

Advocating to Stakeholders

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In the final paragraph of his excellent book *Engaged With the Arts: Writings from the Frontline*, John Tusa remarks: 'The skill of arts management is to turn the awkward, obfuscating and bureaucratic into a language that truly serves the arts and their audiences.'¹ I feel in a similar position when using the words advocacy – what is it? – and, indeed, stakeholders: who are they? – as the terminology can seem unwieldy and the answers to these questions will be different for each individual institution.

The OED defines advocacy as 'pleading for or supporting', and a stakeholder as, 'a person with a concern or interest in ensuring the success of an organisation, business or system'. I hope we are not in the business of pleading too frequently with our stakeholders, but it is worth bearing in mind that the starting point for them, whoever they may be, is an interest in your success. Our job as good advocates is to help them find the point of common interest, and then prove we can deliver the success that they, as well as we, desire.

Advocacy to different stakeholders

A good starting point is to step back and consider how you like to be communicated with, and the different methods that suit different circumstances. This can range from being able to find the right information for taking the family swimming at your local pool, when all around you at home is domestic chaos and speedy easy decisions are paramount, to preparing a presentation on your next major exhibition for a potential tour partner when scholarly information, appropriate budgets and logistical arrangements and some kind of interpersonal relationship are all probably part of the mix. Thinking from other people's perspectives rather than yours, in order that you can explore with them what the points of interest might be and what the possible issues are, is a starting point for developing their relationship with you. In nearly all cases, facts of some kind are going to be required, but an annual exercise for the management team of any museum is going to involve a review of:

- Who are your stakeholders – actual and potential?
- What do they need to know?
- And how do they like to be communicated with?

There is a wide range of advocacy tools to employ, including but not exclusively:

- Large events – active or passive in terms of how information is communicated and engaged with.
- One to ones.
- Small events, including focus groups and meetings (we put our regular early morning visits to exhibitions in this category).
- Online and other messaging, large-scale or small.
- Publications and mailings, from Christmas cards to tickets.
- Telephone.
- People – staff, ex staff, board members and many more.

At [Tate Liverpool](#), we have also a range of systems to support advocacy. These include:

- IT packages (e.g. our Tate-wide relationship database, Pivotal).
- Methodologies and parameters (how are you mapping stakeholders? Who enters data? How often it gets revised?)
- External reference groups/sounding boards to help check tone, content and agree lists. Can be within current structures (e.g. board, members' group) or created specifically to target key segments for particular campaigns (e.g. families). Keeping your key advocates briefed is also important. (We send all our committee members bi-monthly email briefings so they have internal rationales for all current successes/disasters or press speculations. We also run an annual Tate Family Day where we bring all our committees together, from all over the country, to listen to a keynote speaker and work with Tate staff to develop thinking on particular big issues.)
- A communications gatekeeper who has an unerring eye for enforcing plain English throughout the organisation. Not everyone will understand what you think is meant by 'contemporary practice'.
- A written communications strategy, regularly reviewed, and data management owned by someone who really cares about getting people's names and titles correct. Ongoing responsibility for advocacy needs to be held at the heart of the organisation and at senior level.
- Regular communication with your staff, and their friends and families. Make sure your stakeholder lists include them and they are a regular part of your activity. (We run Friends and Family private views for all our major exhibitions so that staff see them first, for example.)
- Media or presentation training for those (including senior volunteers) who are going to need to present arguments most often. This could be given by a company to you as an in-kind donation.

One of the things to look at is segmenting your stakeholders. This is particularly important with invitations to events. Our starting point each year is to divide out key stakeholders into three lists – A, B and C – with each list having ideally no more than 200 names. 'As' are those who are closest to us, with whom we need to communicate most frequently and whom we probably invite to nearly everything. 'Cs' are those who may be very important but with whom we have a much remoter relationship. The Prime Minister is C, for example whilst the chair of our local Members committee is A. We then allocate a member of staff or volunteer to each relationship and map out a contact programme, as far ahead as seems appropriate. This may be per campaign, if you are running several key areas of advocacy, or for one period, with a (short) number of messages.

It is good to focus on the kind of communication which is:

- Appropriate for the information (long and complex arguments do not work well for email briefings).
- Appropriate in timing (avoid Christmas and the summer holidays for vital advocacy via public channels).
- Appropriate for the recipient (our Members like booking online but want to get the magazine through the post).
- Appropriately designed.

