

Working with the media

Museums can and do make news. Culture makes good copy! National newspapers, prime time television and periodicals regularly cover major museum and art related events.

Making the news

You don't have to be a large museum or art gallery to make news. Working within the guidelines of a carefully considered communications policy, even small museums and galleries can enhance their image and draw attention to new developments, exhibitions and events.

A cost effective marketing tool

If well orchestrated, media coverage can draw visitors to your museum – and prove to be cost effective as a marketing tool. You are more likely than many other types of organisation to find listening ears in the media. A degree of respect is accorded to cultural organisations, and museums are perceived to have a high level of professional expertise. You hold valuable art and cultural items in your hands and tell significant stories that educate and entertain.

The media plan

Decide on a media plan when you consider your wider museum strategy. How are you going to communicate the fact that yours is a lively, active organisation? What upcoming events or developments could be communicated to the media? Does your media plan relate to your strategic plan?

Media awareness and public relations

Make your media relationship an extension of your marketing and public relations policy. It's preferable that only one person in your organisation deals directly with the media. But every member of your staff needs to be aware of museum goals, and to go about their job in a friendly, well-informed and enthusiastic manner.

Remember: media recognition carries credibility – people attach importance to news items.

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Good working *relationships* with the media



Put the media on your invitation list to openings and parties.

The benefits of good media relationships

Media professionals often have a keen personal interest in the work of museums. An ongoing relationship with the media based on respect and professional integrity will stand your museum in good stead and help raise your public profile.

Keys to good working relationships

The keys to a good working relationship with media personnel are honesty and tact. If you have a reputation for being aware of news requirements, your release is more likely to become a news item.

Journalists are busy people who work in a world of pressures and deadlines.

Be prepared, be patient, don't hassle and don't quibble about small matters like appointment times. And don't keep people waiting.

Be welcoming and have a copy of your media release on hand. Have good quality images prepared well ahead of time, and available when necessary. Snapshots will not do.

Smooth the way for photo and video opportunities and be clear in instructions as to what is permissible, particularly where sensitive material is concerned, or when copyright is an issue. Adhere to museum protocols, but don't appear officious. The outside world may march to a different drum!

Say thank you sometimes. Make a (brief) call or send a fax.

Copyright can be a minefield. Check anything that might be a problem in any coverage you plan.

Always consult artists or iwi where necessary.



The best advice can come from the media themselves. Don't hesitate to contact a professional and ask for guidance.

Deal firmly but politely with media demands that you are not able to meet. Do not allow yourself to be coerced in any way. If you have checked and cleared your facts you have nothing to worry about.

Value your own integrity and build a reputation for credibility. The media are more likely to cover your news stories if they know you have some idea of what makes news.

The media spokesperson

It's best to designate one person on your staff to concentrate on building rapport with reporters. Choose a person who has an in-depth knowledge of the institution and an ability to articulate ideas clearly in an enthusiastic manner. But make sure the lines of command are in place. Nobody should work in isolation.

Some pitfalls in working with the media

You can't make the media do your bidding. They have strict codes of ethics and will not be manipulated, so don't naively plan on a front-page story for your pet project. Their job is to report and interpret news honestly. They are not your publicity agents.

Don't get offside with the media – you won't win, and you will lose news opportunities for your museum. Approach the media only when you have something really newsworthy to offer. Never exaggerate or distort facts – people working in the media are very savvy and make reality checks. Exaggeration and distortion lead to loss of credibility next time you offer a story.

Never indulge in trial by media. If an issue begins to develop into a fracas, back off as fast as you can, or hand it to a higher authority.

Don't be fussy or pedantic. You will suddenly find that reporters are too busy to talk to you and are overlooking your releases.

Everyone makes mistakes. The best approach is to weigh up the benefits of coverage gained against errors noticed. Often mistakes are not glaringly obvious - except to you. Unless there is an obvious legal or financial reason for drawing a mistake to the attention of the news organisation, let it go. Stay onside with the media. Your courtesy and tolerance will be appreciated.

Don't ever try to charge news organisations for admission.

Check: does your news item fit within the policy of your funding body?

Avoid embargoed news items.

What makes news?

News usually interests a general audience; it rarely concerns only a few individuals.

Generally speaking, newsworthy events are new events, but something can also be served up to seem new. Timing plays a large part in newsworthiness, as does a link to some other major event or news. Ask yourself: does your news item have human interest, is it fresh, does it touch the lives of people, does it have drama, perhaps even include people in high places?

Bad news can be turned to advantage. Rotorua Museum received international coverage when Graceland, home of Elvis Presley Enterprises Inc, refused to allow the mounting of their intended exhibition "Elvis in Geyserland".

