

Second Edition

Fine

ART

PUBLICITY

The Complete Guide

For Galleries and Artists

Susan Abbott

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DISCLAIMER

This book contains a number of sample forms and press releases. The names and facts referred to are entirely fictitious, and any resemblance to actual galleries, museums, artists, curators, directors, exhibitions, etc., is purely coincidental.

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PREFACE



When I was in college studying art history, I worked part-time in a public relations firm. I was fascinated by how simple and effective the tools of the PR professional are and how valuable it is to know how to promote an idea. Later, when I started to consult with galleries on marketing issues, I found that the galleries were using perhaps only 10 percent of the public relations opportunities available to them. My clients didn't seem to understand the direct relationship between the visibility of a gallery and its success. They also undervalued the role publicity plays in keeping old customers and developing new ones.

There are certainly new customers out there to develop. I think the potential audience for art is considerably larger than it is perceived to be. Art is fast becoming a mass-culture phenomenon in America. Certainly one can say that the general public is more interested in art than ever before in our history. As museums become savvier in how to package their programs to reach mainstream audiences, they are reaping the benefits of this nascent interest in art and design. You have probably heard the often-quoted statistic that more people have visited museums in the past decade than in the preceding hundred years. When people attend museum shows, it's the first step to coming to your gallery. Major American museums, using sophisticated mass-marketing techniques, are greatly impacting today's art audiences, and these techniques are beginning to influence gallery promotion strategies and, in some cases, how artists market themselves directly to their core constituencies.

With the expansion of the Internet and art-related portals, there now exists a phenomenal capacity for providing art education and exposure through virtual museums, exhibitions, and gallery or artist studio tours online. Today's collectors initially need not go further than their computer screens to interact with the world of art.

These potential new collectors can be overwhelmed by the choices in the visual art market today. They want to know where to go and whom to trust. Publicity can help them decide that it is your gallery they should visit and that it is you they should trust. One thing I have learned in my years of involvement with art is that the more education people have about what they are seeing, the more interested and committed they become.

We are on the threshold of a new era where people will be able to turn their plasma screen televisions on and bring museums, galleries, and artist studios into their living rooms. Some institutions are worried that it will cut down on attendance, and have been hesitant to embrace this new technology. I think the benefits of exposure to a worldwide audience and the capacity for pre-educating potential audiences far outweighs the fears that new technology may cut down on attendance. To be fully appreciated and experienced, most art still needs to be viewed in person.

I have tried to create a book that will give galleries and artists the tools of the professional fine art publicist and will provide them with some ideas on how to expand the boundaries of their public relations efforts to meet the challenges of this exciting time.

SUSAN ABBOTT

INTRODUCTION: USING THIS BOOK



While this book has been designed mainly for gallery directors and their staff publicists, I think it will be highly useful for artists, who are playing an increasingly active role in marketing their own work. The general text will also be useful for small to midsize museums and nonprofit art galleries that are in some ways closer in scale to retail galleries than they are to large museums.

The nuts and bolts of fine art publicity are the same whether you are a commercial or nonprofit gallery, or an artist. The groups this book is written for are mutually dependant on one another for success, and I believe they will benefit from understanding each other's concerns and perspectives. Furthermore, the boundaries that have traditionally differentiated the role of museum, gallery, or artist have become blurred to some extent by the advent of the Internet, digital technology, and mass-marketing techniques. This trend will only increase as these technologies become more sophisticated and embraced throughout all areas of the artworld.

Today, there seems to be a direct correlation between an artist's involvement in promoting his or her work, and the success of that work in the marketplace. Therefore, each chapter includes special tips, when appropriate, to artists, and artists have a special chapter devoted to their unique public relations concerns and issues.

If you are an artist, this book can give you a practical approach to self-promotion, as well as an understanding of how you can help a

museum or gallery promote your work more effectively. It will also show you how to keep important constituencies, like curators, dealers, critics, and collectors, aware of your work and your activities. Effective publicity starts with the source, and that is the artist. To the extent that you can provide professional PR material that gives appropriate insight into you and your work, you will be maximizing your potential for the success and recognition you deserve.

If you are a gallery director, you can use this book to plan your level of public relations activity, to set objectives, and to develop creative strategies. Your staff publicist or coordinator can then use it as a reference book as he or she implements each strategy.

