



Making Music South East Hot Topics #1:

How to get your local media working for you...!

Welcome to the first of my 'Hot Topics' missives for Making Music South East members.

If your New Year's resolution this year is to boost your group's profile, audiences, membership or just to put a smile on the face of your sponsors, then read on...

Start by asking yourself some basic questions:

- Why do you want to get media coverage? To attract a bigger audience, or new members? To keep sponsors happy? To raise the profile of your community activities?
- Whose attention do you want to get? Young adults? Teenagers? People like yourselves or a completely different audience? Where do they live? How far will they want to travel to get to rehearsals / concerts?
- Which newspapers / TV programmes / internet channels / website are likely to be viewed by them?
- What resources do you have available? How much time are people able to offer? Does one of your members have a digital camera or a video recorder? Can you produce a recording or photo-journal of your project?
- When do you need to get the message out? Do you have a concert coming up or are you on a recruitment drive for new members for the next season?
- How do you want to be perceived? Do you want to emphasise your community focus, your education agenda, your quirkiness and fun social side, your fascinating history or world-changing future plans?

Planning the timing of your press release well in advance will give you time to research, prepare materials and contact the right people.

Put together a brief plan and schedule your activities – you will need to be ready to contact the media well in advance of when you need their involvement: around 1 month prior to an event for TV and at least 2 weeks for print media, and for magazines the lead time can be as much as 3 months in advance. They need time to sift through the large volume of material they get sent and then schedule it all in alongside breaking news items – and they are only human! If in doubt, it is better to call them and ask how early they need your submission if you want to get a slot in a particular issue.

Do you need an excuse to watch more TV or spend all day reading the paper?

...well, now that you have decided which publications/programmes to target, **RESEARCH!** Get to know:

- The format – it is crucial to know how much time (or column inches) might be available for your feature so you can provide something of an appropriate length and style.
- Audience demographic – for example, if you are a rock group trying to reach a new older market, you may need to put some thought into how to persuade your target media that your activities are relevant to them and will appeal to their audience.
- Subject coverage – regional and local media need to cover a broad range of community activities to fulfil their remit, but journalists and editors will also have their own pet interests. Are the arts pages always full of Musical Theatre reviews or pottery exhibitions? Is there a regular review slot for local opera, concerts or events? A good tip is to look at the 'by-lines' to figure out who is interested in what and get in touch with them directly.
- Geographical coverage – the regional media need to cover the whole geographical area of their readership. Make sure that you are approaching the right media organisation for your target area. Then, if you can be flexible in the timing of your press release, keep your eyes peeled for when your area is not getting as

much coverage as other localities in the region: your press release could be just what they are looking for to balance out their content.

- What is topical at the moment? Can you tie your press release into something else which is going on locally, nationally, internationally? Does your gig have a seasonal theme? On the other hand, don't be put off sending in your press release if the world is going to hell in a handbasket – when there is a lot of 'heavy' news which has to go out, they will be looking for fun, happy, community-focussed items to balance all the doom and gloom – your next concert could be just the tonic everyone needs!
- Ongoing themes – known as 'strands' – TV and newspaper planners will be on the lookout for strings of features linked together in an interesting way – can you put your heads together with other MM members in your local network to come up with a series of features? Are there current strands running which are relevant to your activities on which you could piggyback?
- Think laterally – find out which journalists cover education, charities, community affairs, women's issues and anything else which you might be able to use as your angle (see below!).
- Bear in mind the emerging media too: digital TV, broadband TV, websites: even if you are a complete technophobe, your target audience may well spend all day staring at a computer screen at work. Some advantages of new media over TV are: advertising is much cheaper on the web; your sponsors may well be pleased to note that OfCom do not regulate internet TV channels, so product placement and sponsor information are not prohibited – you may be able to work with your sponsors to agree an advertising/event coverage package; there is practically no restriction on the number or length of the features that can appear on internet TV; there is a fast-growing audience for new media and you may reach a whole new potential fan-base to boot!

Case study: ITV Meridian – *Meridian Tonight*

Meridian Tonight covers most of the South East region (from Banbury in the West down to Weymouth, across to Dover and up to the southern parts of Essex). Weekday broadcasts are split into 3 regions: Meridian South covers Dorset, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove; Meridian East covers East Sussex; Kent and South Essex; Thames Valley covers the rest of the MM SE area.