Before approaching the media try to judge your item through the eyes of an editor or producer. Be objective. Exhibition openings rarely make good copy.



The media *release*

Writing the release

Ask yourself who will read your release.

It is strongly recommended that you write a media release for any intended news item. The release is often sent out as a follow-up to a preliminary phone call. It is the key to building a successful relationship with any media, and should accompany all approaches for news coverage.

REMEMBER THAT A WRITTEN RELEASE ALWAYS REDUCES THE CHANCES OF A REPORTER GETTING FACTS WRONG.

The discipline of deciding on the important points and arranging them in order of priority will at the same time prepare you for further interviews.

Give your release a headline. Start with the most interesting riveting piece of information and work down to the least important. Remember: who, what, when, where, why and how.

Write clearly in short understandable sentences, avoiding difficult language. Use active sentence construction: 'Large crowds attended the opening' is better than 'The opening was attended by large crowds'. Look for action words that give colour.

Include a quote from a relevant personality or artist in your release. Double-spacing helps. Make sure your release is never more than a page long.

Your media release should look good. Present it on a specially designed form which includes the museum's logo (which reinforces the museum's identity), name, address, phone, fax and e-mail addresses. Add your name and home phone number. Date the release. Get clearance from senior staff before you send it.

Do not include sensitive material in your release.

A note on commercials

Commercialism can be an issue and many media will not include details like phone numbers or admission prices.

Check if media will include a sponsor's name in copy before you promise your sponsor name coverage in any agreement. If you're speaking on National Radio, you may find yourself quickly cut off if you mention a brand name! Nevertheless, sponsorship details are more acceptable these days. The presentation of grant money can make news.

Differences in approach to newspaper, radio and television

Different media require different styles of approach and different lead-in times. Decide in advance on your most newsworthy point, and deliver it in a pithy, emphatic way. Remember that radio interviewers seek sound bites, and that all journalists look for telling quotes.

Prepare a media resources file containing images which have been cleared for copyright and are suitable for promoting the museum and its exhibitions.

Some **newsworthy** events and stories

- The gift of an unusual or valuable collection item
- The announcement of an exhibition, e.g. featuring returned servicemen
- The setting up or opening of an exhibition, particularly if of general interest
- Anything high-tech and interactive
- The story of a local artist to be featured in an upcoming exhibition
- The return of an item of cultural significance
- A new development plan or a major project
- A holiday programme

MEDIA RELEASE



HINE! E HINE!

An exhibition celebrating the feminine in Maori spirituality

**Rotorua Museum of Art & History
Te Whare Taonga o Te Arawa
June 3rd - November 19th 2000**

A spiritual journey from Te Kore (the void) through to the year 2000 and beyond will be an integral part of a major exhibition opening at Rotorua Museum on June 3rd 2000.

Hine! e Hine!, an exhibition celebrating the feminine in Maori spirituality, will present a unique blend of traditional and contemporary artworks and music.

Mounted to celebrate the millennium, Hine! e Hine! has been generously supported by the New Zealand Lottery Grants Board and by Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa.

Guest curator Dr Aroha Yates-Smith explains the rationale behind the project: "In entering the new millennium it is important that we as Maori and New Zealanders take time to acknowledge the feminine in the spiritual base of our indigenous culture, given the marginalisation accorded Maori goddesses for nearly 200 years."

Ancient taonga (treasures) depicting atua wahine (feminine goddesses) will be complemented by multi-media modern artworks. Vibrant artworks by Robyn Kahukiwa, June Northcroft Grant, Jolene Douglas, Paerau Corneal, Vicky Lee Hipora Stark, Tina Wirihana, Heni Kerekere, Aroha Mitchell and Donna Campbell will depict the stories of powerful women, past and present.

The exhibition will be enriched by both traditional and contemporary music.

The beautiful sounds of Ana Hato singing Hine! e Hine! will become part of the spiritual heart of the exhibition, providing an aural transition from the old world, while contemporary singer Hinewehi Mohi will represent music of today.

Yates-Smith was raised in Rotorua and is of Te Arawa, Rongowhakaata, Aitanga-a Mahaki and Ngati Maniapoto descent. She is currently Senior Lecturer in the Department of Maori at Waikato University.

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Distributing the media *release*

The differences in timing for the distribution of your media release should be reflected in your media plan. For example, a major museum project requires a careful media plan, the first steps of that plan being taken many months before opening day. Print magazines have the longest lead-in times for advance publicity material. Make sure you have your material planned for distribution in good time for all media.

