

Max allen writes about wine:

“HOW TO SEND SAMPLES AND PRESS RELEASES TO THE MEDIA”

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BEING a freelance wine writer I am besieged by unsolicited wine samples; for the last ten years I have received an average of thirty boxes, cartons and polystyrene post-packs each week. That's an awful lot of free grog on the one hand - and an awful lot of hard work on the other.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining. I rely on these samples: I simply couldn't keep abreast of the hundreds of new wineries, new vintages, new varieties and new brands appearing in Australia each year if it weren't for the weekly barrage. And I fully realise how lucky I am to have my job: I still get a thrill when I try a wine I've never heard of before and discover it's superb - and that I didn't have to leave my front gate to find it.

But the larger the avalanche grows, and the more hours I spend opening boxes, reading press releases and following up when a wine presents itself as worthy of a review, the more frustrated I've become by a whole raft of things that, quite frankly, could be done a whole lot better: badly written press releases missing crucial information; badly written press releases with way too much superfluous information; gimmicky PR stunts, sloppy packaging; over-zealous packaging - the list goes on.

So, in an attempt to A) make my life easier and B) hopefully help you present your wine to the media (or retailers, or consumers or whoever might be interested for that matter) in a more efficient, professional and useful way - and at the risk of sounding like a condescending smart-arse - I'd like to highlight some of the things that frustrate me most and tell you how I think they could be improved. Bear in mind that this is a personal view: other writers may have different priorities and give different advice.

1. DO SOME HOMEWORK

Before you even think about stuffing your precious first vintage chardonnay into a polystyrene post-pak and sending it out to the media hoping to get a review, think very carefully about who you're sending it to and why.

There are dozens of 'wine writers' listed in the Wine Industry Directory: how many of us are full-time journalists? How many might also do PR for one of your direct competitors? What publications do we write for, and who reads them? What are our particular interests/likes/dislikes, specialities? Will a review in a mass-circulation tabloid in Melbourne be appropriate if you only have 40 cases of wine that's sold cellar door in Queensland?

Read as widely as you can - get to know who's out there in winemedialand - who they write for, what kind of wines they write about, whether they do mostly reviews and tasting notes, or whether they're more feature-oriented, what price points they tend to focus on, etc. And send your wine to those who might be most interested.

2. FIRST CONTACT

Once you've found your target writers, it's a good idea to make contact - by email, preferably - before sending anything, very briefly introducing yourself, your wines, and asking whether you can send samples. Also try to ascertain what else the writer might need - do I need a CD of print quality pictures, for example? No - but my editor might if I want to review your wine, in which case you're better off sending the pics straight to them. This lessens the load on us, and saves you money and stock (unless your reputation precedes you and the writer is desperate to taste everything you've ever made, plus barrel samples).

3. DON'T BLUR THE BOUNDARIES

Increasingly, winemakers are asking in the letters that accompany their samples for direct feedback on their wines. This, to me, is a confused approach.

I am a journalist, a wine reviewer, not an industry consultant. Even if I did have the time to personally respond to each person who sent me wine, I wouldn't, because it's not my job. My job is to inform readers about wine, not to help winemakers. When I send out copies of my new book to book reviewers, I don't ask for - or expect - direct

feedback. Winemakers shouldn't expect direct feedback from wine reviewers.

The famously barbed UK restaurant reviewer, AA Gill, put it most succinctly (he's talking to restaurateurs, but it still applies here): 'If you want constructive criticism, hire a consultant. If you want exposure, take out an ad. If you want nice things in the papers about what you do, then do it well.'

4. TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Consider this: let's say your samples arrive on my doorstep on the first of June. I might be away, and not get around to opening the box for a week. The wine may then sit on a shelf for another couple of weeks - or longer - until it's tasted (in a blind line-up with wines of a similar style/price). Let's assume the wine does well in the tasting and is worthy of a review: even so, I may not find an appropriate place to publish that review for another month - and the publication may not hit the shelves for two months after that - four months after you sent the samples, by which time the wine is close to running out.

Conversely, your wine may arrive one day, be tasted the next, I may write and file the review the day after that and it may be published a fortnight later - less than one month after the wine left your cellar, and before it hits the shops. This both highlights the frustratingly random nature of sending out samples, and the fact that more thought needs to be given to timing.

Too many people still send media samples out far too long after the wine has been released onto the market. Not enough people are thinking ahead and showing the wine to the media (all of whom have lead times of one form or another) before or soon enough after release. It would also help enormously if crucial information such as release date/production level/and expected length of availability was included with the sample. Similarly, make sure the writer is contacted in advance if you're going to send barrel samples, which may need to be tasted as soon as possible after being drawn.

5. PRICE, PRICE, PRICE AND PRICE

Anthony Hanson, Master of Wine and author of the definitive book on Burgundy once wrote disdainfully about scoring wines in print: he argued that the only numbers that should accompany a wine review are the price and a telephone number of the distributor or retailer. He

could have been talking about press releases. The glossiest brochures, most poetically-written descriptions, in-depth technical backgrounds and superbly-designed labels count for absolutely bugger-all if you don't tell me how much your wine costs. You'd be amazed at how many press releases neglect to mention the price. Amazed.

Ideally, I'd like all prices listed: wholesale, LUC, 'likely' retail and 'likely' restaurant (if appropriate). This fully positions your wine in my mind. Likewise, give me a clear idea of the best way people can buy your wine: all cellar door details, distributor details (include phone numbers, email address, etc) in each state, and even retailers if you have some good supporters. This is crucial - the most important, practical stuff that no sample should be sent without.

