

Mark Perkins: Publicising and driving votes for your Aviva Community Fund entry

About Mark

Mark is Creative Director at London public relations agency MHP Communications. He has developed media campaigns for some of the biggest brands in the world, including Aviva, but has also supported local charities and organisations through pro-bono PR work. His work has won over 20 major awards in the past 18 months including PR Campaign of the Year in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

How can PR help you and your entry?

All over the UK charities, organisations and clubs are doing incredible and inspiring work to help others and make the local community a better place to live in, but most of the time people don't hear about the good work they do.

Wherever you are in the UK you will have a local newspaper, website or radio station that covers local news and will be looking for stories about what is happening in the community. You have a great story to tell, so that's where we come in to help your cause be seen and heard.

Contacting a newspaper or radio station about your Aviva Community Fund entry may seem daunting, so to help you raise awareness and gain as many votes as possible for your project, here are some tips on how best to share your story with your local media.

Have a story

When you approach a local newspaper or radio station you need to have what we in the trade call 'a news hook'. This is something that you can imagine making a headline in your local paper. It could be that you are staging an event, have started a new fundraising drive or, on a more serious note, are facing closure due to lack of funds.

The fact that you have entered the Aviva Community Fund and are looking for local support is a news hook in itself, but the media will also want to know what your project is about, how the funds would make a difference to the community and what the funding would mean for the future of your group.

"To generate wider awareness of our entry, we contacted our local newspaper to see if they would be interested in writing about us and the work we do. We sent them some information and they ended up writing a whole feature on us which was brilliant to see and helped to spread the word on our behalf!"

Samantha Norris, Axminster Health and Wellbeing Centre, 2015 Winner

Here's my beginners' guide on how to write a press release and get it to local media:

Writing a press release

A press release is a short document that contains all the information a journalist may need in order to write an article, or speak about a news story on the radio. It may seem really daunting staring at a blank screen and wondering where to begin writing a press release, but in truth, nobody knows better than you what a difference your project or charity makes on people's lives. This is your chance to tell your story to help secure as many votes as possible for your entry. Here are a few tips to help you get started:

Start with a headline

Like every news story you read in the paper, every press release starts with a headline. This is your chance to capture the attention of the journalist or radio producer who will be reading your press release. While you can be creative, keep the headline short, sweet and to the point. Ultimately it has to capture the spirit of the story you want to tell.

Remember the "Five Ws"

The key to writing a press release is to make sure you speak about the "Five Ws", which form the basis of telling a good news story. In this case, to tell the story of your Aviva Community Fund entry and drive local support, the "Five Ws" are below:

- **Who** you are
- **What** your group does
- **Why** you need as many votes as possible
- **When** you need the votes by
- **Where** the funding would be spent should you be successful

Less is more

Sometimes people think they have to write a novel to get their story across. The first thing to remember is that journalists don't give marks out of ten for prose or plot in a press release, they are very busy and want to know all the essential information about your Aviva Community Fund entry and your community or charity group in a couple of brief paragraphs.

Condense your story in the opening paragraph

If you pick up a newspaper or read news articles online you'll notice that the story is summed up in the opening paragraph or two. So, when it comes to starting your press release, get into the mindset of a newspaper article; write in the same way and get straight to the point. Make sure you include the name of your group, what it is you do, and why you are looking for support for your Aviva Community Fund entry right at the beginning of the release. It might take a couple of attempts but it's worth getting right.

Building the story

Once you've written the first couple of paragraphs of your press release and included the "Five Ws", think about what are the most important things are about your charity or organisation that you want people to know. If you aren't sure, ask yourself some questions:

- Why were we set up?
- Whose lives have we improved or changed?
- What would happen if we weren't active?

The answer to these questions should form the rest of your press release. Again, remember to keep the language and information simple. If you aren't comfortable with writing in the style of a newspaper article, make it even easier for yourself and simply use a question and answer format. *e.g. why were we set up?*

With a growing number of people diagnosed with dementia in the local community, we saw that there was a need to provide carers with additional support. In response, we set up our organisation which brings those affected by dementia together every week, reminding them that they are not alone in their journey.

End with a quote

To add some personality to your press release you might want to finish with a short quote from yourself or someone who plays an active role in the organisation. It doesn't need to be a speech, it could just be a final request for votes.

e.g. Joe Bloggs, coordinator of Young Starts, says "We desperately need funding to help and improve the lives of all the children we work with. It would mean so much to be able to provide new toys, a new play area and also some fun days out to give them the childhood they deserve. So please show your support for us and register online now to vote for Young Starts."

