

The Essential Show PR Plan

How to ensure maximum publicity and a sell-out for your school musical – every time

“It is a hopeless endeavour to attract people to a theatre, unless they can be first brought to believe that they will never get in.”

Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*

You want your school musical to be a “hot ticket”. Nothing less than a sell-out for every performance will do.

You don’t want to just cover your costs. You want a handsome surplus that can be ploughed back in to future productions, or used to buy new lights or sound equipment, or put towards school/club fundraising.

The pr and promotional campaign for your school musical starts here.

And it begins as soon as you have chosen a show, and decided on the dates for performance.

Below you will find Limelight Musicals’ top ten tips for promoting your show – to help make it a sell-out.

1

Appoint a Publicity Manager

A successful school musical needs someone to look after publicity. Along with a choreographer and musical director, there needs to be someone appointed to take responsibility for promoting the show.

The director and producer may often be tempted to add this to their list of responsibilities. Don't do it if you can possibly avoid it. If you *do* take it on, it is guaranteed that, before long, publicity will be crowded out by the 101 other things that need doing.

Do this:

- **Appoint a Publicity Manager:** Ask someone from among parents or staff who is creative and who, ideally, has some experience of promotion, publicity writing or pr to become Show Publicity Manager. It will transform the publicity impact for your show.
- **Someone who is persuasive and creative:** If you don't have someone with a professional angle, ask a person who is good at drumming up support for things, is chatty and creative – and who can write persuasively and is capable of picking up the phone and talking to the local paper. There's one on every team!

2

Announce you are doing a show

It may sound obvious, but you'd be surprised how many people don't announce they are staging a production... until way down the track. And then, it's more of a whimper than a bang.

It's as if they were conducting a "stealth" operation, with everything kept under wraps – just in case someone gets to hear about it. **Don't miss the opportunity to make a splash!** You need to generate a sense of anticipation and excitement around your show, from the off.



Staging a musical production is a real event in the life of a school or theatre club. It is a huge opportunity for children, parents and staff to get involved and shine. Make sure it is on everyone's agenda – and family calendar.

When you have chosen your show and decided on performance dates, choose the day for your show launch. Then, make the announcement. It will create an immediate buzz of excitement in the school and among parents.

Do this:

- **Announce it to the school:** Announce it to the whole school on the same day – ideally in assembly. Tell children and staff what your production is about, give a quick run-down on the main characters, play a killer song to give them a taste, and announce when you will be holding auditions. That will put the cat among the pigeons!
- **Send a letter home:** Give every child a letter to take home from you as producer/director. Tell parents about the show, provide performance dates “for your diary”, and announce when auditions will be held. Also, don’t miss an opportunity to invite help – list the kinds of things that need doing and the roles to fill. You can put on a “reply form” on the bottom for parents wanting to volunteer. Before you know it, you will have an army of helpers chomping at the bit to lend a hand, with everything from costumes, lighting, prompt, stage management, moving things, making things, behind stage work – the list, as you know only too well, is endless.
- **Start a dedicated Show Notice Board:** Create a “Show Notice Board” in the school where everyone - children, staff and parents - can see it. Start with a show poster and performance dates, then add audition info, rehearsal dates, casting, etc as you go. Keep it updated, so people can see the show developing, as your opening approaches.
- **Create a show web page:** Create a “Show News” page on the school web site, and keep it updated. Put up pictures of rehearsals, the main characters, important dates and downloads of information. Maybe people can order tickets online?



3

Hold a show poster competition

Limelight Musicals offers free downloads of original show art work for all our school musicals. This can be useful for creating customised posters, tickets and flyers that give a professional touch to your production.

However, don't forget the power of a poster competition. Children love a competition. Staging a competition to design "the official show poster" is a brilliant way to get everyone involved and thinking about the show.

Do this:

- **Announce a competition** to create the official show poster. Open it up to everyone in the school.
- **Be creative**, offer a prize that relates in some way to the show, that reflects the theme.
- **Invite a local celebrity to come and judge the winner.** Schools in the past have invited a local radio DJ, actor or singer, and even the editor of the local newspaper. Now there's a way to guarantee coverage!
- **Invite the press along** to cover the judging and winner announcement.