Meridian Tonight is watched by over half a million people daily. The weekday programmes are broadcasts of 25 minutes each. Each episode will have space for 4 or 5 'feature packages', ranging in length from 15 seconds to 3 minutes. These might be live broadcasts, pre-recorded features or 'as-live' items which are recorded immediately prior to broadcast but with just enough time to edit them if necessary. Viewers are generally in the over-40s age range. Meridian are interested in gaining younger viewers, but most features are tailored to the current audience.

On weekends, instead of *Meridian Tonight*, there are 6 bulletins during the day which cover the whole ITV Meridian area with very constrained space for non-news items.

The on-line equivalent is ITV Local (www.itvlocal.co.uk) - an internet TV channel with facilities to directly upload your own digital video footage.

There is no denying that getting coverage, particularly on TV, can be competitive, so make sure you give yourself an edge...

- Find an angle – 'Choir Sings Messiah' is not necessarily going to grab lots of attention; 'Choir Sings Messiah Marathon on Pogo Sticks' is worth a second look.
- An angle does not have to be something wacky and outrageous: if you are putting on a festival of Cecilia McDowell pieces, you could find out who on the paper covers women's issues and approach them to do a piece on female composers; if you are collaborating with a youth choir, think about contacting the education or community writers – shape your feature to the interests of the journalists: this is where all that research pays off!
- Get the format right from the start: on TV, items are read out at 3 words per second, if you look at the slots available on the *Meridian Tonight* programme above, that might mean 45 words to get across everything you want to say: so make it snappy and to the point! When you make contact with the media, try to reflect the style of their content in your initial contact – even if your story is absolutely riveting, they will not fancy condensing 1,000 words to 45!
- Visualise how the feature will look – particularly for TV, where having images to provide impact is critical. Without images, you will not get airtime. On the other hand, if you helpfully point out that it would be great to show footage of you all on your pogo sticks dressed up in eighteenth-century costume and singing the

Hallelujah Chorus, they will thank you for saving them the time and mental energy to think of it for themselves.

- Court controversy – the media love it: provoking a reaction is what they are all about. Do not be afraid to be provocative – if you create debate, you create interest in what you are doing (but do stay the right side of the libel laws!). The Southern Daily Echo has been playing devil's advocate in a debate about the use of £250,000 of public funds to buy a single piece of modern art for the City of Southampton's art collection, which has created a lot of interest in the artist and gallery concerned and in the local art collection generally. Do not be distressed by what appears to be bad publicity – your target audience will want to make up their own minds, but you need to pique their curiosity in the first place.
- If your feature is not based around a particular date, you have a good chance of being put into the 'good standby material' pile: if one wet and windy Tuesday night there is not enough news to pad out a programme or paper, your feature might just be perfect to fill the vacuum.
- Look at your inventory of your resources: what can you provide to your target media to save them cost and inconvenience? Does one of your members have a good quality video camera and a steady hand? In the interest of cost efficiency and convenience, TV companies will use your own footage if it is a decent standard. If they do not actually use it, at the least it will give them a good idea of the visual impact of your feature or how articulate your interviewees are. Can you provide digital photographs for the newspaper? Or a podcast of interviews with the star soloist or conductor for internet channels? Or a recording of you rehearsing or performing?
- Once you have created your package of material, send your chosen journalist a text only e-mail describing what you are about to send them: outline the story and list the attachments, then send on a second e-mail with all the trimmings. Do not expect to receive an acknowledgement – it is not standard practice – but do follow up with a phone call within a couple of days to check that they have received it.
- Look for opportunities to upload video footage and photographs direct to websites (both broadband TV and regional newspaper websites are likely to provide this facility).

Make it easy on everyone involved by being on top of the practicalities...

