



Media Events

in an Internet World

aubrum

“All of us who professionally use mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level.”

— **William Bernbach**, Doyle Dane Bernbach



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Media Events

Electronic News Gathering (ENG)

Back in the day, television was 'the' entertainment and information source. Today, thousands of 'news' sites and hundreds of streaming services provide people with what they want, when they want it, 24 hours a day.

Has television news become irrelevant in an internet world?

Rumours of its imminent demise are greatly exaggerated. There is little question that viewership is shrinking. After all, the number one show on the air today, NCIS on CBS at time of writing, would have been cancelled in the 1970's for poor ratings.

While the population has grown substantially over the years, so too have the number of sources and options, most notably the web.

But numbers alone do not offer an accurate précis. We are a pack species. We strive to share and understand our world and the collective experience. In its halcyon days, television provided a point of reference, a touchstone, around which we could share and understand collectively.

Media fragmentation has irrevocably changed that dynamic, in many ways for the better but in others, less so.

But increased choice has yielded two bright spots for marketers. First, there are now many more outlets available as vehicles, most with lots of time

to fill, and second, those remaining with the more traditional sources are, to a large extent, becoming a more narrow-cast demographic.

At the same time, television news and the internet are predominantly visually-based mediums. Content created for the former can easily be re-tasked for use on the latter, where it will certainly enjoy longer life and perhaps even greater exposure.

More importantly, information gleaned from new sources enjoys substantially higher credibility than marketing claims.

NETFLIX



HBOmax

hulu

YouTubeTV

britbox



amazon prime video



Content created via a media event can easily be re-tasked for the Internet where it will enjoy a longer life and very likely greater exposure



Marketing is Sales. News is Fact

Humble Beginnings to Juggernaut

Television is inherently a 'technical' medium. The key to take full advantage of ENG (*or even getting coverage*) is providing the technology with its basic needs. They are simple but so often ignored.

Backstory

In general terms, news items fall into one of two categories: hard news, the stories that media outlets are compelled to cover, and soft news, broadly defined as human interest stories, life style pieces and fillers. With the exception of some political events, or the occasional damage-control assignment, most of us spend our time working on the latter.

For the most part, the use of any soft news item is discretionary. The decision is governed primarily by the volume of hard news on a given day and the relevance of the story to the outlet's viewers. While no one can guarantee that any soft news item will get aired, there are some things that can be done to increase the chances. This process is rooted in an appreciation of technical exigencies.

When television was in its infancy, news programming was a burden mandated by government regulators for commercial use of public airways. Back then few sponsors would pay for placement during news programs so the obligation was considered part of the cost of broadcasters. Except for public broadcaster like CBC, news departments were modest.

The turbulent 60's yielded much change, including the first televised presidential debate on September 26, 1960, between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John

Kennedy. The exchange was watched live by an estimated 70 million viewers. It was also carried live on radio. Significantly, those listening sided with Nixon but television viewers overwhelmingly endorsed Kennedy. Not only did the meeting have a pivotal impact on the election's outcome but it also ushered in a new era in which crafting a public image and media exposure became essential ingredients of political campaigns.

The assassination of JFK, just three years later on November 22, 1963, and the war in Vietnam helped catalyze unprecedented social unrest.

Television news 'showed' the stories. Small, hand-held film cameras brought images from the front-lines into people's living rooms, providing graphic witness to the conflicts. The phrase 'film at eleven' enticed viewers to the 'window' and the sedate tradition of television news morphed. Videotape subsequently replaced cumbersome film processing and electronic news gathering (*ENG*) was born.

Today, television news is fiercely competitive and extremely profitable. Viewers continue to demonstrate an insatiable desire to 'see' what is happening all around the world and down the block.





“If you say three things, you said nothing”

— James Carville

Hone the Message

A pervasive problem is not getting to the point. Media outlets attended an event in good faith, in order to report on a particular story. Burying it in unrelated, usually superfluous information wastes precious time. Get to the point.

A media event is like a film set, and the media, professional observers. Their job is to capture a coherent story that can be told in a few seconds. It's superfluous to have several people speak or to include extraneous information. Having a room full of supporters is also superfluous.

The substance of the message is the stock and trade of the communication people. However, based on experience, we would suggest opening directly with the message covering the salient points in 30 seconds or less. Support the message with a brief explanation, another 30 seconds or less. Then follow up with some examples or anecdotes, another 30 seconds. Brevity is critical so choose the most telegraphic words possible.

