

Running Media Relations - Some Experiences from Worldcon 75, and from Working in a Newsroom

This collection of notes and ideas aims to be of use for anyone handling media relations for a convention, World- or otherwise.

My experiences come from working for the press team for Worldcon 75 in Helsinki and from working as a journalist for STT, the national news agency in Finland.

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1. GENERAL: START EARLY!

- If you are handling media relations for a Worldcon, start planning and preparing as early as possible. Let your local media know that you are planning a bid, when the site selection will take place and be prepared to spread the news via social media, website and press release when you win. (Also if you don't win, don't leave people waiting to hear from you.)
- A Worldcon or other convention is news the fan sphere and in the local/regional media, or national media if it happens in a small country like Finland. This is your main target audience.
- But don't neglect international and other geographically distant media either - it's worth a shot encouraging media from further away to attend and cover. Also, the Hugos are an international news story, especially when a local creator is among the finalists.
- Coordinate your work closely with your social media team.
- Having a first Worldcon somewhere has its pros and cons. Pros: it's new and therefore news. Cons: everything is new and unfamiliar to the local media. Prepare to do a lot of explaining.
- Remember: Most newsrooms are very understaffed and the volume of stuff coming in is ridiculous!
- A well-run news organisation plans well ahead in order to use its resources efficiently. If you can set a date for important announcements, do it - and let media know of your plans and schedules ahead of time.
- Have a crisis communications plan ready. If disaster or scandal strikes, who will speak for the con? (Don't panic, don't lie, decide who speaks for you and stay on message - is a good place to start.)

2. PRESS PAGE ON WEBSITES

- Collect the information the media needs in a single place on your website.

- Link your press policy.
- In the press policy, refer to the code of conduct and state that media representatives are also expected to respect it.
- Link all your press releases and make sure they go up there promptly after releasing them.
- Add links to your social media. They are also an important method of reaching the media.
- Add a form where media can request being added to the mailing list.
- A form for accreditation requests is useful - that way you can make sure you have contact details for your press visitors.
- Get a phone number and try to make sure someone is available to answer it at least most of the time. (Ours was quiet for ages, but started ringing about week ahead of the con.)
- CVs of the guests of honor should be available, as well as links to their own websites.
- Try to have high-quality downloadable handout images available. This should include photos of the chairs and GOHs, as well as the con's logos.

3. PRESS RELEASES

- Have an informative subject line in your email. (You would be surprised at how many people send media releases with the subject line "Press Release".)
- Put the message in the body of the email. Don't expect people to open an attachment called "Press Release". (Once again, you would be surprised ...)
- Visuals and pictures are nice, but don't overdo it.
- Remember to add the date to your release, and either "For Immediate Release" or the embargo time. If you use an embargo, specify the time zone.
- Remember that embargos may be broken by accident or deliberately. Check with your Hugo administrator how they want to handle releasing the list of awards. (Worldcon 75 handed out the information in advance to only three media outlets.)
- At the end of each release, add basic facts about your event and links to your web page and social media.
- If your press release names a contact person with an email or a phone number, make sure the person is aware of it and is available to answer questions.
- You can also ask people to call your press phone and collect interview requests.
- At Worldcon 75 Finnish and English press releases used different styles and leads. Phrases that are common in English releases often sound terribly stilted in Finnish if translated directly. If you are working in more languages than one, adapt your writing style - it's better to get the message across than to translate every word.

- Fan press and local press is interested in things that mainstream/international press will not care about. Target your releases accordingly. (Hugo packet available for download - Hugo base design competition open, Con chair speaking at local book fair, etc.)

4. PRESS RELEASE DISTRIBUTION

- Email is a challenge - be prepared to do your distribution manually if all else fails. At Worldcon 75 we used MailChimp and Sendgrid and had problems with both.
- Know the rhythm of the news cycle. Lots of people send their releases at the top of the hour. Why not send your 10 minutes before the rush?
- Thursdays tend to be especially busy, avoid them if possible.
- Mornings are better than afternoons.

5. CONTACT LIST

- Build a mailing list, try to keep it up to date.
- Make sure you are not only sending to specific people's email addresses. People change jobs or go on holiday and your news release may be lost in some personal mailbox.