Review your communications to stakeholders, and the lists of them, regularly, not only internally but using external eyes, too. Don't give ownership of every key relationship to the most senior person in the organisation unless you really believe that person has the time to foster the relationships appropriately. Plan carefully what needs to be discussed with key stakeholders before anything goes public and think through counter arguments for how you will manage key messages.

Advocating to local government

I wish I could say that Tate has all the answers here. Although we are part of 2008 city funding, Tate has not been funded by Liverpool City Council outside this programme and so we are very much in an advocacy position ourselves at present, both in the city and regionally. One of the most difficult problems is being sure

who to talk to. Who really makes the decisions, and who influences the decision makers? What are the core priorities for the region and how, without compromising your activities, can you show what culture really contributes to these?

What information do you think you need? We have collated key facts on a number of projects, with the in-kind support of our local tourism partners. With special exhibitions such as the *Turner Prize 2007* and *Klimt*, we look at:

- The range and depth of media coverage.
- The number and range of national and international visitors.
- What else visitors do and spend whilst in Liverpool.
- The reason for their visit to the city.

This is to secure accurate and regular data showing what we contribute to the visitor economy of the city, the number and range of jobs we create and our impact with learning programmes. We mail this information to all local councillors and have regular meetings with as many as we can, as well as ensuring that key policy makers are asked to all openings and a range of other community-focused events.

We have found that it is not always easy to walk the tightrope between being able to deliver major skills and economic impacts for a city region, being seen as a core part of local community learning programmes, and maintaining international academic standards of excellence – but we try. Being able to present information about the intrinsic value of museums is similar in some ways to generating an informed sense of public art. We know that in 2008, for the first time, a museum (in fact, the British Museum) is the most popular visitor attraction in Britain, and in his 2006 NMDC report Tony Travers stated that Britain's museums were worth £1.5bn to the economy, a sum equivalent to the British car industry.

All of this may not wash with your local representatives, especially if your visitor numbers are currently under strain because your facilities and presentation are dated. As Janet Barnes of the York Museums Trust puts it: 'If they come and it's crap they won't come again. People's expectations are so high.' One of the most useful recent advocacy aids I have seen is the article by Simon Tait for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'Can Museums be a Potent Force in Social and Urban Regeneration?'. This contains a range of excellent case studies showing the impact of investment in a wide range of museums in terms of how they go beyond their traditional role and whether they can create a space where social issues can be examined in a publicly accessible way. Have a look at it online and see if it is helpful for you.²

In Liverpool we have found collective working particularly valuable. We have collaborated as a group of visual arts organisations to create VAIL (Visual Arts in Liverpool) which has given us combined, if limited resources, courtesy of a one-off grant from ACE NW, to help develop a stronger evidence and promotional base for the importance of visual arts in the city. This has included engaging Annabelle Jackson – responsible for the evaluation of the Fourth Plinth project which helped persuade Boris Johnson to keep the project going – to look at Liverpool's digital and public realm work and help develop some firm evidence as to why events like the Biennial are of real value to a wide range of stakeholders. Sharing this evidence, not least amongst ourselves, is going to be a very important piece of work, because for comparatively small expenditure, we have something we can all use individually and collectively.

Similarly, at Tate Liverpool we are part of LARC, the Liverpool Arts Regeneration Consortium, a range of organisations across all the art forms working together to promote the role of culture in Liverpool, and one of a number of ACE Thrive initiatives. This programme ranges from Sir Ken Robinson giving a keynote lecture to a range of key civic figures, to a combined programme of community engagement in North Liverpool, one of the most deprived areas of the country. Much of it is not about paying for activity but about collective working to agreed common aims. One of the most effective activities to date has been the fact that for two years the Chief Executives of the major arts organisations meet together, for two hours, every two weeks. This has enabled us to be seen as a quorate group with a regular focus for discussion, and therefore a forum for meeting with the city council, the Chief Constable, the universities and a range of other stakeholders, so that we are no longer a disparate rabble but a unified voice, engageable, easily, by others.

Who has an advocacy role? And what do they need to advocate effectively?

The starting point for this question is nearly always bigger than you think. A huge number of people are potential, if not actual stakeholders in your success. I think the way The Lowry has used its local older volunteer base within its building is an outstanding example of advocacy. They obviously love what they do; they are incredibly well informed about The Lowry and its programmes; they provide brilliant service; and I bet they promote The Lowry hugely within their various local communities.

