

how to...

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...Commission creatively

You work in the public sector and you re making history.

You are involved in everything that we value as a society, - our health, our education, the homes we live in, the services that we rely on. You may be implementing best practice in the running of an elderly care home or you might be demolishing and rebuilding huge inner city areas, but whatever your field is, you are involved in the way people live their lives and how they hope to live them in the future. From the cradle to the grave you will have contributed to the lives of everyone, both locally and nationally. And what do you have to show for it?

If you rummage through the dusty drawer in the filing cabinet that constitutes your picture library you will find your answer. In many cases all you will find will be some pictures of Mayors through the years shaking hands with upper management and Chief Executives. There will be changing backdrops, - large cheques, innumerable plaques, the popping of champagne corks, -but you re unlikely to find an accurate image of how we live our lives in the year 2001.

One reason for this is that there are only two occasions when communications officers think about photography - the Official Opening and the Annual Report. Many people think their photography is only as good as the photographer they hire, but as a photographer my experience is that you re only as good as the commission you are given. And as your photographer is going to do exactly what you ask of them, the big question is whether you are commissioning creatively?

The first step in creative commissioning is appreciating that photography is an art form. It can be used as a means of communication in itself and not merely as decoration to the written word.

A good photograph never lies but it undoubtedly has a spin of its own. You can shout about your wonderful new adoption service till you re blue in the face and people will not believe you, but publishing a picture of the moment a parent hugs her new child may well get your message across. It is not simply enough to say that you run a good service, you need to demonstrate it and good photography does this implicitly.

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Your next step will be to create a suitable framework in which to work. Here you must be at your most imaginative because this is about ring fencing resources and being pro-active in your planning. If you have read Carol Grant's excellent 'How to...create a communications strategy' in this section then go back and apply the same guidelines to your photographic project.

You need a strategy to utilise fully the three resources which you alone possess. These are:

a) Time:

If you are planning in advance this allows you to undertake projects which can take time in their research and execution. You could, for example, follow a family living in an area of regeneration during a period of rapid change or you could follow the pioneering treatment of a patient in your hospital. Forward planning could mean that your photography for the Annual Report is built up throughout the year around a theme or it can just mean that you allow yourselves time enough to organize something more adventurous when the assignment comes round.

b) Access:

Utilise the goodwill in your organisation together with the contacts and knowledge on the ground. You should be in a prime position to get access to those stories and images which others might not see.

c) Money:

Magazines cannot justify spending a thousand pounds on a three-day shoot for a one off feature but you are in a different position with regards to the amount of use and the value for money you get. However limited your resources, good planning before a shoot can ensure that you get more value for money and greater usage from your photography.

And so to the creativity...

If you feel you don't know enough about photography take some time to look at pictures and apply what you see to your field. Take a look through lots of magazines and see how they approach the photography for a variety of subjects. Go back and talk to some photographers about their work and start to use their ideas.

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Try to build up a list of photographers whose work you can rely on and who have different strengths i.e., portrait / fine art / architecture / photojournalism. (See How to...Choose a Photographer)

Try to work to your strengths and remember that the public sector is about real people. Photographing managers at the opening of a community hall may be necessary but will lack the universal appeal of residents actually using the hall.

Try to work to a single theme rather than being too literal. Many Annual Reports are decided "democratically" with each department being asked what they would like pictures of. Unless all your staff are communication gurus with loads of imagination this will mean lots of shots of people sitting at their desks. I wouldn't like to mention the times I have been sent to an unfurnished flat because it measures 2 feet above Egan standards. They may be fantastic to live in but as a photograph they look like a white box with a window.

Your first break with tradition might be to commission pictures that are not photojournalistic in style. Normally people regard other photographic styles as art, which is commissioned by arts projects and not used for mainstream communications. Blurring those boundaries is something the commercial sector has been doing for years and may well prove fruitful. If you can continue to use your creativity in budgeting you may be able to share costs between departments.

