



The Central Council PR Committee held an open day in Wellesbourne on Saturday 25 February. This conference day was intended to attract anyone interested in promoting bellringing and getting local or national publicity for their ringing activities. It was also an excellent networking opportunity.

Although there has been excellent coverage of restoration projects, public open days (such as the Heritage Open Days), recruitment events, ringing for First World War anniversaries and so on, often publicity is local and is about just one tower.

The day consisted of a mix of external experts, panel discussion and group work to define the key elements which make public relations a success (or a failure), action plans to become more effective, and to overcome any barriers we face. The idea was to share lots of ideas, interesting initiatives and experience. It promised to be an exciting day, with a wide diversity of people attending, and participants got to know, and compare notes with, other ringers facing the same issues as themselves at a very reasonable price including buffet lunch and refreshments of £18.

The day was organised by Kate Flavell, Caroline Stockmann and Nick together with a number of Council colleagues who facilitated groups.

Caroline sent out pre-reading for the day beforehand and asked everyone to take a look and start to think about what they feel is needed to make public relations more effective for the bell ringing community. This included a mix of PR strategy 'Achieving public awareness' (John Harrison), Group Visit/Open Tower best practices (Giles Blundell), The Effective PR Officer powerpoint presentation (Caroline Stockmann) and an example of an eye-catching PR poster.

The morning began with coffee and refreshments, a welcome from Nick who dealt with housekeeping issues and an introduction to Caroline.

Caroline explained her background in business (where she has organised similar days before, albeit on different themes) and some of the PR activity she has recently organised such as the Julie McDonnell press release and getting the Telegraph engaged. She welcomed everyone and gave participants clear expectations of the day. We all have feelings about the future of bellringing and whether we want to restore bells, deal with the person banging on the door wanting us to stop ringing or need to recruit more bellringers, we need to develop engagement strategies. We are all volunteers and most have other careers, so this is not about changing people's vocations to that of PR, but about tips and tricks to get bell ringing the engagement needed from stakeholders. The day was designed to provide a forum for debate and discussion with external experts so we can work together on 'selling' bellringing to other people. Caroline introduced a 'people bingo' ice-breaker and Dave Richards began filming the proceedings.

Kate introduced the first guest speaker of the session **'how to get engaged with the press, and get press releases noticed'** as someone who understands PR and bellringing, she thanked him for generously giving his time and advised us to make the most of the opportunity.

Kate's introduction: Rob Orchard is the co-founder and editorial director of the Slow Journalism Company, the publisher of Delayed Gratification magazine, which revisits the events of the preceding quarter after the dust has settled and makes a virtue of being "Last to Breaking News". The publication is a labour of love that's designed to offer an antidote to PR-driven stories, knee-jerk reactions and churnalism. Prior to starting the Slow Journalism Company, Rob launched and ran magazines for Virgin Atlantic, created the Middle East's biggest travel magazine and worked as the

editor of Time Out Dubai, Time Out Croatia and Time Out Paris. He also happens to be a slightly lapsed ringer and the son of Nigel Orchard, who you will know as the Chairman of the Board of the Ringing World Ltd.

Rob referred to the changed current media landscape due to the advent of the internet, with papers losing money, a proliferation of news outlets, diffusion of audiences, an infinite number of sources and false news emerging. He painted a fairly bleak picture, with adverts no longer funding publications and the use of ad blockers anyway. 24/7 new coverage and infinite digital space – he referenced Simon McCoy's brutally honest assessment of the arrival of the Royal baby while struggling to fill airtime outside hospital. However this is good for us as we are not trying to reach the masses, we are looking for people like us and we can target editors desperate for stories! In this 'brave new slightly tattered territory' editors are the gatekeepers. Good ideas can cut through – but the days of the mass press release are behind us. Instead its best to target three publications with emails, personalised and geared up with content instead. Golden rules of pitching a story to an editor - know who you've sent the content to before. Editors are looking for ideas to make their life easier and want to know why it is relevant to them. Make their life easy - provide free photos or have a cache readily available. A good headline is another tick in the box if you can provide that for them. The subject header of an email is important too, make it interesting. Do not use a generic email, personalise your email, find a name, send it direct. Flatter editors, like their stuff. Be realistic - only offer what you can deliver. Keep it short, say who you are and who you are representing. Make them care - use a hook, why now? Not timeless pieces, use interesting angles - 'alternative ways to keep fit'. Use arresting facts / quotes / stats to grab their attention, like Julie McDonnell has raised £7 million! Follow up a few days later - they are busy people.