When the topic is complex, requiring background information or details, the spokesperson statement should remain brief. Follow that with one or more of, an expert, printed materials and/or a Q&A session. This allows the spokesperson to deliver the message without getting bogged down in details. Reporters then interpret the information to provide viewers with the salient facts.

The average media event runs 20 minutes, the average news clip, 20 seconds. Being generous, that translates to roughly 25 wasted minutes.

In Television, Pictures Are ‘King’

Viewers demand high-quality images from broadcasters and producers in all genres and they work hard to meet the ever-increasing benchmarks. News programs are not exempt.

Nitty Gritty

News divisions spend large amounts of money on the latest in field equipment just to insure that the images captured, even in extreme conditions, satisfy viewer expectations. In fact, most outlets will run stories with compelling images even if the items have little real relevance.

Over time, marketers discovered the value of packaging product announcements as news. Not only was this content relatively inexpensive to produce, but also, the credibility of information gleaned from news sources is substantially higher than paid advertising.

The evolution spawned what could only be described as an embarrassment of riches. As a result, stories now compete with each other for the small amount of time available each day in program schedules.

All things being equal, getting a story to ‘air’ is often simply looking and sounding better than the day’s competitors.

Television presents viewers with a two dimensional representation of a three dimensional world. Accurate rendition is often a challenge. The framing effect of the camera serves to eliminate important reference points while accentuating incidental details that distort perception.

For ‘hard’ news coverage, a large part of the camera person’s job is to make sure that the pictures reasonably reflect the story. That is paramount because pictures

communicate viscerally, always taking precedence over the words.

For ‘soft’ news, cameras shoot what they are given. The responsibility for clarity and interest rests with the organizer.

The environment must support technical constraints while engaging the viewer. Lesser offerings do not make the ‘cut’.

Knowing how your setting will look is imperative. Fortunately, there is a very simple way to find out. Turn your phone sideways and switch on the camera. Making sure it’s set to 16:9 mode. The image framing on screen is almost exactly what news cameras will see.

Move or zoom in close to the presenter. The primary ‘window’ of information in news is the ‘talking head’. Is the ‘look (*particularly what surrounds the presenter*) aesthetically pleasing without drawing too much attention? Does it support the message? Remember to be objective. You are there and familiar with the surroundings. Viewers are not.

Shot List

A media event should provide cameras with a minimum of two compelling shots: a “close-up”, a head and shoulders shot of the presenter (*the whole presentation should revolve around the close-up*) and a “cutaway”, an incidental shot used to mask the visual “jumps” that occur when the file is edited. The cutaway can be almost anything; a ‘reverse’, a shot over the presenters shoulder or a ‘reaction’, a shot of someone watching the presentation, are most typically used. But neither supports the message.

A more fruitful approach is to provide a product display or some other visual element, something that punctuates the story. Anything less squanders a rich communication opportunity.

Nothing in the close-up should steal viewer attention from the message. The presenter must be the focal point of the frame, not the surroundings.

The human eye is automatically drawn to the brightest area in any picture composition. The mind perceives that to be the centre of interest. Check out Rembrandt or any of the Dutch Masters.

Maintaining the presenter as the centre of interest, skin being only about 30% reflective, means that everything else must reflect less light back to the camera.

Clothing, accessories and background materials must all be carefully selected not to violate this relationship. The presenter should not be ‘in frame’ with anything white, reflective or brightly coloured. All of these shift focus away from the message. Attention is also compromised by small, seemingly innocuous things like ‘busy’ wall coverings, light fixtures and switches, architectural details and especially any background motion. Visual distractions thwart message integrity.

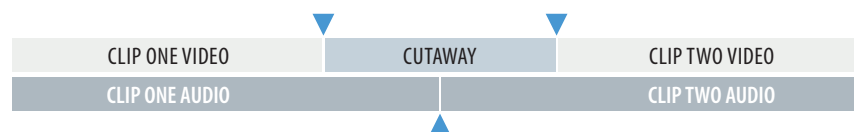
Do people really lose focus so easily? Check-out Appollo Robbins’ unusual TED Talk, ‘The Art Of Misdirection’.

SPOILER ALERT: Yes.



Ian Hanomansing in well-crafted close-up (CBC News)

Simple Video Edit



Story Integrity

Once your story is captured on camera, it will be edited by someone who shares neither your interest in, nor your understanding of the subject.