Setting goals will be the key to your success. Spending time and resources without clear objectives is like getting into your car and speeding off to an unknown destination. You never know when you have arrived, or even if you are going in the right direction. With a carefully mapped-out strategy, you may find you are closer to your destination than you would have believed. I hope you enjoy this book, and I wish you an exciting and successful journey.

1

WHY PUBLICITY?



Publicity is media coverage you don't pay for, and it is the most effective way to introduce yourself and your gallery to the public. Generally, the more familiar people are with your gallery, your logo, your artists, your programs, and you as a personality or community member, the more confidence they will have in you.

A publicist I know likes to use the example of the man with a teenage daughter: Would he prefer to have her go out with some young man he's never seen before or the boy next door? Familiarity can go a long way toward building confidence. And confidence is the key factor in people's art-buying decisions—more important than quality, price, or convenience.

Regional art dealers often complain that people go to New York to buy, even when they're buying works by artists from their own region. This is the quintessential example of confidence winning out. Art in New York seems to have a sort of seal of approval that says, "If it's from New York, it must be good." The reasons are not hard to find. New York galleries are in the art capital of America, they receive more free media coverage, and, because they have a greater volume of business, they can afford to buy a greater share of national and international advertising.

But you don't have to relocate to New York. There are many media opportunities available to you where you are. Regional galleries can get an astonishing amount of coverage in their local communities and worldwide exposure if they have a Web site. The secret is to figure out

the type of exposure that is likely to benefit your gallery most, and go after it.

ARTIST TIP: If you are represented by a gallery and/or your work is exhibited in a museum, you must work cooperatively with the gallery or museum in its publicity efforts. Remember, staff members cannot effectively sell or show your work if they don't understand it, and they won't be motivated to do so unless you develop personal relationships with the staff, from the director to the receptionist. Make everyone your advocate.

ARTIST TIP: Collectors whose visual acuity is not highly developed are greatly influenced by the recommendations of other collectors, gallery directors, or the media's endorsement. You should seek publicity whenever possible to keep your name in the forefront of the minds of people of influence to your career. Press releases are great for distributing to potential patrons, for posting on your Web site, and for supplying these samples to galleries or museums that show your work, or might in the future.

Public Relations Versus Advertising

The term “public relations” (or “PR”) describes all those activities you do to generate publicity and goodwill. The overt goals for a PR campaign are similar to the primary goals for advertising—to increase awareness of your name, logo, image, and artists, or to promote a special event. If your finances allow it, you will want to have a good advertising campaign. But PR also plays a more complex and significant role, because it develops your reputation, which in turn develops the public's confidence in you and what you have to offer. Any press coverage you get will carry more weight than ads, since the public sees it as a third-party endorsement. Publicity also can reach people advertising might not.

For example: When a photo highlight of your exhibition appears in the local newspaper's Sunday arts-and-culture section, readers assume that the editor chose to print it because it was worth featuring (when in fact the editor may have just picked the best of the photos submitted).

For example: If you deal in large-scale sculpture, you may want to communicate with real estate developers through their trade magazines, perhaps with a feature article on incorporating site-specific work in hospitals or hotels.

For example: Consider that a benefit art auction might best be announced in the society pages.

For example: If your gallery is part of an important art movement, the movement might be covered in the art trade magazines as well as in special interest magazines, e-zines, and daily periodicals.

For example: If your exhibition has particular appeal to special interest groups, target your publicity efforts toward media that are followed by the relevant groups.

For example: Imagine you are a public relations professional at a gallery publicizing an upcoming exhibition of an African-American artist who is also a jazz musician. In addition to your usual press contacts, you would want to make special overtures to African-American magazines, e-zines, and social and cultural organizations, as well as your local jazz radio station and jazz-related magazines and newsletters.

In all these cases, advertising by itself would be a very expensive, ineffective way to communicate with all of the different audiences you want to reach. Although a publicity campaign can be national or international in scope, it is always the best way for any gallery to reach an audience within a hundred-mile radius. In most cases, this audience represents at least 50 percent of a gallery's revenue.

