

PLEASE COVER MY FESTIVAL!

WHY GENERIC MAIL-OUTS AREN'T VERY EFFECTIVE

by WIM DU MORTIER

Although festivals are very capable of reaching their target audience through social media and their websites, the role of new and traditional media has not yet been played out. In fact, music lovers still like to look for information that matches their preferences in magazines, blogs, radio stations and newspapers. Those channels therefore influence the choices made about which festivals to visit, and which to skip. This makes it still vital for a festival organisation to get the attention of the press. But how do you get them interested?

Every summer, hundreds of festivals are organised. They will probably all get some form of media attention, but one has to make do with two lines and a pleasant-looking photo afterwards in a small local paper, while the other will be commended a full-page preview in a well-read daily newspaper. When you look at all media outlets - even those that only focus on music - it may seem that the choices of which festival gets substantial coverage, are made a bit haphazardly. In this elusive landscape, festivals must try to get attention for their event. And if tickets need to be sold, it can be crucial that this attention comes well before the festival takes place.

Menno Pot (journalist for Dutch daily newspaper Volkskrant), Jessie Atkinson (former editor-in-chief of the English Gigwise), Niels Bruwier (founder of the Belgian Dansende Beren website), Erik van den Berg (editor-in-chief Dutch music magazine OOR) and Paul Cox (aka Paul Artrock of the London radio show of the same name) let us pick their brain and explain how they make their decisions on what to write about, which generated seven useful tips.

TIP 1: EVERY JOURNALIST IS DIFFERENT

Journalists reporting on festivals come in all shapes and sizes. There are devoted specialists who are professionally involved with music every hour of the day, analysing and explaining trends while constantly seeking news and in-depth stories. You can then make

'Ticket giveaways are always interesting for us. And it's great for the readers. We'll write an article with festival tips and close off with a giveaway. That benefits everybody'

Niels Bruwier - Dansende Beren



a distinction between, for example, newspaper journalists and music journalists who write professionally for music magazines. The worldwide web has made it very easy to start your own media outlet, resulting in a horde of amateur pop journalists. However, it would be unfair to lump them all together. They range from hobbyists who do their work without any journalistic knowledge to passionate music lovers who create a product with a well-defined concept, investing every minute of their free time. Therefore, they easily deserve the title of semi-professional.

Niels Bruwier and his website Dansende Beren belong to the latter group. With a small smirk, he explains that when he started his own blog, all he wanted to do was write about the music that appealed to him. It was never his intention to turn it into something bigger. But in the years that have passed since, his blog has become a hugely popular website run with the help of about a hundred volunteers, thirty of whom are very active and review a concert almost every week. It's an impressive operation with a professional touch. Bruwier has a clear picture of what Dansende Beren should be and he monitors that formula closely. On the other hand, his group of volunteers has the characteristics of devoted amateurs with various motivations for their work. Bruwier says that fun and the contacts with other people form his motive: 'The main reason to do it is the gratitude you'll receive from different kinds of people. Plus, there are always super cool opportunities to experience things that others never will. At the major festivals, for example, we are welcomed into the press room like the "real" journalists. The only difference is that we're not making a living by writing about music. And we certainly don't do the job out of obligation like most other journalists you'll find there. They simply have to be there for whoever they work for.' Bruwier takes pleasure in the fact that festival organisations are so welcoming. No wonder, he thinks, because through a channel like Dansende Beren, said festival reaches exactly the music lovers who buy festival tickets. 'I think that if we write about a band coming to a festival, fans will be more likely to notice it. For example, if a newspaper writes about a lineup announcement of an alternative festival, their readers, who buy the paper for news on politics or sports or whatever, probably won't recognise any names, and they're likely to think it's a bad festival. While our readers think, "Wow, those are some cool bands!" In that way, I think a pie-

'If a new festival is successful the first year, and is attended by influencers active on social or traditional media, it can count on a lot more attention the second year'

Jessie Atkinson - Gigwise



ce on our website is more effective.'

