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mailout's cut out and keep guide to good practice

Clipout is the name for our growing toolkit of good practice for participatory arts. This edition focuses on communication, Alison Morris from Media Trust gives us some helpful advice.

Arts organisations can't communicate?

Arts organisations facing funding cuts at a local and a national level have been told it's their own fault. Ed Vaizey suggests that had better communication with local authorities been on-going for longer, building a deeper understanding of the arts organisations' and the authorities' priorities, arts organisations would not be in the position they now find themselves in. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA) echoes the sentiment, suggesting that arts organisations have been unable to make a convincing case for public support, and that many in the sector will not recognise that the case even needs to be made.

The biggest question these arguments throw up is 'so what now?' While to an extent the recent arguments about arts organisations and their communications do make some valid points, what can you do now to turn your situation round?

We don't believe arts organisations should be singled out in this way - at Media Trust, we work with the whole charity, community,

voluntary and social enterprise sector, and we spend a lot of time getting to know our audiences and what they need.

We published some research last year on the marketing and communications needs of charities and found that there was a lack of management and stakeholder investment and involvement in communications, which impacts on the ability of charities to plan communications strategically rather than keep going tactically. Second, we found most organisations are online but know they aren't making the most of digital potential. When support was sought, non-profits prefer help from within the sector that shares their values. Most importantly, charities really want to raise their communications game.

That's where we come in - Media Trust is a national communications charity, working with the media, marketing and communications industries to help charities find their voice and make it heard. We offer training, free resources, practical support from volunteer mentors and advisers as well as film-making services for charities

to support their desire to improve their marketing and communications and be heard.

Arts organisations in many ways are luckier than many charities in their communications - desirable products or services, ticketed venues providing a database full of intelligence about your audiences, dedicated and passionate staff and engaged customers. However, the debate about the instrumental value of the arts can sometimes prevent us from communicating the messages that key stakeholders need to hear in the terms they understand. You shouldn't be exasperated if asked to show your value for money - understand where the request comes from and what's really being asked. Make your case in their language, not yours.

Last summer as part of our regular events programme, we ran a series of breakfast briefings on campaigning. Expert panellists including MPs, Councillors, think-tanks and seasoned campaigning charities gave key communications for persuasion tips. See over the page for our top 5:

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1) Do pick up the phone, get out there and get to know the important people in your local authority, the officers and directors as well as the Councillors, portfolio holders, and your local MP, as well as the people who talk to and influence them. Get yourself, your senior management team and your Trustees into people's diaries. Have a couple of talking points and one 'ask' for your meeting. Know why your service is key to your community. What is the one thing you want, and how might it work?

2) Do spend time on your digital communications - your website needs to be full of clear information, stories and pictures of how you meet local needs. Make sure you've identified and invested time in the social networks that speak to your audiences including local decision-makers. Don't fall for 'me too' marketing traps - if it's not right for your audience you don't need it, even if it is free to use. Don't substitute twitter for a regular news-filled email or two - keep it personal and make sure the news is interesting to people outside your management team.

3) Don't forget what a useful tool your local papers and radio stations can be. If you're visible to local people who aren't yet on your mailing list you're more likely to find support at times like this. You're creating 'background noise' about your organisation which will make it harder for



people to take a decision to de-fund you. It's not too late to start building relationships.

4) Do look at your communications functions strategically - Everyone's a fundraiser or marketer now, and if they're not converts already, get management and Board buy-in to the importance of their communications. Think about how you could benefit from support from mentors or low cost training. Don't be afraid to pick up the phone and talk about your communications needs - we can point you towards free and paid-for services, find you or your Board a mentor, or help you make your case to managers.

5) Finally, the golden rule of communications, internal, external, day-to-day and strategic, never lose sight of what you want people to do. Focus, and ask them directly. •



Alison Morris is Communications Development Manager at Media Trust. With a background in arts marketing, an abiding passion for the arts and a geeky obsession with marketing and mining data to improve planning and performance, she feels strongly that communications is part of the answer to any problem.

Why not visit the website, www.mediatrust.org, to find comms training events, mentors and advisers, filmmaking services and free resources, to help you improve your communication. •