The only way to insure the integrity of the message is by providing a tightly focused presentation that is unambiguously supported by every facet of the event.

Media events differ pretty dramatically from other presentations. Most of the things necessary to make an audience feel comfortable are actually impediments at a media event.

Despite that, many organizers persist in jamming people, balloons, chairs, hospitality and other unnecessary elements into small rooms, while neglecting even the most basic considerations that make it easier for news gatherers to tell the story.

Provide news gatherers with focused raw material. Content is not within our purview but strong presentations are all structured around a single message. To quote the larger than life James Carville, *"if you say three things, you said nothing"*. The script is not a speech and need not flow like one, but it should have only one topic.

Repeat the same message several ways, with smooth transitions. Only a few seconds will make it to 'air' and repetition helps ensure what views see.

Average Media Event

20 Minutes

Average Soft News Clip

20 Seconds



A good space guideline is the 'rule of thirds' — presentation elements/ infrastructure/people. Multiply total expected attendance by 12 m² (40 sq/ft). That allowance equals one third of the total space. Though not a perfect formula, it is a useful starting point.

Location

The event space should be quiet, comfortably large and have easy access to the street and especially parking. Wedging news gatherers and spectators into a room that is difficult to find or a lengthy walk from vehicles, hinders the chance of good coverage.

When no event background is used (*more to come*), the room should have neutral decor, free of mirrors, unusual architectural details, 'busy' wallpaper and so on. Locations with windows or other sources of daylight are good for the soul but bad for news cameras.

The space should be as acoustically "dead" as possible. Hard surfaces cause enormous sound problems, potentially ruining the 'shoot'.

Avoid locations selected because they have thematic relationship to the story; for example, using an operating theatre for a pharmaceutical story or the floor of a factory for a new product introduction. Organizers find the tie-in almost irresistible but the significance for viewers is at best, obscure. Plus the technical challenges such places create, far outweigh any advantages.

Outdoor locations are completely unpredictable. They should be avoided at all cost. They are akin to betting against success. Even when the event naturally lends itself to the outdoors, a ground breaking for example, the surroundings will have little impact on viewers but the risks are enormous. The event can (*read will*) be ruined by the sun, wind, rain, dust, birds, insects, sirens, trucks backing up, rowdy passersby and so on. There are no 'retakes' in news. Now or never.

Once the location has been selected and the event defined, generate a 'scale' floor-plan. Be sure to include everything significant. An accurate drawing eliminates innumerable space problems and confusion on event day.

Provide a simplified version of the floor plan to media outlets with the invitation. The more they know about the event, the more prepared they will be to do their part in spreading the word.

Resist a 'theatre style' plan. This configuration does not work well. Instead, position the spokesperson along the longest wall with the camera position directly opposite. Both should be on the same plane, preferably flat-floor. Print and radio journalists can then be accommodated 'classroom style' on one or both sides of the camera position. This layout provides the best working environment for all.

There is a seemingly irresistible urge to fill the room with spectators. It is a mistake. The media are 'professional' observers. Everyone knows the purpose of the event and people without a function simply get in the way.

Avoid lavish 'hospitality'. Outside locations push this because 'F&B' is a profit centre. Spend that money on elements that support the message. Light refreshments are all that is required, coffee, tea and water. Adding juice and soft drinks is deluxe.

Background

Television's horizontal (*landscape*) frame presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The face in a close-up, already stated as the principle window of information, consumes roughly a third of the screen real estate. That leaves two-thirds of the frame for either something or nothing.

Many organizers simply slap a logo or slogan on the face of the lectern. The practice while simple is usually ineffective. Cameras frame to the face, omitting the signage. And when occasionally caught in-frame, it is too small to read.

