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How to know if you should hire a publicist

Unpacking the seemingly confusing topic of publicity, and the value of publicists in general.

My name is Kelly McClure and three-ish years ago I started a boutique publicity firm called WolfieVibes Publicity. In the beginning I did everything entirely myself, from seeking out clients and meeting with referrals, to developing campaigns for the musicians, filmmakers, podcast makers, nonprofits, and writers who came to me for help signal boosting their projects and landing press. It was (and still is) a lot of work, but I enjoy the feeling of helping increase the visibility of people whose projects I care about. In early 2019 I took on my very first employee, my wife Lindsey Baker, who performs in a band of her own called Guts Club, so now there's two of us on the sending side of the WolfieVibes emails.

Although I launched WolfieVibes just a short time ago, I've been a publicist since 2011. I started out as the in-house publicist for K Records, then went on to work for a couple of other firms before finally making the best decision I've ever made: starting my own company. Before I get into the tips of how a publicist can help you navigate the murky waters of PR, I'll give you a bonus bit of insight: living a boss-less, landlord-less (I recently bought a house) life is the way to go. I work from home, usually in my pajamas, and no one can tell me shit. It's great.

Anyway, back to my point: when done correctly, generating publicity is easy. But boy, there are a lot of ways to turd up the works, and there are lots of mysteries surrounding publicity: what the hell is a publicist, and what can I, a creator of things, do with one? Hopefully the following tips will help.

– Kelly McClure



WHAT IS A PUBLICIST?

A publicist is someone who works with creative people (musicians, writers, event organizers, etc.) who are looking to attract more attention to their work. A publicist spends the majority of their day reaching out to writers at publications (blogs, magazines, newspapers, etc.) who they feel would be interested in, and have a way to creatively cover, what their client is working on.

A publicist is able to do their work well when they have an established network of media contacts, and when those contacts trust them to bring them relevant, interesting pitches. At their best, a publicist should be both a fan of, and a cheerleader for, their client. A publicist is also a secretary of sorts, who spends a huge part of their day sending emails and making phone calls on their client's behalf, so their client can do other things, like make the work they're hiring the publicist to promote.

WHAT *ISN'T* A PUBLICIST?

A publicist doesn't have anything to do with advertising or marketing—those are two completely different fields. Instead of promoting an artist's work to an audience themselves, a publicist goes directly after publicity, i.e. "press" or "coverage." Advertising, which is very different from publicity (but seeks the similar result of eyes/ears on a thing), is a paid placement in a magazine, newspaper, billboard, or TV/radio/podcast. Usually, an ad for something will be pretty straightforward, like "here's a thing, and here's where you can find that thing." Marketing—also in the same deck of cards, but its own suit entirely—is the process of promoting something, usually a product, to a target group of consumers in a way that will make that product seem compelling.

To break it down further:

- Publicity = "I'm a writer, reacting to and describing a thing of my choosing, because I deem it interesting enough to write about."
- Advertising = "I'm a newspaper, billboard, magazine, or TV/radio/podcast show and I'm telling you about a thing because I was paid to, and selling ads is a way for me to drive revenue."
- Marketing = "I'm a company. I was hired by the maker of a pink pen to convince the general public that this particular pink pen is somehow an essential product for people who identify as women."

HOW DO I KNOW IF I SHOULD HIRE A PUBLICIST?

I've read lots of other articles on the topic of publicists, many of which make a solid case for *not* hiring a publicist until you're already pretty established. However, this doesn't make a lick of sense to me. Regardless of how long your band has been around, regardless of how much of a following you have, and regardless of how many listens your solo album is getting, if you do not want to personally spend large portions of your days emailing and calling people about something you're doing, yet you want people to know about your work, you should consider hiring a publicist.

You could stop reading this article right now and make a zine about who knows what, run off a few copies, and then hire a publicist to get someone to review it. And someone *will* review it. It's that easy. Publicity is out there for the taking, if you want it, or need it. If you're doing something cool right now, you don't need to wait. But...

PUBLICITY COSTS MONEY

Publicity *does* cost money. Not a ton of money, but probably a bit more than you'd imagine. A good one-month PR campaign with a person who knows what the hell they're talking about will run you, on average, at least \$1,000 a month. This can sometimes go lower, if a publicist learns that your budget isn't quite there, but is passionate enough to take a hit on you. It can also often go higher, depending on the publicist's rates, or if the project will require extra work because there are more elements involved like a tour, a rushed timeline, etc.

YOU SAID TIMELINE. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

Ideally, a publicity campaign will run for two or three months, and start PRIOR (screaming this) to the release of the thing you want publicity for. I can't tell you the number of times a really good band has emailed me something like, "Hi, I made this awesome album that took three years to finish and just threw it up for free on Soundcloud. I want some press for it, can you work with me?" Too late, my dude. Too late. In this scenario, the album being released to the public is the grand finale. To be most successful, publicity campaigns should ramp up to that grand finale.