I mention this percentage because galleries that do a lot of national advertising frequently regard their local publicity efforts as the stepchild of their marketing effort. "We've already spent \$30,000 on advertising and it hasn't brought any business in the door. Why should we spend time on local publicity when we're not even guaranteed coverage?" The answer is that not only are local audiences often the bread and butter of gallery revenue, local collectors are usually the ones who support regional artists, the cornerstone of many gallery activities. By building a portfolio of local media coverage you can leverage it to get national coverage or museum recognition for your artists.

PR and Advertising Working Together

A good advertising and PR campaign can make the crucial difference between someone wandering into your gallery cold and suspicious, and someone coming in already eager to see what you have to offer. You will get the best results when both these components of your promotional efforts are developed to support and complement one another.

ARTIST AND GALLERY TIP: Too often artists and galleries spend so much on advertising that they shortchange their PR budget. Artists and galleries tend to splurge when they have a big important show. They may buy a full-page ad in a magazine in which they have not built a presence previously. Generally speaking it is better to have a consistent small presence month after month in the same media outlet than a one-time large splash before a big show. Slow and steady fills the bucket of name recognition in the minds of both the media and your general audience. Some of the extra advertising dollars would be better spent on public relations strategies that will garner free media coverage, such as a frequently updated Web site, reviews, profiles, or interviews.

A gallery might decide on the following campaign to promote both its sculpture inventory and the consulting services it offers to architects and developers:

- Place a small ad twelve times (once a month) in a major regional commercial real estate magazine
- Submit two major feature ideas to the magazine within a year: (1) an article to be written by the gallery director on how to incorporate site-specific work in a project, and (2) a photo essay to be developed about a successful local commissioned project by one of the gallery's artists, including interviews with the artist, happy tenants in the building, and the proud developer
- Create a recurring e-mail newsletter on sculpture and its uses in real estate projects, and send it to local developers, landscape architects, and architects on a bimonthly basis

This campaign is sure to be more effective for the gallery than an isolated feature story or an unsupported advertisement. The idea is to reinforce one marketing strategy with others so that the message is sure to penetrate the audience's ignorance of you and your message. The less familiar you are to an audience, the more strategies are needed to gain their recognition and build confidence.

Recognition and confidence influence people in the media, too. The media's job is to bring the best and most current information to their audience. They are interested in covering the leaders—the healthiest, most representative, and trend-setting galleries. But how do members of the media assess these qualities? One way is by measuring how much

publicity a gallery receives and by its fiscal strength, which is often expressed through large advertising budgets. Thus a large and consistent advertising budget may aid a gallery in positioning itself as a leader.

ARTIST TIP: The media will often judge how “hot” a contemporary artist is by scanning how much accumulative media coverage that artist has received. An upsurge in positive media buzz or word of mouth about you will likely reach the ears of collectors and patrons, and pique their interest in you and your work.

When you are considering magazines and newspapers that have serious critical art reviews with bylines, however, it is crucial to remember that the editorial staff is quite separate from the advertising staff. The editors have the responsibility for developing criteria for coverage and for conducting their own research. Writers and reviewers will reach their own conclusions about the relative quality of an exhibition. Advertising clout has little or nothing to do with what is covered editorially, or how an exhibition is reviewed.

In some cases, a mass circulation magazine will solicit a gallery for advertising when it is featuring the gallery’s artist or when an editorial focus, such as an issue on the region’s art, includes coverage of the gallery. Two ads placed in advance issues, followed by a smaller ad when the feature appears, will capitalize on the publicity while avoiding the impression that the gallery somehow paid for the feature.

Publicity and Today’s Art Audience

In the old days, when the artworld had more purity, collectors seldom even saw the artist. Now collectors want to have some fun, they want to show off art and the artist.

—John Alexander, quoted in Paul Gardner’s article, “How to Succeed (By Really Trying),” *ARTnews*

The preface mentions how the audience for art is broadening. Buyers now are less knowledgeable than the art patrons of the fifties and sixties who collected art primarily for its own sake. Today’s audience is more likely to buy art for other reasons—as a lifestyle or decor statement, for investment or status, for the values that the piece of art communicates, or because it’s trendy.

For the unsophisticated client, this superficial sort of involvement may be the door to making a meaningful connection to the work of art.