Use a great front person for contact with the media as this will make a difference. Who will articulate best, to attract the right kind of person. Look at the kind of publications you are aiming for; if it's youngsters look at Buzzfeed for example. Link to other causes, themes, stories - it's all about positioning. Set up a database of ringing images and copy for articles.

Bellringing isn't new so align it to another cause or story and there are people who have been doing this quite successfully. Highlight examples of what is good about ringing: it improves co-ordination, team work, exercise, mental gymnastics you can do it for most of your life! Tailor the content to your audience, eg history, maintenance, maths. History can be used in your favour. Not necessarily for younger people but if you have archives of stories they can be fed into local interest magazines these could be a rich mine and might get the press thinking about bellringing. It can be a double-edged sword but it can work for you! Manage negative publicity, build on current successes; like Julie McDonnell, use figures, like raising £7 million!

Exclusivity is powerful as we all want a one-off. You can have one story with different angles for different publications, and milk it in another way. Build a series of relationships with editors of publications to make them look forward to items as you build trust with them. Contact church notices editor as they don't have many good stories.

Social media has the advantage of drawing people into your orbit for stories, pictures, blog - e-blast weekly newsletter to keep people interested and engaged.

There could be a perception problem as bellringing is not necessarily seen as cool. Is there a national campaign happening to link with i.e. Heritage Open Days? Bellringers are idiosyncratic but very welcoming and have a lot of warmth - this is good potential for spreading stories. If the perception is of older people, focus on the university ringers, focus on interesting careers, - nice

people, not odd! Publicise the nice bits eg teas, pubs, the social side; 30% ringing, 70% nice understandable stuff. The set-up for radio and TV is different as you need to find out who is the commissioning editor for a programme and reach them. For Facebook you need to reach the community business and lifestyle pages; it's about uniting the community eg posting on village websites. Facebook pages rather than groups should be used, and check other pages for ideas and follow them: church/village community; local publications looking for some content.

Caroline presented the slides 'The Effective PR Officer' and directed the group work, which was to develop strategies for the effective PR Officer, or indeed for anyone who rings a bell, to make PR more effective. She discussed how they got the Julie McDonnell story into the Daily Telegraph, and how once you succeed, this can lead on to more regular exposure, -

- eg radio, TV and magazines are all interested in Julie now.

The PR Matters Day application forms collected information about participants – how long have you been ringing, how long have you been in a role/association, what is your interest in PR, and in this event? What would you like to get out of it/contribute to it (please don't be shy – as if)! Using this information the team was able to ensure a good mix across the groups. There was a vast array – senior ringers with years of experience and those who began a couple of years ago, those in official posts, those who were looking to share experience in PR and others who were keen to find out more. Each group of half a dozen for the breakout sessions was facilitated by a PR Committee member/CC helper.

The groups had 45 minutes to reach a consensus on a list of the top five things/strategies to make the PR role effective. A spokesperson from each group presented their five, all were displayed on a wall, and each person voted with five post-it notes as to which things were the most important, so the common themes emerged.

Lunch followed, - a great spread provided by Veronica, a retired professional caterer and wife of local bellringer Peter Quinn, and her team, who were terrific. Sue Hall of Derby DA was spending her birthday there so Caroline bought a cake and we all sang happy birthday to her!

After lunch Kate introduced **Harriet Roberts and Ben Thomson:**

Harriet is a freelance creative consultant. She masterminded the communications behind Heritage Open Days last year for the National Trust and negotiated the coverage about bell ringing with the BBC including the local radio survey and the BBC Songs of Praise feature. Harriet's comment quoted by Kate Flavell "I know so much about ringing you would not believe that I was not a ringer unless you put a rope in my hands!"