What people need to advocate effectively will vary according to their role and the people they are going to need to communicate with. It could be a great website or a good phonescript or an intensive trustee presentation. But the starting point of genuine enthusiasm combined with genuine knowledge is a pretty essential one. Another one is succinct messages and appropriate answers, particularly if you are focusing on a key campaign. People may want to know that you are broadly seen as interesting or popular or very attractive to families, but if you are acquiring a particular work of art they will want to know specifics about how (or whether) you will display it, whether you are going to share it with other institutions, and how it is going to contribute to your learning programmes online.

Local and national advocacy: what works and what does not?

‘Tate lifts break down – as busy as Primark.’ This headline, taken from the *Liverpool Daily Post* during the 2007 *Turner Prize* exhibition, could be seen as both a positive and a negative in the advocacy armoury. It shows we are busy (good) but also that the building does not always work (not good – but good in our campaign internally at Tate to show why they need renewing). It also compares the offer at Tate Liverpool indirectly to that of a high-street store currently not known for best practice in eco-friendly or child labour controls over its product (not good – but helpful in our internal campaign at Tate to show that the lifts need renewing).

I give this example to demonstrate that you will never be totally in control over what the press say, but if your advocacy programme is good enough, you can either turn it to your advantage, or have a range of voices prepared to put an alternative view into place pretty swiftly. The warning corollary is that the reality of what you deliver is also intrinsic to such advocacy being effective. No message will work if the institutional actuality is hollow.

In terms of local and national advocacy for museums and galleries, the earlier suggestions about what works well in terms of appropriate communication, level of contact and tone and length of messages are often the same, although with local stakeholders the transparency and sincerity of contact and appropriateness of message are *very* important. If you get it wrong, and the local community does not support you, it will be very hard for others to feel comfortable backing you. It is a long haul, often over several years, to give people a sense of ownership of what you do. Tate St Ives came into being in the first place because of a dedicated, determined and well-connected local support group. Tate Liverpool felt isolated from the City Council for many years because it was perceived as having been ‘organised’ by a London – and worse, Tory – government. Ownership in the first case came through many, many small-scale local meetings, mostly in people’s homes; in the second, through dint of keeping going over a number of years to build a reputation for our work, and measuring hard the various impacts that this has had for the city and the region. Suitable consultation is critical but it is also important to ensure that ownership is understood. Is your local community going to direct the programme content? Do they expect to? Do you know what they expect?

I am going to close with one good and one bad example of advocacy. My good example is the Whitworth Art Gallery’s capital plan document. I was unable to go to the launch of this campaign, but shortly afterwards received an admirably succinct, clear and attractive document, together with a one page and personal letter from the Director, whom I know. I am now a stakeholder in their success because I feel I know about the project to the right degree of detail and I have been appropriately communicated with. For all top tips on advocacy, do not talk to me but see Maria Balshaw.

For a truly bad example of national advocacy, it would be hard to find a worse example than the handling of the ACE 2007 Spending review communication. The independent report of why this went so wrong, swiftly commissioned from Dame Genista MacKintosh by ACE in 2008, makes salutary reading, as it shows that organisations of any size can get it wrong, particularly if a variety of elements combine. These include a perception that people have not been communicated with, even though the Arts Council spent an enormous amount of time sending letters, briefing the media and talking to individual stakeholders. Expectation management and not feeling able to communicate either the strategy for the new ACE portfolio fully or good news about individual Revenue Funded Organisations, let alone not foreseeing the scale of the sector's reaction, means that the overwhelming memory for most of us of the 2007 Spending review is of a stage full of some of the most famous arts faces in Britain lambasting the lone figure of the Chief Executive of the Arts Council, as if he was tied to a stake like a bear: a whole new meaning to the term 'stakeholder'. But as the independent report points out, the problems were not just due to communications. They were about internal decision-making and the culture of an organisation that did not realise that these factors had an impact on its communication with the outside world. The importance of external touchstones to help ensure your advocacy is appropriate cannot be underestimated.

On a final note, one part of advocacy which should not be ignored at either local or national level is saying thank you appropriately. The celebratory drinks for your membership committee who have just reached their recruitment target, the card when one of your ex Trustees gets an honour, the phone call to the councillor who has helped endorse your HLF bid – basic good manners all, but fundamental to advocacy.

Notes

1. John Tusa, *Engaged with the Arts: Writings from the Frontline*, London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007, p.223.
2. Simon Tait, 'Can Museums be a Potent Force in Social and Urban Regeneration?', *Viewpoint*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, September 2008, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/pdf/2262.pdf>

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