

Marketing and Public Relations for Community Events

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Community events need the right people to know about them if they're to be a success, whatever the size and whatever your goals. Mrs Fiddlesticks shares her experience and advice.

Obviously you want your community event to be a great success, whether it's raising lots of money for a local cause or just giving the local folk a good night out. So it's important to think about your advertising right at the planning stage. I've put together some ideas for you to think about, and some hints if this isn't something you've considered before.

Some definitions

Firstly, let's look at what I mean about marketing and PR. These are two totally different things, both worthy of some thought and discussion at committee meetings. You may decide that some of this isn't appropriate for your group, but don't dismiss it out of hand before considering the positive consequences.

Marketing

Marketing in this context is purely about bums on seats, getting folk through the door to your event and hopefully spending money. The most important thing to think about is how many people you want to come, and then tailoring your campaign appropriately. For example if your event is purely for the children of the community and there are only a certain number of places you may decide that advertising it county-wide would be inappropriate and you'd have to turn folk away, so posters on lampposts may be enough. On the other hand if you are planning a huge Fete, then the more people you can get through the gate the better, and casting your net wider via the local newspapers becomes a worthwhile task. The bigger the event, the bigger the advertising campaign needed. You do need to think carefully about this. We'll come on to some ideas in a moment.

Public Relations

Public Relations is an often-overlooked aspect of community organisations, but the benefits can't be overstressed.

Getting your event in the paper, perhaps with a photo and a short report has the effect of raising the profile of the school, organisation or building or whatever you're trying to raise money for. Most Head teachers would be delighted by this as it helps the school's standing in the community; but discuss it first and work with the school or whoever and be sensitive to their rules and ways of doing things.

Highlighting the 'plight' of something may help with whatever battles you're having over it.

PR raises your organisation's profile, which in turn helps the success of future events – if you become known for a great night out, then tickets may sell quicker and easier when the posters go up for the next dance etc. Overall it also raises the profile of your community as a whole, and as a place where things happen and there are things to do – that's got to be a good thing!!

First steps : Marketing and PR for specific events

So where do you begin? If these are things you've not thought about before then don't feel you have to do them all at once. Certainly in terms of PR it takes time to build a good reputation. Here are some things you might like to try.

Assess the available media

a) Find out what there is in your local community to help. Collect copies of local free papers, parish magazines, local evening papers and their websites – a lot of the local ones are owned by Newsquest and a list can be found here http://www.newsquest.co.uk/portfolio_newspapers.html and they in turn are often linked to a county style website; we have www.thisisoxfordshire.co.uk. There are many more about; try Googling them but bear in mind about not advertising something county wide if you've only room for 50 people!!

b) Your local TV station may also be worth a try but they do get inundated by such requests so you may only be successful if there is an unusual 'angle' to your event.

c) Community websites are becoming popular; even if there isn't one in your community the next village along may be happy to accept adverts for your things.

d) If it's a parish magazine for example send an e-mail to the editor and ask if you can advertise your event through them

e) Most local media are keen on local contributors helping out, and a lot have 'What's On Pages'. Note the deadlines for these things so you can send in a note about your event in plenty of time, particularly important if it's a monthly publication, and factor that in at the planning stage of your event.

f) Most importantly, find out who to contact in these publications. Local newspapers often have a community desk or an education reporter for example. Get e-mail addresses rather than telephone numbers. Keep the list up to date as far as you can to be as professional as you can. This is useful not only in advertising your event but for the PR side of things

– more on this in a separate point.

Other ways and places to advertise your event

Posters

Don't dismiss the simple posters on lamppost approach. Find the prominent places for display in your vicinity. Telephone poles, parish notice boards (better to ask permission first to avoid offence!) and perhaps bus shelters or trees.

The local pub, branch library or shop may have a space that you could pin a poster to.

Put posters in plastic sleeves if outside so they remain legible and don't forget to take them down after the event to keep things tidy.

Ordinary windows can also be very effective. All the school children and parents have to pass my kitchen window twice a day so I've found posters stuck there to be helpful.

Put up plenty, but don't litter the place.