She has worked as a programme maker herself with the BBC for 20 years. Her main work for the last three years has been managing the Blackburn Business Improvement District and her skills in partnership working, communication and event management were rewarded last year when the town was crowned champion in the Great British High Street awards beating 26 other finalists.

Ben Thomson

Ben is a BBC Broadcast manager, multi-media professional and creative leader. He has more than 20 years BBC programme making and journalism experience, including big brand BBC campaigns, partnership and community events. Additional public sector experience includes a proven track record in public relations and corporate communications, including experience gained in a high profile public service press office.

Harriet and Ben are married and make a dynamic couple. They had answers for everything that was thrown at them! Harriet said 'you all sound like a network of experts to me' - but you don't have to be an expert to help with PR, you need passion and storytelling. It's about PR for your own community, your identity is your brand, communication is your marketing and content is king. Pick up on Awareness Days, don't be frightened to push boundaries, piggyback everything you find. Mental health is a current issue, look at Will's & Kate's interests. Finding new angles will help you reach new audiences. Enthusiastic people help get others on board as people want to be with/like such people – it's infectious. Just because you're a volunteer doesn't mean you don't have enough time; planning is important, - put it in your diary, have a plan and add time to do it! Have a list of when/how to contact press, let people help when they can, rather than having to be on a committee. Target people individually to help you - flatter them. Steal ideas! Use smartphones - Ben spoke about *Humans of New York* a photoblog featuring street portraits and interviews collected on the streets of New York started by a photographer which has developed a huge following through social media, and said we could do the same, steal the idea, flood the internet with different images of bellringing and bell ringers. Use YouTube!

How do you get your press release to float to the top above all the churnalism? Ask what people want, get ideas from them, ask what would work, almost craft that press release. Plan what day to send it out, the time of year. Every story has a journey. If phone calls don't work then visit them; everyone has a reception, keep at it. Ben wanted to know 'Are you consuming your local paper, watching local television because if not them how are you going to engage with those who do?' Thought-provoking and inspiring.

The top 5 things we agreed on for effective PR were as follows:

- be enthusiastic, positive, pro-active & professional
- develop a central repository of resources (joined-up, sharing, coordination)
- research and reach out to targets, plan, use the right 'hooks'
- relationship-building
- knowledge of social media.

How do we put our top five into practice?

The groups worked together to determine what support they needed to achieve the agreed five points, and how to overcome barriers, then fed back to everyone, and an action list was agreed, which Caroline typed as the outcomes were presented. We saw our hard work come to fruition in front of our eyes, and it was so rewarding and inspiring to work hard in discussions to reach these conclusions together.

Christopher O'Mahoney, Vice President of the Central Council and participant, thanked the PR Committee for organising the entertaining, informative and useful day. He said he had really enjoyed the day; bellringing brings people and communities together locally and nationally, bells call people together. He spoke about the work of the Central Council and survival of ringing, of exciting new developments and the current review, of advocacy with other organisations, and outreach work. The new web site gives anyone an opportunity to be a friend of the Central Council and to subscribe. He asked everyone to take a look and thanked everyone for a wonderful day.

Kate thanked everyone for their enthusiasm and participation. She looked at the top five items for effective PR, particularly the central resources, and asked everyone there to help out: you don't need to be Central Council members! We are all volunteers, we need good teams to help us deliver what we want to do our work better, and we need good teams to help us all deliver together what we have presented today. Kate invited people to let her know now, or send an email another day!

Caroline asked delegates to feedback by expressing their satisfaction by placing a cross on a flip chart with a diagonal line bottom left to top right, axes being quality of content and quality of delivery. The results were all bunched up at the top right!

The PR Committee later rang a Quarter Peal of Grandsire Triples at St Peter's Wellesbourne to round off a successful PR Matters day and linked it to the event Bellringers Strike Back Against Blood Cancer (SBABC) <http://bb.ringingworld.co.uk/view.php?id=1163618>. No 7 conducted and it was his 250th QP as conductor and 125th QP of Grandsire Triples.

Then, at the end of the day as we were checking into the hotel, Kate invited us to join them for service ringing in the morning; my sidekick just said 'Awesome'.

Alison Everett, SCACR Communications and Events Team Leader 02.03.17

