EXHIBITIONS AND MEDIA RELATIONS:

HOW TO ENGAGE WITH THE MEDIA AT EVENTS AND INCREASE YOUR CHANCES OF COVERAGE

(From journalists themselves)

AD COMMUNICATIONS

THE MEDIA AND EXHIBITIONS: CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

WHY CREATE THIS GUIDE?

In 1984, when AD Communications started out, there was no digital marketing. No social media. No HTML e-shots. No online news.

Over the last four decades, the world, and the nature of what we do as communications specialists, has changed tremendously, but as much as things have changed, there have been some constants. Two of those constants are the services that we've offered to clients from day one, and in combination, they are the subject of this guide: *Communications strategies at major exhibitions, and dealing effectively with the media.* These two things go hand in hand. With the radical changes to the media landscape in recent years, and with all the changes and challenges to exhibitions, we're often asked by clients how, as an exhibitor, they can maximise positive media coverage at a major event.

This piece is our attempt to answer that question. To create it, we've drawn both on our own decades of experience, and on insights gathered directly from conversations with dozens of print and packaging journalists, as well as editors from all over Europe. We asked them about how they want to be engaged with by exhibitors and how they want to receive information.

WHY NOW?

The media landscape has changed immeasurably over recent decades, but specialist trade media still have a crucial role to play when it comes to casting a critical eye over industry developments – and amplifying a good news story. And, despite the ease of virtual networking in a digital world, exhibitions remain a vital channel for demonstrating technology and meeting decision-makers face-to-face.

The Covid-19 pandemic (remember that?) forced us all online for a year or two, and as major global shows hastily moved to virtual online spaces – or cancelled altogether – many speculated that the era of major exhibitions might be over for good.

Reports of their demise though, look to have been premature. Though not all have survived, many are back and busier than ever, but not without making big changes. Given the massive shift in the way news is consumed in recent years, coupled with big changes to the way exhibitions are managed and perceived, especially after the disruption of the pandemic, and how often we find that we're having conversations about this – both with clients and with media – we thought we'd delve a little deeper, survey the media, and record our findings in a handy, one-stop guide.

WHAT'S COVERED?

In the following pages we look at what's changed in recent years – and what journalists like, and don't like about the way most exhibitors deal with them today. We explore the topic of one-to-one press interviews on stand – and press conferences. What works and what doesn't. We look at how journalists like to receive and access vendor news and imagery. How best to do this to make their lives easier. We look at how best to manage both post and at show communications with the media for best results. And finally, we summarise our findings and explain how we can help.

For those of you in a hurry – skip straight to the back for the summary!

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ENGAGING WITH THE MEDIA AT EVENTS. WHAT OUR JOURNALISTS SAY HAS CHANGED

A MOVE TO DIGITAL

All the media we spoke with highlighted the shift from paper-based news communications to digital – whether on a flash drive, QR code or link to download. All saw this particular development as mostly positive as it makes sifting through swathes of press releases and comms much more manageable. A few journalists cited an overreliance on social media channels for sharing news – but all saw this as a useful *additional* comms channel if used wisely.

Many also discussed the short-lived experiment with events going all-virtual during the Covid era. Some recognised the convenience factor of these events and see them having a long-term future alongside physical events – but all, without exception, were delighted that in-person events are back, and all saw them as having a long-term future, in some form.

All respondents highlighted the value of face-to-face interaction with vendors and welcomed the fact that exhibitions and company open house events are happening with pre-Covid levels of regularity. All were pleased to see this trend and several said they thought that companies still overly reliant on virtual events were harming their prospects of insightful coverage and meaningful publicity. One respondent, from Portugal, did though highlight that Open House events – which journalists are expected to pay their own way to travel to – are of limited value, as most media simply don't have the resources to do this with any regularity.

One journalist from Germany said that many companies had become too over-reliant on English-only speaking PR agencies, often not even providing press releases in German and lacking the language skills and local market knowledge to communicate effectively. He stressed the importance of company spokespeople themselves finding time to engage with and build relationships with the media – and not to **"hide behind the PR agency"**.

PRESS CONFERENCES

"Only have a press conference when you have something genuinely new and interesting to say" – said a number of our respondents, **"and keep them brief!"**. 20 minutes is ideal, thought most, for a press conference at an exhibition – with 30 minutes being the upper limit.

One respondent bemoaned a tendency for many vendors to just repeat the information in the press release. The press conference itself has to offer deeper insights into press release content, or spring a genuine surprise.

Most said that they thought Q&A segments at the end of press conferences were, largely, a waste of time. One journalist said:

"I don't want to ask my questions in front of a room full of other media, many of them my competitors. I'd rather ask them in person, so I have something unique and different to write about."

Another, echoing this sentiment, said:
"We all-too-often see identical news stories, almost word-for-word, appearing in multiple publications. As a journalist, being able to ask you own questions in a private setting helps to avoid this."

On the subject of 'on-stand' press conferences, most were opposed. Too noisy and too many distractions was the consensus.

ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEWS

As indicated in the previous section, (almost) all saw one-to-one interviews with vendors as vital, though many also cautioned that there simply isn't time, at a major exhibition, to get around as many as they would like to.

All understood that at a busy show timings could slip, but one said a major frustration was getting no warning when an interview had to be postponed – often leading to wasted time.

Many stressed the importance of speaking with genuine product experts at these interviews – preferring to engage with those with the most knowledge, rather than speaking with the most 'important' or senior person on the stand.