4

Produce a press release

A well written press release can generate wonderful publicity for your production, and dramatically raise the profile of your school in the process. It's free. And, actually, it doesn't have to be that well-written – that's what journalists and editors are for.

Many schools don't do this one simple thing, perhaps because it sounds a bit daunting. It isn't, and it should be an essential part of your communication and publicity plan.

Don't just send your press release to the local papers. Include local radio stations, television news, and local interest web sites on your target list.

What it should include: newspapers and the media love something out of the ordinary, a bit offbeat. Instead of headlining your press release: "St Bart's to stage production of Annie", think up a fresh angle. How about: "Headmaster's dog get's starring role in school show". Which headline makes you want to read the article? Which one will the newspaper jump on and follow up? Which one gets you on the front page, and with a picture?

Now you are in business.

Do this:

- **Come up with a fresh angle on your production:** Acting dogs aside, is there something unusual about your show? Does it mark an anniversary of your school, perhaps? Are you doing it to raise money for a good cause? Does the theme of the show tie in with a local issue? Are you planning a spectacular scene as part of it? Are you doing something for the first time? Have you got a famous conductor out of retirement to come and be musical director? Be creative, think laterally. See what you can come up with!
- **Send it in with a great picture:** A good or intriguing picture doubles the chances of a story being published. So, get your young performers decked out in their costumes, and co-opt the best photographer on the team to go to work. The more creative, whacky, off-the-wall, the better. (It goes without saying you will have cleared photo permissions with parents at the start of show rehearsals).
- **Hold a press photo-call in full costume.** It's a great idea to invite the press along to a photo-call, with your performers in full costume. It only takes half an hour, but it can produce priceless publicity in the run up to your opening. Make sure you give the reporter/photographer details of performance dates and – of course – the Box Office number, so their readers can secure one of those hot tickets.

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Produce an official Show T-Shirt

Once you have decided on your show logo, make it work for you. A great way to promote your show, and make some extra money in the process, is through an “official show Tee-Shirt”.

Keep it simple and bold, and order them in three sizes. Before long, they will become “hot property”. To keep costs down, you can make your own – although you need to do it well to justify the price tag and avoid the “naff” label.

There are plenty of companies on the web who will do it for you – put “show T-shirt” into Google, and hit return.



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Have a super-efficient Box Office

A well-run Box Office is as important as having an electricity supply to your stage lights. Without it, there will be chaos and mayhem – and not many people will get to see your show.



It is one of those jobs that some directors/producers also take on. Our advice is, don't do it. You have enough to think about. Appoint a Box Office Manager to take responsibility for organising ticket sales. It's important it's done well, by someone with a feel for numbers and people (they do exist!).

Do this:

- Appoint a Box Office manager you can trust to do a good job.
- They may have their own ticket team to promote ticket sales among parents, community groups and so on. But the Box Office manager has the responsibility and oversight, and reports to the producer on how things are going and the final numbers.

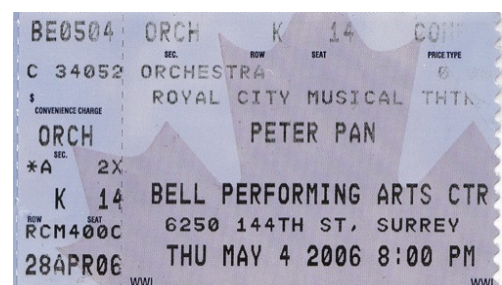
7

Send home priority ticket order forms

You obviously want to give parents and family of children in the show (or who are helping as members of the production tea,) an opportunity to buy tickets first. Once they have booked, you can open it to all-comers.

Do this:

- Send home a "Priority Cast Ticket Booking Form" six weeks before the show begins. Explain that you are giving an early opportunity to the families of cast and crew so they can secure the tickets they need, to avoid disappointment.



