

USING THE MEDIA TO MUSEUM'S ADVANTAGE

Presented by Rick Carlyon

RICK CARLYON:

Currently Regional Editor of TVNZ. Has been involved in TV News since it's inception in New Zealand. Some experience in Parliament in the Press Gallery; spent time in London in TV journalism. Very experienced in broadcasting. A member of MOTAT for approximately 10 years in the Fire Section. Also involved with MOTAT management on Management Committee and currently on MOTAT Promotion Committee.

INTRODUCTION:

I have broken the topic today into three sections:-

- (a) What makes the news?
- (b) What is expected of those who make the news bulletins?
- (c) How does an organisation like MOTAT, or COTMA, use the media to get space or time?

(a) WHAT MAKES THE NEWS ?

Journalists will say something like;

"If a dog bites a man, that is not news ...  
... But if a man takes a bite of a dog, then that is news!"

This then, is something new; something different; something novel; something outside the norm; something unexpected - these all tend to make the news.

Human life is still something that is held absolutely sacrosanct and the reporting of such is of great importance. The way we live; socio-economic changes in what might be expected of citizenry; changes in the public officials - obviously Parliament, local authorities - all contribute to what comes into the field of news. All these items will attract the journalist in any one sector who will then set about investigating the story, following it up, getting the facts as far as he can and finally go into print or whatever media he is working for.

(b) WHAT IS EXPECTED OF THOSE WHO MAKE THE NEWS BULLETINS ?

News comes into New Zealand from, of course, overseas - on the wire services for radio and via satellite for television. We have a network of New Zealand correspondents. Every radio in NZ contributes towards TVNZ's news gathering effort. We ourselves, have strings to Radio New Zealand and all the newspapers; eight or nine in parliament; lobby groups like Federated Farmers and Trade Unions etc., all trying for space or time in the media.

Examples of publication of various products and services in the form of handouts were used to illustrate this point. An example of the Watties Group Trade Mission indicating the background of each member with photographs, where they fitted into the organisation, what they hoped to sell when they go overseas on this trade mission, annual report showing the overseas potential that they were looking for when they went abroad. This

enabled the journalist to plan his story for when they return using this previously published information as a platform.

Another example would be university lobby groups; CORSO; Auckland Crippled Children Society etc., all make sure the media knows what is about to happen in their particular niche. Some organisations may send a free ticket to a seminar or whatever; an eye-catching mailer. Some up and coming events are even sometimes given directly to the reporter via telephone or mail in advance.

This then, indicates the tremendous range and volume of "happenings" on which to choose to report on and unless your "release" is imaginative, straight forward and honest, then it is likely to be swamped by the other material coming through the newsroom.

Material from museums or the like, properly put together in an imaginative way, will rate with all the other material that comes in. Public relations or advertising companies should make certain that they are in fact putting the stuff together in a fashion that is attention-grabbing. These professional people rate their success, and the clients rate their consultant's success, by the time it is on TV, radio or any other outlet.

Without all those frills though, we still come back to what are the basic facts of the story and what is the angle of the story? Most news stories have an angle. Sometimes some would say that it is angled wrongly by the journalist and that is one thing that you have got to remember - that when you open yourself up to the media or invite the press in, then it is up to them then to find that angle. Now sure, they can be persuaded, the hints can be thrown out, there can be certain steering in one direction, but at the end of the day you have got to let the journalist decide how that story is going to best fit his outlet. You must determine which paper (or other media) is likely to produce what type of story in the end by the very nature of its reputation. (In the case of this museum - MOTAT - there have been dissidents who have used the right form of media through which to spread ill-will, resulting in bad publicity for the museum).

So we come down to the fact that we have got to sell our stories the right way. It has got to be promotional for the museum - but we have got to put it into news terms or personality terms that a journalist or chief reporter can cling to and make something of.

(c) HOW DOES A MUSEUM LIKE MOTAT, OR SIMILAR ORGANISATION, USE THE MEDIA ?

Nobody can use the media. It is there, from a proprietor's point of view, as a service from which to make money - if you were to take the exorbitant rates being charged for the commercials that run immediately before and immediately after any news bulletin as an example. By the same token, they (the media) are also "journals of record" and they will want to publish stories which are happening, which they feel they cannot ignore because their credibility will go down the drain if they do not have those stories. That is why so many outlets have their own correspondents or share correspondence between themselves.

Those media organisations which have a good reputation are "journals of record" and the stories that come forward into their newsroom which are of some significance cannot obviously be ignored, so there is another thing that your releases must be striving for. Not only do they have to be well presented; not only do the facts have to be there; but you must ensure that they are there in such significance or angled in such a way that they rate as well or even better than all the other material that is coming in. If at all possible, know (say from previous observations) of journal-

istic techniques of a particular journalist or organisation and approach him/her direct if possible to determine the best angle for your article and ideally, work together from then on in order to reach the best result.