6. ACCREDITATION

- Spell out the difference between fan and mainstream press and press credentials and passes on your website.
- Fan press versus mainstream press is sometimes clear, sometimes much less so. Try to spell out the difference clearly on the website, but be prepared to make your own calls in some cases.
- Also state clearly that the press team reserves the right to issue accreditations (passes) at their discretion. No one is automatically entitled to one.
- I thought I had a fairly good idea of the relevant media in Finland, but came across a lot more cultural and literary magazines and webzines that I had never heard of.
- Also, we had many requests from freelancers. Do you want to require letters from their commissioners or do you take people at their word?
- I was fairly liberal in giving out press passes to small publications and freelance journalists, as long as they were not obviously fan press. People who wanted press passes just to write on their own blog did not qualify.
- Be prepared to provide letters of recommendation for visa requests - we had several such requests from China.

7. AT THE CON - BADGES

- We issued a separate press badge. People who were not members only used that. Fan press, who were members, had it in addition to their regular badge.

- This was used for the Hugo ceremony, where we had reserved seats for the press. It also served to indicate the people who could use the press room.
- We held a press conference at 10 am on Wednesday before the con started. We did not require badges there, as it was possible to usher people in without them.
- If we had held another press conference later on during the con, the press badge would have been another means of making sure that only working press people attended.

8. AT THE CON - PRESS ROOM

- Our venue (Messukeskus) has a designated press room that local media know well. We had the press there, sharing the space with the conzine, our social media team and the con photographers.
- It worked well, the room was lively but not too crowded. Busiest time was after the Hugo awards, when there was an impromptu press conference there for Chinese press with Cixin Liu and the Chinese ambassador.
- Stuff you need in the press room: a copy machine. A computer to keep up with accreditation requests and schedule the interview rooms. A printer. A radio for backup comms - faster to just ask there than call. Coffee. A separate wifi from the public one - risk of congestion otherwise, especially when the Hugos are on.
- We also had two small meeting rooms designated as interview rooms. They saw quite a lot of use by people making podcasts. We took requests via email and printed a schedule for each day and put it up on the door.

9. AT THE CON - INTERVIEW REQUESTS FOR PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS

- The requests started coming in fairly close to the con, from podcasters and others.
- We realized that we would not be able to channel all the requests or hunt for contact information. It would have been a lot of work for the already busy programme division.
- The solution to this would be to ask participants ahead of time. If they are willing to give interviews they should provide a preferred means of contact ahead of time, email address or webpage. Also - does your participant speak English or is an interpreter required?
- We had not done this, so in the end we told everyone, that we would only relay requests for the GOHs and other special guests and GRRM.

10. CONSIDER

- Requests for streaming. Are your panelists ok with their panels being streamed or put up on YouTube? There were also requests to stream signings, but we did not allow that.
- What does Tech think - is the wifi up to several simultaneous high-quality video streams?
- Photography ground rules at the Hugos and Masquerade. Where are the photographers allowed to go during the ceremony? No flash use was allowed - make sure everyone knows about that ahead of time.

And how did we do? Worldcon 75 in the media:

- Having had a first failed bid for 2015 raised national media interest in the second, successful bid.
- The main national paper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, covered both bids. The paper has a reporter who is a fan and knew the process. This helped a lot.
- Closer to the con, coverage shifted to YLE, the national broadcaster. Their Helsinki area radio did several pieces, interviewing our con chair Jukka Halme several times about preparations. (Radio needs a lot of content and people to interview to fill all their hours of programming, so there are good opportunities for stories there.)
- A couple of weeks ahead of the con, we had stories in local papers about people planning to attend. (Many fancy cosplay pictures, but also an interview with our scifi-fan MP Jyrki Kasvi, who gave an interview about the reasons why scifi is awesome and the Worldcon is important.)
- As the con began, there were more stories in newspapers, TV and radio, including a few from the press conference on the opening day. Many interviews with our Guests of Honor. Also, our astronaut guest Kjell Lindgren gave a number of interviews.
- We had a total of 106 accredited journalists with press passes, 60 people with press credentials.
- Internationally, the Hugos were the main event. As there was no Sad or Rabid Puppy controversy, the coverage was mainly reporting the winners.
- We had visiting journalists from mainstream media from Sweden, Norway, Poland, China.
- In Finland, apart from the regular mainstream press and the cultural and literary magazines we had stories in two magazines affiliated to the Lutheran Church, a gay magazine, a couple of student and university magazines, a magazine published by the national trade union for engineers and the paper published by the smaller one our leftist political parties.