Menno Pot who works for Dutch newspaper Volkskrant looks at the phenomenon of amateur pop journalists from a different perspective: 'I consider the good ones to be fully-fledged colleagues but there is a certain proliferation,' he notes. 'Festivals should perhaps maintain a bit of hierarchy when it comes to that. For example, when you're applying for accreditation, it can be somewhat annoying if you are lumped together with all kinds of well-intentioned amateurs who are mainly after a free ticket.' Pot gives the example of the decades long attention his newspaper has given to the Dutch Lowlands festival which always includes full-page stories, superbly designed with beautiful photography. 'I'd like to think that's important to a festival. They should make a distinction between professionals and amateurs. Festivals should think "let's make sure that our trusted, large, national media partners, who we have known for a long time, are treated well." By that I mean: work facilities. No need to wine and dine us.'

A festival organisation should always keep in mind that all journalists are different, and the target audience of the media outlet they work for plays a role in their motivation to cover a festival or not. Journalists and media outlets are not always drawn to the same things. This phenomenon is a common thread throughout the following tips.

TIP 2: AN APPEALING LINE-UP

"That's stating the obvious," you probably think. Indeed, all members of the press consulted mention an appealing lineup as an important factor. Jessie Atkinson, who was at the helm of English Gigwise, emphasises that a lineup with "hyped bands" is important for the decision of whether or not to write about a festival. She also considers whether a festival is well-attended.

However, when questioned, more differences come to light in how these journalists perceive an appealing lineup. To some, exclusive headliners are a benchmark. Paul Artrock of Artrock Radio, on the other hand, can't stop gushing about Left of the Dial's - as the journalist calls it - "non-headliners policy." In fact, to him, that alone is reason enough to regard it as a festival you simply have to cover. In other cases, he filters festivals based on genre and whether that genre will appeal to the lis-

teners of his radio show. →

All journalists agree that an interesting lineup should offer something special. In the vast selection of festivals, almost the same series of bands play in a different town every week. Festivals with such generic lineups usually aren't worth anyone's time. Niels Bruwier: 'We don't want to write the same review every week about that one band that plays the same set at yet another festival. Who cares.' Erik van den Berg: 'We're looking for bands that pique our curiosity. Or better yet, bands that we've never heard of. But not too many all at once, or it will make our heads spin! Obviously, we'll first look at a festival's profile and their lineup, and whether that suits our target group – and our own profile. It helps if the lineup is somewhat international, preferably including some exciting artists that haven't played in the Netherlands yet. We're not interested in small

festivals that only feature the same Dutch acts you see in your local music venue all year round.'

Bruwier is looking for unique festivals, with "cool names". 'If a festival organisation manages to book bands which you can't see anywhere else you tend to think "those people really know their music". I totally understand however that some festivals have to rely on local acts to play it safe. But that also makes it less relevant to us to write about.'

TIP 3: AN INTRIGUING STORY

For many journalists, the overall story a festival tries to tell matters. Paul 'Artrocker' Cox is very outspoken about this. Artrocker Radio is deeply rooted in the post-punk scene in London and beyond. It used to be a magazine, then turned into a radio show combined

with a whirlwind of activities like promoting concerts and running a record label. The DIY ethos and whether this plays a role in a festival's image weigh heavily on them. 'We have always been independent. That background determines which bands, labels, and festivals we sympathise with. There is an unspoken camaraderie in this scene. The fact that we all struggle is our common ground, and mutual support is therefore essential. So yeah, that's a weighty factor.' Cox pays close attention to the commercial setup of a festival and which sponsors are involved. But also, which music venues are participating tells a part of the "story" of a festival. 'You pick up a vibe from how they present themselves. The ticket price is also important to us; it has to be affordable. We're also interested in what an organisation brags about, what's their narrative? It gives an idea of what motivates them and what they are interested in. Whether that speaks to us definitely plays a role in our decision-making.'

Jessie Atkinson advises festivals to try and develop an eye-catching and unique brand. And Erik van den Berg also emphasises the importance of a clear profile. 'Make sure you underline your unique selling points. Especially when it comes to your lineup, try to stand out. Try to approach things differently, surprise us with a special location or an unexpected set-up. When you send out a press release, avoid terms like "something for everyone" or "Will and the People".'

The potential background story is the decisive factor in whether Volkskrant will devote any pages to a festival. Menno Pot explains that his newspaper would never accept the kind of festival report that just briefly reviews dozens of bands. 'Festival marketers tend to mainly boast about their lineup, but the overall story of that specific festival edition is actually much more important. I was at the Dutch festival Pinkpop last weekend, which was really interesting because the festival is clearly in transition. They're moving from big, classic rock acts to a more pop-oriented lineup. Musically, it was a somewhat poor weekend for me, but I do understand what they are trying to do, and I saw that their usual crowd had also partly changed. The festival was distinctly trying to reinvent itself. Well, there you have it, the story of the 2023 edition.'