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Tip off your local newspaper



- Let them know that in two weeks, you will be opening the Box Office for the whole school – and that you expect tickets to go like hot cakes. The orders will flood in.
- Once the two weeks “priority booking period” is up, send a Booking Form home with every child in the school announcing that the Show Box Office is now open, and that tickets will be sold on a first-come, first-served basis.

You’d be amazed how much credibility someone taking the initiative and calling the editorial department of a local newspaper has in the eyes of reporters, and even the editor. You may feel that you are just the “small man/woman in the street”, and that you really don’t want to be bothering journalists with your plans to stage a musical at your school. Think again.

Having worked in a magazine and newspaper office, we know the impact such an apparently low-key phone call can have – and the attention and resources it can spark into action. It’s seen by the journalist receiving it as a “phone in lead”, and he or she is duty bound to take notice and follow it up.

They will probably ask you questions about the show, what it’s about, whether it has been performed before, who’s in it, what the music is like – and so on. At the very least, you will get a mention in the paper’s upcoming events and diary column (don’t forget to mention that Box Office number!). Or you may find they turn it into a newsy feature, with a picture and a background story on the show – that can grab the attention of the community and the town. So...

Do this

- Find the number of the local newspaper and pick up the phone. Ask to speak to a reporter.
- Tell them about your show, when it’s on, where, and pick out some highlights. If you can find a local angle, fantastic, that will help get you coverage. For example, if you

happen to be located on the coast, and your show is about a seaside fun fair, you are onto a winner. (That's the Limelight show *Dazzle!*, by the way, set in a seaside fun fair).

- Invite the reporter along to see the show – offer a complimentary “review ticket.”
- If the newspaper has a theatre critic, invite them to come and see the show. Don't be too concerned about being on the receiving end of a harsh write-up. Reviewers are invariably kind when it comes to school shows. It is passion, energy and enjoyment that count, so give it to them in bucket-loads. We have witnessed a reviewer actually cry during a Limelight show, and for all the right reasons! Money can't buy that. The review of the show was an absolute scorcher.

9

Call the BBC

We know. But listen...

A group of schoolchildren decided to put on a 30-minute show with songs they had written themselves, as part of a Sixth form review. When it was performed, the school and teachers were amazed. The deputy head picked up the phone to the BBC and asked to speak to the news team.

He spoke animatedly, and told them something extraordinary and wonderful had happened at his school – and they should come and see for themselves. A news team duly arrived at the school and did some filming for what was expected to be a one or two minute clip on the local BBC news. It was broadcast for 14 minutes, and occupied almost the whole news bulletin.



The story doesn't end there.

The BBC producer was so impressed by the show, and the display of young talent it showcased, he obtained a budget to take the show in-house, and directed and filmed it in its

entirety at the BBC studios. The then Director of Music for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) was taken on to head up the music.

It was finally broadcast on prime time television on BBC1 in the run-up to Christmas. For months, news of the show filled the local and regional press, it was featured in national newspapers and the Radio Times. The show – and the school – became a talking point. It was a triumph that changed many lives, and continues to today. *Bus Stop 23*, *Limelight*'s modern nativity, was born.

Do this:

- If your instincts tell you think there is something special about your show, something magical going on that deserves a wider audience, pick up the phone and call the BBC.
- We know, but...just do it.

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Have a collection at the end

Your audience may have paid for their tickets, but once they have seen your inspirational production they will want to shower you with money. Don't stand in their way.

Catch people when the thrill of the show is still ringing in their ears, having seen their children perform on stage, they will want to contribute again.

Do this:

- **Put children with buckets at the door:**
When the show finishes, make an announcement that you are collecting donations on the way out for new lights/sound/new staging/equipment/new roof for the school canteen.
- **Say this:** "If you have enjoyed the show, please give generously."
- And, wonder upon wonders, they will.



Final thoughts

Promoting your school musical is not rocket science. You may already be doing some – or all – of the things outlined here. In which case, you will know what a difference they can make.

All it takes is a little organisation and planning, and as many bucketfuls of creativity as you and your team can throw at it. It will transform the success of your show.

If you have tips for promoting shows, or ensuring they are solid gold commercial successes, please let us know. We will add your suggestions to future updates of this guide, so everyone can benefit.