6. BOTTLES

When your sample arrives, it is separated from its accompanying material: the bottle goes on the shelf, the paper goes in a file. It's a great idea, then, to put stickers on each bottle with the important info - contact number (for winemaker/PR/distributor), suggested retail price, etc - on it. I'll still dig out the other bumph if I need to, but having some context right there on the bottle in my hand is enormously useful. And until all bottles are sealed with a screw top, it's worth considering sending a second bottle of cork-sealed wine as back-up. I know this slightly contradicts my main point about reducing the amount of stuff you need to send, and I realise this is an extra cost for you, but it saves time for everyone concerned if the first bottle is cork-tainted.

7. DRESS DOWN

Please, please, please don't overdo the packaging. Your wine may look lovely with each bottle wrapped in tissue paper, put in a polystyrene box, covered in gold paper, then plastic wrap and tied up with gold string, but really, neither I nor the environment will thank you: it takes me three times as long to open the pack (which means my first experience with your wine is a frustrated and annoyed one), and I end up with twice as much rubbish. You really don't need to wrap the pack with too much tape, either - again, it's amazing how little you need to provide a safe and secure seal.

8. GO GREEN

Think about what will happen to the packaging after I've opened it. I can re-use the white poly paks: retailers, winemakers and wholesalers take them off my hands (in fact, I suspect there are probably so many floating around the industry at the moment none of us needs buy a new one for years). I can re-use good, sturdy cardboard six- or twelve-boxes and even two- or three-bottle carry boxes.

But I don't have a lot of use for bubble wrap, foam packing beads (god, I hate them) or dozens of your brochures - all of which are frequently used to fill gaps in boxes. In the same vein, try and cut down on the amount of paper you use: do you really need to put your press release in a folder, in an envelope in the box? Do I need your business card if all your details are already on the press release?

9. GIMMICKS AND PRESENTS ARE BAD ...

After many years of receiving wine samples, I've come up with 'Allen's Law': 'The quality of the wine sample is often in direct inverse proportion to the amount of crap that arrives with it.' If it takes me half an hour to wade through the wrapping, glossy brochures, CDs, olive oil, homemade jam and pictures of your dog to get to the bottles, then I'm already suspicious before I've even popped the cork. I'm exaggerating for effect, of course (and I'll contradict myself in a minute), but you get my drift: if the wine doesn't taste good in a blind line-up, it doesn't matter how many t-shirts/caps/boxer shorts/mouse pads you've sent me as presents, you won't get reviewed. Save all that malarky for the retailers and cellar door, where it'll be appreciated, I'm sure.

Oh, and by the way, those really tall, skinny olive oil and vinegar bottles may look pretty, but they're completely impractical - especially in a wine writer's kitchen, where sobriety isn't commonplace and things can be knocked over easily.

10. ... BUT SOME CONTEXT IS GOOD

Having said that, if you're a brand new producer and you want to make an impact, you do need to put your wine into context. Very often, this can be done with a well-written single page of A4 and perhaps a photo or two (if your winery is architecturally striking, for example, or you have a lovely shot of your vineyard at sunset, or a well-drawn map) but sometimes you might need to send a little extra - a menu from your cellar door café, for example, showing how well your wines have been matched with your regional cuisine, or your

latest newsletter, with the winemaker's philosophical treatise on terroir or taxation. Just don't overdo it: wine writers are not as interested in what you write or say as what you grow and make - unless what you grow and make tastes good enough to be reviewed, in which case, believe me, we will want to talk to you - at length.

11. I TASTE WINE FOR A LIVING

The whole point of sending wine to writers is to let us make up our own minds. Huge lists of every medal you've ever won, photocopies of glowing reviews in the Wine Advocate, and extensive tasting notes on each wine are unnecessary. Again, save it all for the retailers, who can use it to promote your wine to customers. For this wine writer at least, if you send me a thick file full of praise for your wine, part of me wonders why you need another review. If you feel there is good reason to include reviews, medals, winemaking detail and tasting notes, keep it brief.

12. A FEW WORDS ABOUT WORDS

Bad spelling is inexcusable. Don't rely on computer spell-check: write your press release, print it out, leave it for a few days, go back to it. Read it backwards, so you're not blinded by logic and can spot spelling mistakes more easily. Get someone else to read through it. Twice. Make sure you spell the wine writer's name correctly (again, again, you'd be amazed how many people don't). Make a list of all the crucial info you need to include and check every release off against the list before you send it.

Be concise. As an exercise, try squeezing everything you want to say about your wine - including all the crucial info I've outlined above - onto one A4 sheet - two at the very most. It can be done. Believe me. And the process of doing it will make you think a lot harder about exactly what elements of your business are important to you.

Now that I've started on the topic of words and writing, there are a couple of other pet irritations I'd like to mention. For a start, there is no apostrophe in the possessive 'its'. I know that an overwhelming weight of documentary evidence would lead you to believe otherwise, but I just want you to trust me on this one, okay? The only time you should use an apostrophe is when you are contracting the words 'it' and 'is'. Similarly, 'compliment' is a noun, not a verb - it's something you pay somebody, not something that chicken does to chardonnay (that's 'complement'). Let me give you an example: the sentence 'This

shiraz, with it's ripe berry flavours, compliments roast meat and cheese; its best enjoyed young' is wrong. It should be 'This shiraz, with its ripe berry flavours, complements roast meat and cheese; it's best enjoyed young.'

Another thing that annoys me - a lot - is completely unnecessary capital letters. As in: 'Bringing the Art and Craft of the winemaker to bear on this Remarkable chardonnay has resulted in an Excellent wine of subtlety and Charm'. We're not living in Victorian England. It just makes whoever wrote the press release/back label look like a Pompous Arse.

Oh, I know I shouldn't let this stuff bother me, but it does. It really, really does. I tell you what, though, I feel better now I've got it off my chest.

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