But even the best of stories doesn't guarantee you a lengthy piece in his newspaper. For example, the Rotterdam Bluegrass Festival just missed out on the selection this year. 'That was a bit of bad luck because the marketer, Gijs van de Burgt, actually did everything a marketer could possibly do. He really tried to help us find the right angle. Bluegrass might seem like a niche genre, but it's gaining popularity surprisingly fast in the Netherlands. The growth of this festival shows this, and also the fact that Dutch pop act Bertolf is releasing a bluegrass album, for example. Van de Burgt pointed out that there is a story to be had here. That helps. We do try to find these stories ourselves, but sometimes we overlook something that could

'Details matter at festivals. Has any thought been given to what music is played before a band comes on? How are you welcomed at the door and what is the attitude of security? How is the sound quality at the venues? Does a band thank the festival after their show, and are they proud to play there?'

Paul 'Artrocker' Cox – Artrocker Radio



very well be interesting to our readers. If a festival representative points us to such a story, we're grateful, and that might set the wheels in motion.'

Alas, the Bluegrass Festival didn't end up in the paper due to other priorities: The Weekend - the most-listened-to artist of that moment - played his first Dutch arena show, and Defqon - a huge gabber party - took place that same weekend. Newsworthiness is ultimately the determining factor in the journalistic consideration, and also the number of attendees is taken into account, explains Pot. 'However, we don't always opt for the massive, and most popular festivals. We do occasionally pick the smaller events. It differs per weekend. These are perhaps quite whimsical, and personal choices that come about in consultation with the three pop editors of Volkskrant. To some extent, there's an emotional consideration involved. But always in good conscience, I may add.' And sometimes there simply isn't enough space in the newspaper, and the pop editors don't get to write anything at all. 'In that respect, trying to plug a festival is sometimes a bit of a losing battle,' Pot concludes sympathetically.

TIP 4: GIVE INFORMATION IN A TIMELY MATTER

Amateur or professional, all journalists emphasise that they like to be notified in good time and expect to receive correct information. Niels Bruwier: 'An exciting story and the announcement of interesting names are obviously valuable, but the most important thing is that the information is sent well in advance. If you email a lineup announcement after you've released it to the public, we usually won't write about it because the relevance is completely gone. You also have to take into consideration that we can't always immediately invest the time to write an article. Only band names are usually enough for us, though. Yet, information like "this is the only EU show for this British band" may help. It makes it exclusive and more newsworthy.'

Menno Pot also likes to receive press releases in a timely manner. 'So, we can plan ahead. PR reps might sometimes get the idea that they are just shooting blanks and their messages go unseen, but that is really not the case. We keep track of everything; that's why they really shouldn't try to engage us in lengthy email dialogues. That will only slow things down. Even if they don't receive a reply, they can trust us to have read it.' Insight into upcoming events helps the newspaper make their choices. The Volkskrant editors spend a lot of time planning, says Pot. Every year, a plan is put together based on the festival calendar that is as complete as possible. The "Dutch big five" are always included: Pinkpop, Best Kept Secret, Down the Rabbit Hole, North Sea Jazz, and Lowlands. In addition, there are four or five festivals to choose from every week, 'and then I don't even count the festivals that we'd disregard anyway.' Timely information is also important in case

the newspaper wants to preview a festival. 'If there is a really great story to a festival, we might consider calling the organisation or a performing artist and write a recommendation. We do try to do such things, but it's not always possible.'

TIP 5: PROPER FACILITIES

What journalists need to be able to do their job differs depending on the working method of the medium they work for. For blogs without their own photographers, for example, access to stock photos can be essential. Every journalist benefits from a quiet place to work on their report, and it's even a pure necessity for the professional who has to quickly send their work to an editor. 'Sufficient power outlets, an internet connection, well-functioning Wi-Fi, enough lockers, and a somewhat quiet place to work,' Menno Pot sums up. 'If that is taken care of, I'm really content.' He recalls how journalists used to have to work at Pinkpop, in a small building, while the locals were hoisting beer. 'Journalists were sitting in a corner near an outlet with laptops on their knees. That has improved drastically. It's just that it's a bit of a sore point for music journalists; music journalism is often not considered a proper job, we're often seen as hobbyists, more or less. If such a press room turns out to be the place to be for party people, you might feel like your job is not taken seriously. We like to be treated as the professionals we are. At least I do.'