Local, regional or national newspapers

All newsrooms like to work ahead. Your release should be sent out at least two days before your event. Address it to the Chief Reporter, who will consider it – probably at a planning meeting – then pass it on to a suitable reporter for further attention. The reporter will contact you directly if they want to arrange a photo opportunity or delve further into the subject.

Do not expect your release to be quoted verbatim, but you may be surprised how many times your words appear in print. It may take several days for a newspaper to respond to your release. This may be because some news is more suitable for a weekend magazine than for general news. The editor of a newspaper has the final say on any item that goes to print.

Luck can be important. Something really new and exciting won't make news selection on a day when the government is forced to go to the polls. Weighty issues may crowd out your story.

If a reporter likes your story and drums it up into an even better story, the chances are it may go out on New Zealand Press Association (NZPA), a news dissemination service. Once it's on the wire services you can expect calls from far and wide. And when a story goes outside your area, you can expect renewed interest from your local media – even if they showed little interest in the first place.

Newspapers sometimes indicate they won't cover a topic that their competition has already covered. If so, talk to the editor and offer to re-package your story focusing on a different angle.

Local and national radio

Radio has changed radically in the last decade and will keep changing. One large network currently provides nearly all the national news to a number of commercial stations. Don't hesitate to phone your local station and find out if they offer any sort of local news service. They may offer to turn your news into a talk-piece, even an on-air chat with an announcer. Repackage your news to fit the talk-piece format, keeping it very brief and chatty.

Send important information to the Independent Radio Network and to National Radio. If you are contacted to arrange an on-air interview, prepare for the interview thoroughly. Have notes of facts and figures at your fingertips, and keep comments short, bright and to the point.

Budget for about 20 copies of promotional images (with copyright clearance) in the initial planning period of a major exhibition.

There is merit in the idea of sending your release out by fax on a Sunday. Monday can be a slow news day.

Remember newsroom deadlines. Try not to phone a newsroom before 10am.

Read newspapers with an eye for their style, and couch your release similarly.

Be cleverly democratic. Offer big news stories to larger newspapers, and keep local interest topics for the local media.

Imagine you are talking to just one person when you speak on radio.

Speak clearly using short natural sentences; use a warm vocal tone and lots of inflection.

Most radio interviews are done by telephone.

Some comments may be edited later for insertion in a news bulletin.



Television

Human interest, colour and action are factors that help to attract television coverage. Try to package a story attractively, looking for a people-oriented or quirky angle.

Adopt a policy of sending your media release out at least ten days before an event, then follow up two days before. Find out how far in advance a programme is shot. For example, daily magazine programmes often shoot stories four to six weeks before broadcast. The links for the story will be written about ten days before, and shot the week before the programme goes to air. Only very important stories from the regions are shot, edited and aired the same day.

Many news and magazine editors and producers like to have a file of ideas of what's coming up some time ahead, so send out some preview information six weeks before an event and follow up with further copy later. Address your release to the producer. It could be a good idea to find out the name of one of the news researchers and send them a copy too.

A television channel may ask for exclusive rights to a story. In most cases agree to such a request. If the story is of sufficient interest, other national and local media will soon jump on the bandwagon, once the story has broken.

Phone television channels to find out the names of news or current affairs producers.

If possible line up a local identity for interview.

Don't forget to contact *Te Karere* for excellent coverage of Maori news stories.

Remember that television is radio with pictures! Much the same rules apply, but take care to appear as relaxed as possible.

Magazines

Most high quality magazines include a roundup of what's on and like to receive information on exciting art or history-related events and projects. Phone major magazine publishers such as ACP to find out the names of the editors who deal with listings of exhibitions and events. Make their acquaintance with a phone call.

At least two months before the event send out media packs to suitable magazines. These should contain punchy, captivating information about the project and at least one high quality slide, transparency or image. E-mailed images are generally not accepted.

Make yourself available to assist journalists who contact you for a feature story. Supply them with photographs and other printed media material on your subject. Editorial coverage carries additional prestige and further raises your profile.

Keeping in touch

Following up your release

A quick call to make sure your release has been received is as much further prompting as you should give when you send out your material. Paper wars are waged in newsrooms and it is certainly possible for releases to go astray.

Contacts

Accumulate an up-to-date list of media fax numbers. Compile postal addresses of the editors of major magazines and weekend newspapers, and keep them up-to-date with your events.

E-mail is a wonderful tool - easy, cheap and quick. If you have e-mail, keep your address book full of media contacts.

Glossary

Copy Written material for a newspaper article

Embargo A restriction on the earliest time at which information can be broadcast or published

Exclusive A story offered to only one media outlet, with other media unable to report the same story

Live-to-air Broadcast directly at the time of interview, though possibly with a five- to seven-second delay

Shoot Filming of an item for a future television programme

Further reading

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