents happening centrally in this area have the greatest chances of coverage. A stolen artwork from a neighbouring museum will get more coverage than arts

stolen from some Australian gallery. And a regional newspaper will offer more space to a national event where some local hero is involved.

Meaning for many

The more people an incident has consequences for, the better are the chances that the media will cover it. Rise and fall of taxes receive typically huge coverage.

Number of involved persons

An incident involving a huge number of persons is good news. A terrible example is the tsunami catastrophe last winter. After the tsunami, the number of missing Norwegians was drastically reduced from more than 400 to fewer than 100 persons. The Ministry of Foreign affairs and the police were strongly criticised by the media. One reason for this critic can be that by reducing the number of missing persons, the "news value" of the story was reduced.

Power, status and representation

As I have mentioned, today's media is focussing on individuals. And persons who have strong power, have a great status, like celebrities or persons that represents many people have the greatest potential of media coverage.

Numbers and records

Numbers are fine news, and records are the best. An all time high number of visitors is good news. Heavy investments are worth writing about. A tendency is that it is easier to get the costly and airy projects covered, then the down to earth realistic ones.

Unexpected incidents and rare objects

News is that something unexpected happens. If the museum does something weird, you can be sure the papers want to write about it. A presentation of rare objects also raises your chances of coverage. If an art museum presents once-of-a-lifetime opportunities to see exceptional art works, broad media coverage is guaranteed.

These are just some examples of criterions that might create news. This is only one-way of listing them, and in other situations, other criterions are more important. But anyhow, the more of these criterions characterising a story, the greater are the chances of getting it published.

Negative coverage

Most published stories about museums are positive. Museums are reckoned as solid institutions serving the society. The function as they are meant do and there is rarely any fuss with them. Most journalists in the cultural field are harmless people writing about new exhibitions and shows in the same way as the museum director is presenting them.

But there are other days. There are the days when the phone rings at six. You answer it half asleep, and you hear: Good morning, it is from the national news. Then you know that it won't be a good morning at all. A journalist has discovered something out of order. The last counting of museum objects resulted in ten valuable paintings missing. Or your museum director has had a secret relationship with the Norwegian crown Princess Mette-Marit. But it doesn't have to be as big as that. Through the editing of statements and the choice of interviewed persons, even the smallest incidents can be blown up to big sensations.

Such situations create a huge pressure on the communications sector of the museum. It can feel like everyone attacking you simultaneously. And journalists can be very creative in hunting down the right persons and presenting a certain angle of a story. I will try to give you some ideas on how it is smart to behave in such situations. I cannot guarantee a success, because every incident is different, and you never know what comes up.

Confidence

First and foremost it is important that the media have confidence in you and the museum. Most museums are good in presenting comprehensive and high quality press material in situations of positive media relationship. It is vital to manage the negative inquiries in the same way. An open dialog between the museum and the media is

important both on good and bad days. If you try to avoid answering questions, or even worse, try to get away with a bad excuse, the confidence can be lost. And to rebuild this is a hard job.

Accessibility

If a negative story is coming up, it is vital to be available for answering questions. The most comfortable might be to turn off the cell phone and disappear. This gives the journalist a chance to find out more about the story from your counterpart. If you answer "No comments" or: "This can not be anything to write about", the journalist will get suspicious and you give him a golden opportunity to continue his own investigations.

Statement

At the moment you feel a negative story sailing up, it is important to clarify the museum's view on the story. Write a short statement that sums up what has happened and the museum's meanings about it. Send it as a press release, distribute it to all personnel and put it on the museum's website.

Contact Persons - Questions and Answers

Define contact persons. The director will anyhow be contacted. In addition you should point out a small group of persons who have the best knowledge of the case and those who are acquainted with media contact. A tough case can run 24 hours a day; so one person cannot deal with it alone.

Sort out possible questions from the journalists and write down answer to these. Distribute the list of questions and answers to the contact persons. This will help you presenting a common view of the case.

"Stick to your story"

"Stick to your story" is a basic rule for criminals being interrogated. The same rule applies when you are attacked all over by journalists. Journalist will try to make you say what they want you to say. And do not comment statements from other sources without checking the source first. A good form of questions and answers can help you through and preventing you from saying the wrong things but it is not easy.

Reduce coverage

There are some ways that might reduce the coverage of a negative story. But you have no guarantee that it will work. As I said before, press conferences are the worst place to publish news. If you have a negative story that must be published, do it on a press conference on a Friday afternoon. Then you have a fair chance that few journalists' turns up. And you can hope that the story is dead on Monday.

Another way is to offer the story to a journalist exclusively, trying to angle the story in a positive way. This should only be done with journalists you have a very good relationship to.

A third way is to produce an extremely comprehensive information kit about the case. The journalist will hopefully have no time to read it through, and get an overview.

As I have told you, my paper here is a set of practical advises in trying to get and trying to escape media coverage. There are no general rules for what is good news and what is not. So my advice might not work every time. But I hope I have offered you some new ideas.

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