At Dansende Beren, each volunteer decides for themselves which concerts and festivals they review. 'With them all being Belgians, it's sometimes hard to find a volunteer specifically for festivals abroad. Sometimes, festival organisers try to lure us in with an extra ticket, for example. And that helps because it's more fun for our volunteers if they don't have to go on their own.' Another tip from Bruwier

'Festival organisers are almost always amazing people. They do an incredible amount of work for a fairly uncertain income. Almost by definition, they are lovely people to deal with who try to sincerely promote music. And we try to sincerely do justice to their work'

Menno Pot - Volkskrant



is to welcome the journalists informally. → 'We were at Paaspop, and the festival started with a small welcome party held in the press room, a one-hour gathering with free drinks to meet up with the organisers and the other journalists. We immediately felt at ease and welcome. It made us feel more involved.'

TIP 6: MAKE IT PERSONAL

All journalists have their own motivations for writing about a festival, so a personal approach makes sense. From the emails he receives, Niels Bruwier can quickly tell whether a festival is passionate about their work. 'You know, those generic mail-outs that feel like no effort has been put into them. It even happens that people address you by the wrong name. That makes me think if you won't put in the effort, neither will I.'

A genuinely personal approach is engaging, says Bruwier. Paul Cox is also pleasantly surprised when he receives a quick and personal response. 'That's actually quite rare. The bigger the festival, the less that happens. Of course, that's understandable. Still, I see no reason why, as a festival organisation, you wouldn't personally sign an email. When I hear about a festival and I'm trying to get more information, it's a plus if they're easily approachable. And also, personable. At the end of the day, it's about connecting with people. When that happens, it makes the job much more fun.'

Menno Pot is also sensitive to this: 'A personal approach helps. By now, we have known many of the people working at festivals for a long time, and they know us. Those informal connections are helpful. It's not that we're doing favors, though. I have no problem telling well-known contacts like Gijs van de Burgt or Minke Weeda of Left of the Dial, "Sorry, it's not going to happen." And they don't mind that either. But it is preferable if you can have those conversations on a somewhat equal level.'

TIP 7: NO NAGGING

To be fair and square, festival marketers can sometimes be a source of annoyance. Erik van den Berg gives a shining example: 'Passive-aggressive sentences such as "Please share this on your website and socials tomorrow, preferably after 12 noon." We like to decide for ourselves whether we share something. We are not an advertising agency that you pay to do whatever you want. We make our own choices.'

Endlessly following up on emails or press releases is also a sure way to get on journalists' nerves. Niels Bruwier sometimes feels like

'A special, somewhat relaxed location sometimes helps. That's the reason I go to Misty Fields every year. Great lineup, not too crowded, and a beautiful rural setting: a forest in De Peel. Unique. But don't tell anyone else, I don't want it to get overly crowded'

Erik van den Berg - OOR

he's being stalked: 'People asking me multiple times a day if I've seen their email. That really doesn't help your case. If I'm not responding, not even after your third email, there really is no point in trying again. On the other hand, sometimes your first email is overlooked because the information didn't really speak to us. It's always good to follow up with new, more interesting information.'

Menno Pot is not easily bothered, and he always primarily focuses on content. 'Music is leading, not the PR that comes with it. I think it wouldn't be fair to dismiss a festival based on just a personal faux pas. If someone tries to push their festival a bit too aggressively, and I were to decide on that basis, "damn what a load of bollocks, screw your festival," it would be an incredibly childish and unjust assessment.'

Erik van den Berg is also rarely annoyed by festival marketing in general, although he's not keen on weekly email attacks with endless lineup announcements. But if it's done somewhat innovatively, then it can be effective, he concludes. 'Despite the considerable amount of press releases full of new names that invariably mean nothing to me, I wouldn't say one bad word about Left of the Dial. Somehow, they manage to hit the right note. They have a good sense of humor, which is also important. A few years ago, they reached out to journalists with a kind of fictional, personalised news report. Much to my surprise, I read my own name in the enclosed newspaper clipping: "Erik van den Berg is going to Left of the Dial this year!" Magnificent. That really got me on their side.' 🤖