To put it another way, once the can of pop is opened (I'm from Chicago, whatever), it starts going flat. The goal is to get people so intensely excited about opening that damn thing, writing stuff about what they've come to know about that thing so far (here's where "premieres" come in, and other exclusives) and then, once they've opened it, and filled their guts with its contents, they can write reviews about how they felt about it.

IF YOU LIKE MY MUSIC/BOOK/EVENT/PODCAST, ETC. SO MUCH, WHY DO I HAVE TO PAY YOU?

I've had bands ask me this before, and I understand the misconception that if I love your work, I should be willing and able to help you get coverage, without charging you much. However, even when publicists are a fan of what they're working on, what we do still takes time, and people should be paid for their time. That doesn't mean we don't genuinely care about the work we're promoting, or for our clients as people. I mean, would you go to the doctor for stitches and, when given the bill at the end, say something like, "Can't you just fix me because I'm a person and you don't want me to BLEED TO DEATH ON THE FLOOR IN FRONT OF YOU?" Services cost money because the people performing those services for you have expertise, and need to make a living, just like you do. That doesn't take away from the caring-about-your-work part. Well, sometimes it does, a little bit. But you know what I'm saying.

HOW TO KNOW IF YOUR PUBLICIST IS DOING A GOOD JOB

There are varying degrees of "good job" when it comes to a publicity campaign. A general indicator of your publicist performing well for you is a noticeable up-tick in coverage, and general recognition, that can be traced back to the start of your publicist advocating for you to the press.

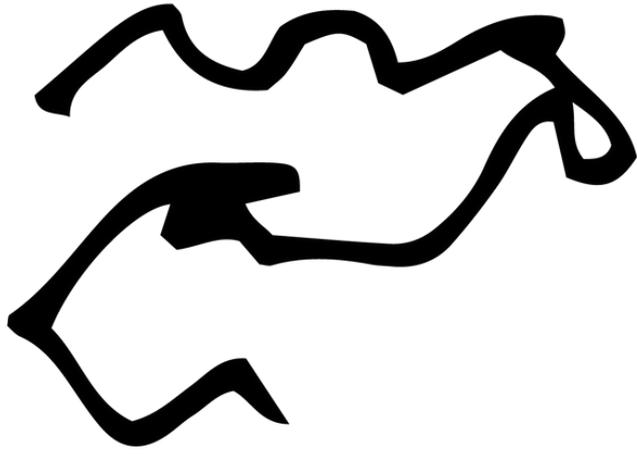
A good publicist will start the campaign by talking to you about where you'd ideally like to be featured, and then will regularly check in with you via phone or email to let you know what press they've reached out to, who seems interested, what's been concretely scheduled, and who's passed. One thing to note is that not a lot of writers will directly pass on a pitch. Instead, they'll only respond to a publicist's email if they're definitely interested in covering what we're pitching. This presents a delicate situation for a publicist, who then has to sniff out how many follow-ups will be okay to send before becoming annoying and bothersome to the writers they're contacting.

Overall, know that when working with a publicist, clarity and honesty is key. Getting press means your publicist is working hard for you, and producing good results, but in any campaign—be it for a bigger, more well-known artist, or someone just starting out—press isn't guaranteed. A publicist is still a good publicist if they're making every effort to land you amazing press, but don't produce quite the amount of press you'd hoped for. The work is still being done. It's important for an artist to have reasonable expectations, and to keep in mind that, with fewer and fewer publications, and fewer and fewer writers available to pitch, every publicist in the world is clamoring for press for their clients in what amounts to about ten or so well-known publications. At this point, Stevie Nicks' publicist and the publicist for the garage band down the street are all fishing from the same pool, so it's good to be happy with what you get. Something is always better than nothing, which is probably what you had before you hired a publicist.

IN SUMMARY...

If you're creating something you care about that you genuinely think other people would enjoy knowing about, it could make good sense for you to seek out and hire a publicist. If you have the money to do it, do it—that way you can use the time that would otherwise be spent talking about yourself to strangers doing what you'd probably much rather be doing (creating more cool stuff).

If you hire a publicist and they do good work for you and treat you warmly, treat them warmly in return. A publicist does a lot of work for their clients, but that doesn't make them a servant that can be kicked around. We're in this together. Also, a publicist isn't a magician. If you're brand-ass-new we probably won't be able to get you on Pitchfork, or in the New York Times, but we're sure as shit gonna try. Take note of the trying, and be thankful. Be nice. Writers who get our emails: this goes for you, too. Be cool. Don't be all... uncool. At least we don't work at Kohls, right?



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