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Press Releases 101: or How to Get Journalists to Swipe Right on Your Awesome New Show

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Posted by: Rotimi Agabiaka

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by Nicole Gluckstern

As the in-house publicist for EXIT Theatre, as well as an arts journalist on the receiving end of hundreds of marketing emails, I've gained a lot of perspective from both sides of the press release. When I receive an incomplete or badly-written press release, my first instinct is to offer tips for making it better. And I know I'm not the only one. Facebook followers of the *San Francisco Chronicle's* theatre critic Lily Janiak are often treated to posts about impromptu marketing tips and photo specs, which (I hope) have been as helpful to other publicists as they have been for me.

In that spirit, I reached out to several fellow journalists and PR professionals to get their take on what makes for an effective press release. Of course every journalist and PR person has their individual preferences, and what works for one may not work for another. But the points on which my interviewees (mostly) agreed are ones I'll share with here.

Don't leave out the basics:

Think of a press release as your dating profile. Sure, you might pique the interest of some journalists with a witty come-on or an erudite bio, but we're not mind-readers, and details that may seem obvious to you really need to be spelled out for us. Your most important info—the names of your company, show, and venue, the dates, the times, and the ticket prices, cast and creative team, or at a minimum the director—should be appended to the description of the show. If there's a specific press opening night, that info should also be included.

I personally find it helpful (though not everyone did) when companies include the **Who, What, Where, When** (including days of the week, dates, and curtain times), and **Ticketing Info** as a separate section. This makes it easy for me to provide editors with those details to publish with the piece. Ticketing Info should include the ticketing link, the ticket prices, and if a particular show is a preview, a fundraiser, or any other kind of anomaly.

Photos are fundamental:

The importance of a good press photo (or three!) cannot be overstated. A photo not only catches the eye, but it's almost certain that any journalist you contact won't be able to publish without one. Even automated listings frequently require photos. And unless you're a practiced photographer yourself, consider hiring a professional to take them. As an investment in your show, you'll find it's

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one worth every penny. But even some professionals aren't going to be up-to-date on the latest specs, so here's a shortlist of must-haves.

- **Photos need to be print quality = minimum 300 dpi, 6" x 4" (~1800 pixels wide).**
- **Photos typically need to be horizontal, i.e. landscape orientation, not portrait.**
- **Photos should ideally reflect the vision or aesthetic of the show.**
- **Photos should be clearly labeled, captioned left-to-right, with photo credit included.** Consider using the following naming convention to cut down on the number of times a journalist or editor has to follow-up with you about who's who in your image:
NameOfShow_NameOfActor1_NameOfActor2_PhotoCredit_NameOfPhotographer
- **Production Photos should be sent to reviewers by opening night.** A good rule of thumb is to consider the original promo photo your preview image, and the production photos the images published with reviews.

Timelines:

You should plan on having your press release and photos in hand eight weeks in advance of your opening. To be featured in the *SF/Arts* print edition, the deadline for press release and photo is the first week of the month, two months prior to the show's opening. For the *San Francisco Chronicle's* Fall Arts preview, the deadline is August 1, and for their holiday preview, Halloween.

Send the press release once, between 6-8 weeks in advance of the show, and then follow up with folks in a shorter email 2-3 weeks before opening night. If something major like a last-minute casting change occurs, do let press know about it, but otherwise don't inundate them with minor details if you can help it. Do send the production photos you want them to use by opening night.

Watch your language:

Put the title of the show, your company name, and the run dates in the subject line rather than something clever but forgettable like "What are you doing this summer?"

Trans, genderqueer, or non-binary cast or crew? You should include preferred pronouns in the cast and crew bios so there're no misidentification.

Please proofread your press release! It's pretty awkward to have to follow up the next day with a revised version because you misspelled the lead actor's last name, or forgot to include the dates.

Thoughts on coverage:

A casualty of shrinking arts coverage has been the in-house Calendar Editor, and with them, their carefully-curated event listings. The plus side to this for an emerging company is that the gatekeepers are gone. If you have two hours and an internet connection, you can cannibalize your press release and enter it into most of the listings aggregates yourself. This won't get you press coverage, but it will help get the word out. Sites I personally find useful include [SF Gate](#), [SF Weekly](#), [SF/Arts](#), [SF Station](#), [Broke-ass Stuart](#), [Funcheap](#), and [Broadway World](#).

Lastly, remember that a journalist's decision to see a show rarely has to do with the press release per se. Timing, newsworthiness, and even personal preference, are all factors weighed by arts reporters and their editors. That said, a well-crafted press release that encapsulates the artistic vision of the show and the company with brevity and clarity, will make a jaded journalist assume, sometimes erroneously, that that level of care and attention is going to be reflected in the actual piece, and could well tip the scales from an indifferent "maybe" to an enthusiastic "yes." Just like your dating app!

Thanks to Allison Page, Chloe Veltman, Evren Odcikin, Jean Schiffman, John Hill, Lily Janiak, and Lisa Geduldig for taking the time to weigh in on this subject with me.

Nicole Gluckstern is an arts journalist and theatre-maker in San Francisco. You can read her most current work at the *East Bay Express* and *KQED Arts*, or stalk her on twitter at @enkohl

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Comments...

Charles Belov says...

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And of course the TBA website's What's Playing. Also, I hope the theatre will include the playwright's name(s) in the press release as well.

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