Include contact details and the URL to the Aviva Community Fund page where people can register to vote

Once a journalist has read your press release, it's likely that they will have a few questions for you. Be sure to end the press release with your phone number, email address and, where appropriate, the URL to the website or social media accounts for your charity or community group. Also remember to include the URL link to your entry on the Aviva Community Fund website so everyone can register to submit their votes.

Approaching the media

Getting your press release seen

- Visit the website of your local newspaper or radio station where its contact details will be listed
- Call up and ask for the news editor and say that you have got a story for them. When you get through, introduce yourself and explain why you are calling and what your story is about: again it's the same information that should be in your opening paragraph
- Offer to send over your press release and ask for an email address. If a journalist is interested, take the opportunity to tell them a bit more about what your group does in the community and why you need as many votes as possible for your entry

- Don't be too put off if they sound rushed. News editors get lots of calls and have deadlines to meet
- It's best to call news editors and radio producers between 9am and midday
- When sending the press release it's best to cut and paste your text into the body of an email rather than sending it as an attachment (some organisations won't open attachments in case they have viruses)
- If you are too busy to call then see if there is an email address on the website, but it's always good to call up later that day to check that the news editor received your press release and see if they want more information

Building relationships

The most important thing to remember is that the media is your friend, so don't be afraid of speaking to them. If a reporter is interested in the work you do, invite them to come down and experience the community project or charity for themselves.

The next time you have another story about the work you do, go back to the same journalist you spoke to about the Aviva Community Fund. They will remember you and it saves having to explain who you are and what you do all over again!

"Through our entry we built strong connections with local newspapers and radio stations and these have since proved to be invaluable to us. Local media have continued to show an interest in our charity which is such a great support and allows us to shout about the work that we do on an ongoing basis."

Simone Francis, Kyrece's Legacy, 2015 Winner

Don't stop at your Aviva win – look at the below tips to continue to encourage people to support your group:

The power of celebrity

Has a celebrity supported your charity or group in the past? Maybe there is a local celebrity who you can contact to see if they would like to get involved and help you drum up support for your cause? In some cases, a local sports team may ask a player or two to show their support for a local cause such as your own.

Or why not aim big and contact your favourite celebrities to see if they will support you – they don't have to visit your project but maybe just send a tweet, post a selfie or send something you can sell for auction. If you don't ask, you'll never know!

Stunts

Remember how suddenly everyone was doing the ice bucket challenge for charity? Can you think of things you can do among the friends and families involved in your group that could drive votes and make local news? And whatever it is you dream up, make sure your local paper knows about it.

Word of mouth – engage with all community networks

Just as the best gossip takes place at the school gates or at coffee mornings, make sure that everyone in the community knows about your Aviva Community Fund entry and how they can support you. Contact as many local groups and organisations as possible such as schools, the Women’s Institute, local sports clubs and the NCT and tell them about your cause. Tell everyone you know because they may need your help one day too!

Here is a template press release that you could use as a starting point:

Local organisation <Insert name> in <Insert location> needs your support to secure vital funding

[INSERT DATE] [Insert name of group] [Insert description of your project e.g. *a national charity in Cornwall which responds to the needs of people with dementia in the local community*] is calling for the support of the local community to help win funding as part of the Aviva Community Fund 2016.

[Insert name of group] is relying on votes to increase their chances of winning funding of up to £25,000 which they hope will [insert description of the things that the funding will allow your group/project to achieve]. Only projects with the most votes will become finalists, so additional support is vital.

[Include further information on your organisation such as when you were set up and why. Outline whose lives you have improved or changed and explain what difference your charity or organisation makes to the local community]

[Insert your name and job title] from [insert group name] says: “[insert quote from yourself. Try not to repeat what you have already said in the release but use this opportunity to say something new or simply make a final request for votes. If you want, you could also include a second quote from a participant or service user that offers another point of view on what the funding would mean to them.]”

To get behind [Insert name of group] and help make a difference in your local community, visit [insert URL specific to your entry] and submit your vote before 18 November 2016.

For more information on [insert name of group], visit [insert website/ Facebook/ Twitter page if relevant].

-ENDS-

Media Enquiries - For more information please contact:

[Insert your name, phone number and email address]

Notes to editors:

About [insert name of group]

[Insert any standard information about your group, as well as your group's website, Facebook and/or Twitter handle if you have one]

About the Aviva Community Fund

The Aviva Community Fund is an initiative that lends a helping hand to local communities by offering support and funding for inspirational local causes. For more information visit aviva.co.uk/community-fund