Most find it helpful to be contacted about one-to-one interview opportunities ahead of the show, as it helps with diary management. A few said they preferred to be more spontaneous, or to manage the process of booking a slot directly through their own contacts.

STAND TOURS

Most said they found stand tours useful, though for some more specialist media, not all products or sections of the stand are relevant. Journalists in that category prefer personalised tours that focus on what interests them, rather than an 'all-inclusive' tour as part of a group. All said they thought stand tours lost value if the 'tour group' was too big. A maximum of 10 was the consensus.

RECEIVING INFORMATION

All interviewees we spoke to were very comfortable, and used to, receiving news digitally – but there is not a one-size-fits-all method. Some prefer emails (with download links if necessary for large files or images). Some like the convenience of being able to scan a QR code – while others find them a nuisance. Most were comfortable with receiving information on a USB stick, but many newer laptops do not have USB drives, making them impossible for some journalists to access without an adaptor. In short, having a variety of options for journalists to quickly access information is vital.

When it comes to imagery, a few stated a preference for taking and using their own photographs wherever possible – but all also agreed that the timely supply of hi-res imagery to accompany news stories was very important. One journalist in particular made a request for vendors to share photos of spokespeople, stands and new products that have been taken at the event itself (even if these are submitted on the first day of an exhibition as a follow-up). The reason being that it makes the visuals that accompany the stories much more relevant.

PRE-SHOW, AT-SHOW, POST-SHOW

For the media, as for the exhibitors at a major show, the build-up starts early. Many journalists we spoke to expressed frustration at the volume of information that comes at the beginning of the show itself – rather than being spaced out beforehand. **"I don't just want to republish press releases,"** said one UK journalist. **"I want to do my own analysis and research, and that takes time. Realistically, I don't have time to do that at the show – so it's something I have to work on in the weeks afterwards."** He continued:

"One of my biggest pleas to vendors would be to ask them to issue more of their news ahead of the show, under embargo. Ideally a minimum of a week before, giving me time to digest, analyse and better formulate my own questions when I'm at the show itself."

As far as at-show communications go, most felt that the show itself was the time for face-to-face interaction, with little time for in-depth analysis of written communications until the show was over. Many mentioned the added value of being able to speak with a customer of an exhibitor for added insights and a different perspective. Many also emphasised clear communication ahead of the show, helped them to maximise the information that could be gathered and absorbed during the show. This includes: the timing of press conferences, as well as, an idea of the content, and precise timings for scheduled one-to-one interviews and details about who they will be with.

In many cases – journalists also highlighted the value of being able to speak with someone in their own language. Partly for convenience and to better understand technical nuances – but also in order to ask local market questions that will be interesting and relevant to their readers.

Post show communications, many felt, were of little value. One journalist said:

"When the show is over, it's too late. It takes me weeks to sort through my notes and material after an event. If I haven't heard about it before or during the show I will not pay attention to it afterwards – there is just too much else to do."

IN SUMMARY WHEN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA AT EXHIBITIONS OR EVENTS

	DO...	DO NOT...
1	Communicate news (under embargo if necessary) ahead of the show – ideally one or two weeks minimum.	Call a press conference when you have nothing new to say.
2	Keep press conferences short and to the point (ideally 20 minutes, no longer than 30).	Don't just use a press conference to reiterate what is in the press release (or releases).
3	When organising on-stand interviews with media – make every effort to pair them with the most relevant expert or experts for the topics they want to discuss.	Organise on-stand press conferences, unless there is a very compelling reason to do so.
4	When one-to-one interview times need to change – make every effort to communicate this as far in advance as possible.	Arrange stand tours for groups of more than 10 where possible.
5	Keep press releases brief, to the point and newsworthy.	Overload journalists with a barrage of new information all at once at the start of the show.
6	Make news available in multiple languages, and have multiple spokespeople of different languages available.	Leave important announcements until late in the show, or after the show.
7	Try to make customers available to speak with journalists as much as possible.	Bury important announcements in heavy marketing copy – journalists shouldn't be treated as an extension of your marketing team.
8	Provide multiple ways for journalists to access information: USB, QR code, link via email.	Issue communications in English only.
9	Use agencies – but don't 'hide behind them' – build direct, trusted relationships with the media as well.	Expect journalists to pay their own way to company hosted Open House events.
10	Share relevant, hi-res imagery with journalists including images taken during the show.	Only offer for journalists to speak to the senior team – they will benefit from discussions with technical and product experts too.

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HOW WE CAN HELP

AS WE SAID AT THE START OF THIS GUIDE, DEALING WITH THE MEDIA AT EXHIBITIONS IS SOMETHING THAT WE'VE BEEN DOING FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS. OVER THAT TIME, MUCH HAS CHANGED, AND MANAGING THOSE CHANGES CAN BE A CHALLENGE.

We know the media through working with them closely for four decades – and even more so after speaking with more than 30 of them to discuss this particular topic. There are universal things to do and things to avoid – but the real value of a specialist agency like AD is that we know the people behind those responses.

Communications, whether in this setting or more generally – is not a one-size-fits-all exercise. Different media in different sectors and different countries – need different approaches. And no one is better placed to advise on those approaches than AD.

Attending exhibitions is not a cheap exercise, and to maximise value, getting the media to carry your news to a much broader audience than could possibly make it to your stand, is vital.

From strategic communications and messaging, to media outreach and liaison ahead of the show; to press conference and media engagement at-show – we've been doing it all for decades and we know how to get results.

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT: adcomms.com

EMAIL: info@adcomms.co.uk

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