Flyers

Consider small flyers through doors; we had a tea and mince pie event in our village hall so posted invitations; though all the villagers's doors. If it's a children's event you could get the local school to give out flyers to the parents.

Roadside boards

Roadside boards can be very effective, but do your homework with regard to local bylaws on such things and the local police's views on road safety. Good places to site them are where cars slow down to enter a village's 30mph speed limit. Boards can help greatly with advertising, particularly if you are off the beaten track. They can also be used for signing car parking arrangements on the day in a professional manner. Obviously you should remove them as soon as practical after an event!

Your local paper

Ask the local paper if they will send a photographer to your event, but be prepared to photograph it yourself if something more exciting like a house fire comes up and they don't arrive! After the event, send a photo (if it's a school event, get permission 1st!!) and a short report to the local paper if you want to, using the names and e-mails you've got. Keep it as brief as possible as there is more chance of squeezing it in, but don't be offended if it gets edited or re-written - that's journalists for you! Be prompt, if you want to report a successful jumble sale you need to send it off within days of the event, there may be some leeway if it's a monthly publication, but be aware of deadlines. Don't be offended if it doesn't appear, just send something in next time and they'll get to know you, and there is the chance of building up a professional relationship – have you noticed how some organisations are always in the papers; - be consistent, professional and persistent (in a nice way!!)

Ongoing PR

Try some PR work even when there is no event in the calendar.

Create an identity

Create a 'corporate' identity for your group. Design a logo or always use the same font. Perhaps produce your posters in the same style each time, using the same font or colour so that yours are visible from a distance. This doesn't have to involve a professional person unless there is someone willing to do the work for free, just play around with clip art and fonts until you find something that is distinctive and professional and then use it across all your paperwork, posters, tickets, and headed paper. This helps with the PR aspect of things as you'll get 'known', which will help build up the reputation of your group.

Create a web page or similar

Get your own page on the local website and update it regularly with photos from previous events, details of meetings and how others can help you as well as a platform for future events. Perhaps you could have a regular half page in the parish magazine (or even local paper – it's worth an e-mail!) again with updates and information. But do appoint someone who is able to keep up the commitment : there's nothing worse than an out-of date website or editors having to chase for copy.

If there is little available locally, why not set some things up yourself ? Perhaps it's time your village had its own website? Can you organise all the local groups to chip in with it, and help with setting up and running ?

Newsletters

Newsletters can be surprisingly effective. We have a PTA one, which we send out to the parents of the school, and it gets delivered to everyone throughout the village. Your workload on this can be as much (say, monthly with 3 or 4 pages) or as little (e.g. six-monthly, and just a double sided sheet) as you can manage. You decide, but then stick to it! Organise its distribution effectively. Sharing it out can work well, with volunteers each taking on their local streets or area.

In your newsletter, you can:

- List upcoming events – plan the diary well in advance if you don’t send a newsletter out very often to get all your events listed.
- Include a flyer for a forthcoming event and ask folk to pin it up in their windows for you.
- Include a fundraising catalogue if you use one
- Report on a previous event with photos and amount raised
- Make a request for donations, help or new volunteers
- Add a thank you note for past successes and help - don’t overlook this : it’s polite, and ensures you’ll get help and support again.
- Include updates on the campaign, how much money has been raised and what it's been spent on
- Put prominent members’ contact details so that you are visible in the community.
- If there’s space, you could put a prize crossword or competition (helps you find out if they’re reading it!!), letters page, recipe or joke
- You could also use it to help the general community by taking For Sale adverts or other local news.

As I said right at the beginning there is a lot you can try, but only practice and planning will tell you what’s appropriate for your event or group. Don’t be afraid of putting marketing and PR on the committee’s agenda. We were lucky to find a professional marketing executive in our village, who gave us some much needed advice, ask around. Tailoring it to your locality is important; go with as much or as little as your group feels comfortable with. Above all be professional and thoughtful – a poor reputation is much, much harder to correct than no reputation at all!!

Good Luck

Share advice and ideas or ask questions on the Community Matters forum