

Publicity: The Rules...

In the hands of a genius, press and publicity becomes an art form. Take the KLF. When not burning a million pounds, or awarding alternative Turner Prizes, Jimmy Cauty and partner Bill Drummond took publicity into new realms. They blindfolded journalists and took them to the Scottish island of Jura. They wrote a book called 'How To Have A Number One Hit' (tip: get yourself a copy now). They dropped a dead sheep at the BPI awards. The KLF are an extreme example of the three golden rules of publicity. Keep it interesting. Have a laugh. And don't be afraid to make things up.

Think Dexy's Midnight Runners' Kevin Rowland wearing a dress as part of the promotion for his new album. Rave band Altern 8 bumrushing the queue at a rave to do a gig on a tank. The blue dummies that littered the streets of London before the release of Portishead's debut LP 'Dummy'. All of these, contrived or real, helped create a profile and press presence for the artist. Even a refusal to do press can create publicity; something proved by the anonymous Techno artists of late eighties Detroit. The point is that publicity comes in many forms. While the donkey work of mailing records, getting reviews and collating information needs to be done, you need a bigger picture, a plan. The music is the starting point, but the media need interesting, lively, opinionated people to write about. Magazines will always choose a mouthy band over a mousy one. No matter what the tunes are like (unless you are Supergrass)

Hype or Hit & Hope

So to the bottom line: there are two ways of approaching press and publicity. You either take the KLF's starting point, which is to point out that all a publicist needs is a phone, a fax, and a capacity to lie, or you scatter-fire your release across the media. This can be summed up thus: Hype or Hit & Hope. The former necessitates you being able to build up a buzz, and a word-of-mouth reputation that will get magazines running after you eventually, the latter suggests the more prosaic route of attempting to get coverage through reviews and magazine coverage.

The Hype route is clearly more fun, and often more profitable. What you need is an unassailable sense of belief in your band and your music, unstoppable energy, and often, a big gob. You need lots of friends to kick-start your fanbase, people who know people who can get journalists to hear your music, and good ideas. It's slightly different for bedroom dance acts, who just need to get their music to DJs, but for bands the rules haven't changed since Elvis. You need good ideas. The Stones were helped by a manager who told the previously nice boys not to take their sunglasses off in interviews (it made them seem harder, more mysterious, more sexy). The Jam and The Clash had agendas. Every band needs something.

Don't dismiss Hit & Hope as Hype's boring younger brother. The basics of press and publicity are as important as the big plans. Reviews in magazines help your distributor sell your music to shops. Coverage in the press helps other journalists and music industry figures become aware that you exist. It can help sales. Everyone in the music industry reads the music press, and it can help your ability to get signed. Take the case of future Folkie, Badly Drawn Boy. At the start of 1997, Damon Gough had just put out his first record on cool-but-tiny Manchester label Twisted Nerve. Thanks to a local journalist who freelanced for Select Magazine, Gough was included in a 'tips for the top' feature the magazine ran on the best new artists of the year, and ended up as the focal point of an A&R scramble. He was then signed by XL Recordings (home to The Prodigy, Basement Jaxx and electronic enigma Leila) for a reckoned £250,000. Press can help interest, but only your tunes can take you higher.

DIY Press

For most small bands and acts, DIY press is as effective as hired PR. It's cheaper (although you will need a budget for postage, stationary and phone bills) and you'll probably get similar results. As already mentioned, you need a phone and fax and capacity to lie. Know your medium: if you are a Rock band, read the Rock press, if you're a knob-tweaking bedroom boy, locate the Techno reviewer at Muzik or DJ. It's worth going to a good city newsagent (not just the crap one at the end of your road which sells OK and Bella!) and spending a tenner on an armful of magazines. Browse the ones which cover your kind of music, and buy the kind of magazines you would like to be in. Take them home and study them like a map.

Things you need to know about magazines: journalists get sent hundreds of records a week. Most freelancers don't work at magazines, they work from home. Most journalists don't listen to everything they get sent (and then they sell them, the bastards!). Despite the hurdles, you *can* get your records to journalists, but in order not to waste precious resources, you need to plan and target carefully. Remember that monthly magazines work six to eight weeks ahead of their street date, and that many of them won't review music once it's been released. So you need to send a record to a journalist approximately two months before it is released (although you can of course lie about the release date - everyone else does). Look on the masthead to find out who does what at the publication. Read the reviews and music features to see who reviews what. Identify the people who you think might like your music, based on the preferences they display in their reviews. See if they have a staff job (they'll be the people with titles on the masthead - freelancers just go under 'Contributors') and if they do, you can send records to the magazines' offices. If not, ring the magazines and ask if they forward records to specific journalists, or if they come to pick them up. Send information and make sure you put a phone number on. Do a press release to go with the release, not a letter. And if you are unsigned, don't say so. Just make up a name for your own label and say you are signed to label X. You might not get any results. Ultra-new bands can sometimes get coverage in specialised sections of magazines - both NME and Melody Maker have sections like this - or by having a well-placed industry fan mention them in interviews. The dance press are much less bothered by pedigree or a (ahem) track record, and a good new record can get quite extensive coverage in dance magazines. You just need to get it to the right person.

'Proper' PR

Proper PR can be worth it too. Bear in mind most professional companies charge at least €750 for promotion on a single (although you might find a few who will do your first PR for a few hundred less if they really like your music) and they *can't* guarantee results. What they *can* do, is provide a journalist swamped by a stream of free records with an idea of what's inside the mailer. If it comes from Phuture Trax, it's club music. If Hall Or Nothing is stamped on the front, you're likely to find Rock. And so on. A PR company does all the hard work for you. They already know the journalists, they know all the sections of all the magazines, they have the freelancers' home addresses. They have the knowledge that you don't (yet). The other main benefit of professional PR is the fact that they can get responses from journalists. They have relationships with journalists, and can ring them to find out what they thought.

Hiring a PR

In order to find the right PR for you, you need to find out who they already deal with. You need a PR that really likes your music (or they aren't going to do a good job). Usually they will ask to be sent a copy of the record before agreeing to work for you. When they have done, you should talk to them about the record, what they thought, where they see it being covered, and the kind of response they realistically think they could achieve. Once you've agreed to work together, you should expect regular reports on the progress of the record - who they've sent it to, what responses they've got and what reviews or features they expect. You can also expect a cuttings file of all the coverage they've obtained for you at the end of the promotion.

What else?

People with mega-budgets like UNKLE can afford to send out limited edition stickers, cut-outs, dolls, and small houses, but anyone with a bit of imagination can think of something to brand and send out. T-shirts and frisbees seem to be very popular, but you need to make sure that any merchandising you send is really good or it will devalue the perception of your record. A club once sent me a piece of toast in an envelope and followed it up with a fax about a club called 'Toast', so really you can do anything.

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