If you're starting to think this way then you're already streets ahead. Here are a few ideas that we've had for getting the most from commissioned photography.

A Powerful resource for Pro-Active Press Work;

Publications everywhere are stuffed full of writers, all of them professional journalists on the look out for stories. If you give them a self-penned feature you are actually replicating a resource, which they have in abundance and you may be up against huge odds in having that published. However, no national magazines have staff photographers but they do all need decent photography and you are in a unique position in being able to supply them with the type of photography, which they cannot obtain themselves due to cost, time and access. This can facilitate magazines commissioning whole features on your work rather than a small mention in the news section.

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At Third Avenue we try and approach commissioning photography as a magazine would and we have a lot of success in placing features. Many of these have been as picture stories in their own right and we have found that magazines often like the idea of photographic essays but are very rarely offered them and can't afford to commission them themselves.

Using Photography as Part of the Process;

This is usually seen as the preserve of arts based projects, but by commissioning photography in this way you can hope to use the subsequent material for presswork as well as your own literature. The phrase itself means that you commission work, which not only illustrates how you work but demonstrates it.

A couple of Examples:

You manage a housing estate which badly needs to engage the youth and make use of the new community centre you have built. So you negotiate for a photographer to run a community photography project, ensuring that the work is of a high enough standard to be publishable.

If the issue for your organisation is providing training for employment, then commission your photography to include the mentoring of some trainee photographers in your area.

These are projects, which will take time and effort to accomplish. Others which might be less time consuming would be;

You receive an SRB grant of £30 million but you need to get tenants involved in the decision making process of how to manage the resources. You hire a photographer for the afternoon to set up a mobile studio in the area, inviting residents to take their own portraits and asking them how they would spend £30 million personally and for their area. By the end of the afternoon you should have a collection of portraits, which record the wishes of the very people you want to get involved. With these you could:

- ¥ Give them as an exclusive set to a magazine for a picture feature.
- ¥ Create an exhibition to show in the public libraries and community centres, drawing the community in and getting them interested.
- ¥ Use the pictures in official documents such as the Annual Report.
- ¥ Have the pictures hanging in your office building or reception.

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Whatever you decide to do with the images, you will still have used photography as a means of involving tenants in the process of deciding what will happen to their estate. You might decide to shoot the whole thing digitally, which could mean you have the option of giving a print to your resident then & there. They will go away waving a portrait of themselves to their neighbours and telling them it's about deciding how to spend money on their estate. And who knows, they may come to your meetings.

The whole point is that you are using photography as part of the product of what you wanted to achieve in the first place, be it job training, youth engagement or simply providing photographic artwork to brighten a surrounding.

Self Publishing;

The Net has made self-publishing both easy and inexpensive and it is likely to become more accepted as the equal of paper publishing. The opportunities for using photography in a more adventurous way will continue to increase. At Third Avenue we can provide templates for publishing your own features or picture galleries and we can do this very cheaply because the design element remains constant.

In effect, this means you can run photographic galleries or albums as part of your site, making them localized where necessary. This could involve commissioning an afternoon shoot on a new estate and then publicising your site on the basis that tenants will see photos of themselves and their neighbours. With a little more expense, you could allow them to download and print the shots. If you're really adventurous you can run a magazine section from your site, which utilises photography to get people to visit.

Hopefully this may have given you some ideas for working with photography creatively. More importantly, I hope it has convinced you how quality photography can be made to work for you in effective communications.

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I recently met with an organisation that delivered a magazine to around 20,000 local residents. The content of the magazine had been well thought out, but the design and photography were extremely poor. The organisation had already swallowed the large fee involved in putting together, printing and distributing the magazine, but once it got through the letterbox, they were doing nothing to get people picking it up off the mat and reading it. The point at which you communicate was lost. I estimated they could have doubled their readership by adding on another 10-15% of the cost from commissioning some decent design and photography.

Good quality photography is not an optional extra, which is nice if you can afford it. It is a **basic of good communications**. The more thought you put into the commissioning process, the better your communication will be.