- The significant majority of TV crews are now freelance, so if there is a lot going on locally, or you are planning something in the middle of the Christmas holidays, bear in mind there may not be anyone available to come out and film your Christmas Handelian Pogo Challenge.
- Likewise weekends and evenings are not great times to expect a crew or photographer to come out to you, as they of course have lives of their own. Also, there simply isn't the same available airtime on weekend TV bulletins, and many local newspapers tend to be daily Mon-Fri.
- The best time to contact the media or to arrange for coverage of your feature is in the morning, which allows the crew or photographer to take all the footage they need and then for the editors to get to work in time for early evening broadcasting/edition. They can do it at a push in the afternoons, but in the late afternoon or early evening you are likely to get a pretty curt response, and they will most likely ignore the phone whilst they try to paste together and broadcast that evening's edition.
- Don't be afraid to keep following up your press release with phone calls, particularly if you are told to contact a specific journalist or photographer as this will most likely mean that your feature has been assigned to them and you are heading in the right direction for publication. You might think you are being annoying, but ultra-polite, friendly persistence is the best way to make sure your press release doesn't end up lost at the bottom of a large pile of paper.
- When you call, if you don't get hold of the person you want to speak to, don't just leave a message and expect them to get back to you – they probably won't. Instead, try to find out from their colleagues when might be a convenient time to call back and persist until you get to speak to them in person.
- Make sure you provide all the relevant details: who is doing what, where, when, why and how?
- Who should they contact to organise interviews, photographs or filming? That person needs to be contactable and able to round up the troupe, quite possibly at very short notice: you may hear nothing at all until the day before your event and then get a call out of the blue.
- Can the media access your venue? Is there somewhere for them to park? Can they broadcast from there or will there be difficulties with transmission because of tall buildings or because you are doing your Pogo Marathon in an old WW2 bunker?
- Persuade prominent or famous people involved in your project to speak to the press, and gather everyone together at the same time: a photographer or TV crew will not want to make several trips across the county on different days, and may well not be available to do so – make the most of your window of opportunity! Be as flexible as possible about your availability, and let them know if children are involved as they need to know they will have to make greater efforts to be on time so as not to keep the kids hanging around.
- Call on the day to check that the photographer or crew is booked – the last thing you want is to be jumping up and down on pogo sticks in full period costume all afternoon and nobody turns up to film you.

- When a journalist comes to review your concert, be especially nice to them! – they will remember the whole experience and that may make the difference as to whether they choose to review or recommend your next event too.
- Once the feature is finally ready to go out, do bear in mind that breaking news may mean that your item gets bumped or dropped at the last minute – this is inevitable from time to time: try not to be too disappointed or get irate as the editor has no more control over world events than you do.
- If you advertise with the paper, you might want to call the advertising manager and gently point out that if they want to continue receiving advertising revenue from you, it would be much appreciated if they would preview/review your next concert...

And finally...

- The media need your stories as much as you need the publicity – their circulation depends on you!
- Remember that previews are more useful to you than reviews.
- The media may look like a slick machine from our side of the fence, but it is a machine which is operated by people who are often under intense pressure and the more sympathetic you can be and easier you can make it for them, the more likely you are to get their help.
- Looking towards a longer-term partnership with your local media is likely to pay higher dividends than sending them a fairly anonymous one-off press release and expecting them to find room for it. Get to know your local editors, journalists and photographers: try and meet face-to-face – ask if you can pop in to chat to them or offer to take them out for a quick coffee – it is much harder for them to ignore someone they know and like. Offer complementary tickets, butter them up with flattery, best of all why not persuade them to jointly develop a campaign, a reader/viewer competition for free tickets or a supplement to get them involved with your group's aims and activities. I also have it on good authority that if you can think of a small (and inexpensive) themed gift to send in with your material (a miniature chocolate pogo-stick might go down particularly well), the journalist is very unlikely to forget about your feature, so get creative! If you can establish a relationship over the long term then you will be less likely to be disappointed by your one-off elegant and witty article which you spent months perfecting being bumped off the latest edition by breaking news of a Royal love-child or sightings of Nessie...!

And if all that is not enough...

Here are some more sources of information and inspiration:

Local TV online

www.meridianTV.co.uk
www.itv.com

BBC Local websites

www.bbc.co.uk/southerncounties/
www.bbc.co.uk/kent/
www.bbc.co.uk/hampshire/
www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire/
www.bbc.co.uk/oxford/

Newspapers online

<http://icsurreyonline.icnetwork.co.uk/>
www.thisisoxfordshire.co.uk
www.thisiskentandeastsussex.co.uk
www.kent-online.co.uk
www.thisishampshire.net
www.thisisbuckinghamshire.co.uk
<http://icberkshire.icnetwork.co.uk/>

OfCom media and communications research

www.ofcom.org.uk/research/

I hope this proves useful to you – do get in touch with me if you have any questions on this or anything else (within reason!). Also, please do drop me a line if there is something you would be particularly interested in seeing in a future issue of 'Hot Topics' (preferably without chocolate pogo-sticks enclosed, thanks!).

With all best wishes for a harmonious Christmas and New Year.

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My thanks to the South East Arts and Business Forum and also to my sister, Kirstie, who has edited magazines on both sides of the world and provided some useful comments on the above!