

**WAYS FOR FRIENDS TO GAIN PUBLICITY***by Mary Bailey*

Publicity is not something most of us seek - we prefer to retain our anonymity. But for Friends groups it can be a valuable tool in support of your museum by making people more aware of events, exhibitions and activities and also of current issues concerning museums.

One of the most cost-effective ways of gaining publicity is to make use of your local media - newspapers, radio and TV. All you need is some investment in time and some knowledge of

the ground rules for dealing with the media. It is worth remembering that the media in general are always looking for stories they can use - there are pages or hours to fill each day and if you can provide a tailor-made story then that reduces the work they have to do. But how can you ensure that your story is used? There are three things you can do to achieve your publicity objectives:

**1: Press Releases**

Write press releases about the activities of the Friends and of the museum. A press release gives the news editor all the information needed to publish the story, or to follow it up with a reporter. It answers the questions: who, what, when, where, why in the opening paragraph. It is usually short - about 250 words - and made up of short paragraphs of short sentences. It finishes with a contact name and telephone number for further information. There are certain rules about the way press releases should be written to make life easy for the news editors; these are summarized below:

1. Put in a headline - briefly summarizing what the story is about. Try to keep it to one line.
2. The first paragraph should briefly give the whole story and grab the reader's interest (giving the answers to who? what? when? where? why?).
3. The facts should be in descending order of interest because journalists cut stories from the bottom up to make them fit the space available.

4. Always date your press release, usually on the line below the heading.

5. Avoid jargon and do not use abbreviations or acronyms unless you explain them in full first.

6: Try to include comments from key people – eg the chairman of the Friends group or a curator.

7. Always include a contact name and number and make sure the contact is easy to get hold of and is fully briefed about the story. Include a home telephone number or a mobile number.

Email is the preferred method of sending press releases these days, as journalists can simply cut and paste the information directly. If you are not on email then type your press release with double line spacing and wide margins.

**2: Research**

Do some research. On the internet you can find out all your local publications, with email addresses and names of reporters. What area do they cover? What type of stories do they print? Many regional papers are interested in stories with a 'human interest', so try and write your release with this in mind. Many publications have a column for forthcoming events such as coffee mornings, jumble sales and so on, so - if nothing else - you can get a mention of your activities in there. Their websites have contact details for sending emails directly to them, so make use of these.

What programmes are on your local radio or TV that you could link in to? Most radio stations have talk programmes about local issues, or magazine programmes which include lots of different topics. TV stations are more difficult to attract but, given the right story, will still give coverage on local news programmes. Again, radio and TV stations have websites which provide contact information and names of presenters so that you can email them directly. The BBC email system is very straightforward: the name of the presenter followed by the BBC address: eg: john.smith@bbc.co.uk

If you are sending information by post and are not sure of the correct address for newspapers and radio or TV stations, then try your local library. It is best to send your press release to the news editor, as all stories go to the news desk first for processing.

If you want to be more adventurous, identify the local reporters and radio presenters who cover stories on museums and the arts in general and try to make contact with them when you have sent in a press release. If you have built up a relationship it can help you obtain coverage for your story. However, always treat journalists with caution and be careful what you say to them. They will not worry about relationships if they think they are on to a good story.

### **3: Publicity Officer**

If possible, designate one member of your Friends group to be responsible for publicity. There are less likely to be crossed wires and conflicting stories if media contacts are left to one person. That person will not necessarily be the spokesperson for the group when quotes are required. It could be that the Chairman is a more appropriate choice.

### **What To Write About?**

There is a wide range of stories that can be provided to the media. A good occasion is a fundraising event. This is an opportunity to raise public awareness of what is happening in your museums and what your Friends group is doing to support it. The purchase of a new acquisition is another opportunity – there is always a story to tell about the reasons for the purchase and the importance of the object for the collection. Volunteering, exhibitions and special events are all opportunities for publicity, so make use of them.

The best approach here is to send out a press release before the event to encourage newspapers to send a photographer or radio stations to send a reporter. If none is forthcoming, then take a picture yourselves and send in a further release about the event with the photograph (digital of course) - this is applicable only to newspapers. Radio stations will not be interested in photographs!

Another aspect to raising awareness is the publicity you can give to special issues, sometimes controversial ones. Friends can help by writing letters to the media in support of their museums and by lobbying councillors. Before taking part in this kind of activity, though, Friends need to clarify guidelines with the museums management to ensure that there is no conflict.

### **How To Talk To The Media**

It can be daunting to be contacted by a reporter and asked for your views on a local issue. Remember that you do not have to agree to answer. You can find out what the questions are and play for time by saying that you will ring back. Establish the purpose of the interview or article and how it will be used, when it will be published or broadcast. You may decide that you are not the best person to be interviewed or you may want to check up on a few facts first.

If you do decide to be interviewed, know what you want to say. Write down no more than three basic points, supported by one or two additional facts. Try to speak as briefly as possible to ensure that references to your Friends group are not edited out.

And try to make your points, whatever the questions being asked! Bear in mind that the higher the profile of your group, the more influential you can be on behalf of your museum.