It is also quite common to have an embargo on your story so that details that maybe confidential before a particular date or time are not spilt out before this and therefore will not be detrimental to the outcome. This then allows several media the opportunity to present the story more or less simultaneously over a wide spectrum. It also allows, say in the case of a new tramcar from Melbourne or wherever that is about to arrive, the TV or paper journalist to do a backgrounder to the story and put it on the shelf in readiness for the date of release.

Pick your media method to suit the story; if it moves and/or is colourful then, obviously, TV is the most suitable initial choice. Timing is also important, think of school holidays or long weekends looming, and fabricate if necessary, a story that may boost gatetakings and then get the media involved. Think ahead of events that are imminent - such as completion of a major restoration project or exhibition and plan your details and background in advance especially if you know there is a busy news period ahead. Either delay your release or make it sooner, if this is possible, to avoid missing out altogether. If you think you have something that will "go", then let the media have it as they are all after a "first" and may want to use it right away - let them decide.

Don't pester the news media. Sometimes the public tend to pester journalists whilst they are carrying out their task. Leave them to get on with it. They will ask if they require assistance. Also the news editor never knows until the day whether or not your particular news item can, in fact, fit in with all the other news happenings of the time.

Let's have a look at the sort of museum news that may make the news:- new exhibits, old exhibits being restored, a difficulty with a restoration (perhaps even including a plea for the return of missing parts or information), handing over ceremonies, completion of building or service project within the museum, openings of those buildings or projects, highlights of particular displays, changes of staffing personnel or membership, opening of a new facet within the history that you are presenting, a discovery by someone of an important potential artifact to be given to the museum, big donations of money or requests, museum executives who might be about to travel abroad or who have just returned with reports on other museums or artifacts, changes in museum policy, membership drives, outgoing museum personalities, promotional stories - special displays, special weekends, short term exhibitions, parades, special visitors to the museums and attractions "dreamed up" to coax the public along.

Be selective with your promotional stories. Promote only those features or activities that you know are going to happen. Don't dare mention those that are at all doubtful through reliance on outside help or even particular volunteers. For example, a feature promoted and then not taking place is a certain recipe for disaster for expectant patrons who may never return because of this.

In your releases for promotions or in interviews or in any dealings at all with the media don't use jargon. It is very easy for those in engineering or museology fields to get down to jargon. It is not understood by the journalists. They may put it in their story which means the readers or viewers do not understand it either. Worse, the journalist might try to interpret the jargon and end up with an entirely different and incorrect angle on the subject. In other words, keep your description simple and

in everyday terms as far as possible.

A word about bad publicity this time. Often by the time a dissident has given their story and that story gets further distorted by the journalist, we can end up with some pretty bad publicity not warranting any further comment whatsoever. Comment on ridiculous accusations, I think is worthless because if you are countering with denials or corrections, which is about all you can do, sometimes those denials or corrections, by the time they get through the media, have changed their meaning and you are back to where you started from. Leave ridiculous criticism alone but for that which becomes hopelessly tangled, releases or contact with the media would be the way to set the record straight.

If you cannot get an airing, ring the chief reporter and say, "The article you published yesterday was unfair and I have a correction". Under the Broadcasting Laws in this country, we are bound to listen to you and give you semi-equal time. Otherwise, you can go to the Broadcasting Tribunal and get it that way, or you can go to the court and issue an injunction, or you might start talking money! If there is any chance of untangling a story, then be honest about it.

That brings me to the final advantage that one can take or make of the media and that is silence itself - saying absolutely nothing. MOTAT for example, whilst experiencing certain administrative difficulties at one time, did not loud-mouth those problems but, rather, just got over them quietly in anticipation of better things to come. We were very careful about promoting only those aspects of the museum of which we could deliver.

In conclusion, I'd just like to re-iterate that the media is there to be used and I see it being used every day of the week by politicians, by big business, by lobby groups who either dream up stories or dream up facets of stories or aspects of stories so that they know that they can have a go at their opposition and the news media, of course, because this is news, then go ahead and report it. But for small users, like museums will always be, in the "odds and sods" bin when all the big stories have been taken out for the day, the media has got to be used with care. Timing is very important. Honesty, I believe, is important. Collect your material and releases that you know are going to happen and present it either yourselves, your promotions committee, your consultant, more through your local authority publicity machine.

You can use the media to your advantage. We are always crying out for good stories and if you use them as they would want you to use them, then that could bring credibility to your museum. It might bring in new artifacts, cash donations and most important of all, increased visitation with accompanying cashflow.

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This session finished with general comments and questions from the floor.