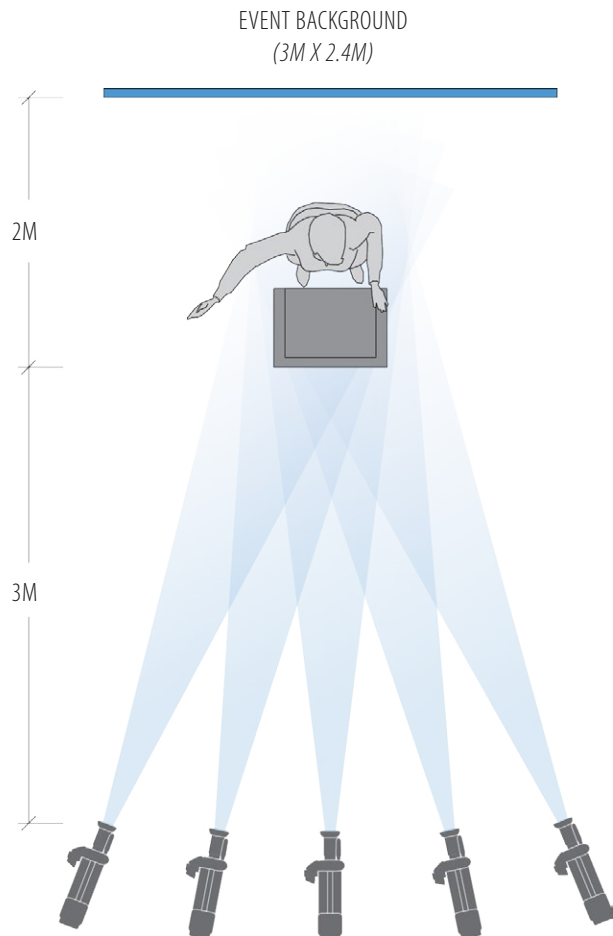
The most effective solution is an event background, also referred to as a 'step and repeat' (*S&R*). Thanks to advances in large format printing, *S&R* backgrounds are used for many events, particularly 'red carpets'.

There is, however, a significant functional difference between a sponsor wall and a media background. For the former, the purpose is to build brand awareness using celebrity as the hook and as much as possible create a linkage between celebrity and the brand.

Sponsor walls have prominent branding, single sponsor or more commonly several, with investment 'order of magnitude' delineated by relative size, frequency and in some cases, opacity. Brand instances are vivid by design, in an effort to compete for attention as celebrities make their way by.

By definition, media backgrounds should play a supporting role. The information they communicate is intended to bolster the message and presenter, not upstage them. Colour, opacity, size and so on must be carefully orchestrated to avoid stealing viewer attention. The background should create an impression without the need for cognitive process.

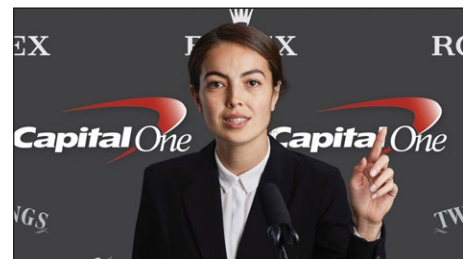
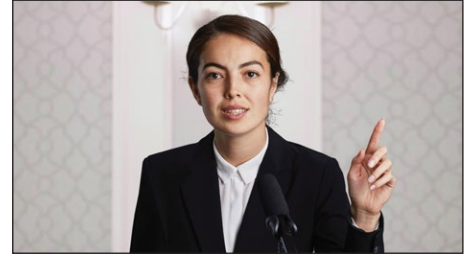
To maintain visual integrity, the background should be at least 230cm (90") tall and 244cm (96") wide, but 305cm (120") is safer. This size keeps uniform branding behind the presenter for up to five cameras.



Large format printing should be available for roughly \$100 per m² (\$10/sq/ft). Full coverage is best but cameras typically shoot waist up.



Having no background or vivid graphic content behind the presenter leaves viewers wondering where they should focus. A harmonized look (above) takes best advantage of screen real estate.



The backgrounds can be wall-mounted but most rental spaces restrict such attachment. Stands, flats or a 'pop-up' trade show wall work well. Some use 'retractable' banners but these present a few challenges in terms of height and (invisible) seaming. Regardless of method, the installation must provide a crisp, wrinkle-free appearance that does not inadvertently upstage.



Camera Placement

Proper camera placement is extremely important. News cameras should be no further than 6m (16') from the presenter, and as close as 3m (10'). The lenses on most ENG cameras need to be within that range to capture a good close-up, the principal 'window' of new information. At the same time, being closer than 2m is quite intimidating for all but the most seasoned, like politicians, where 'scrums' are the norm.

As previously mentioned, cameras and presenter should be on the same plane, preferably flat-floor. Having both on the same level presents a more natural image, eliminating unflattering nostril shots or diminutive down-angles.

Cameras should be directly in front of the presenter, with no elements or obstructions between the two. This sound obvious, of course, but you might be shocked at how often the strangest things happen.

Cameras are the important observers at any media event. Each one represents tens of thousands of people.

The empty space between cameras and presenter should be cordoned off, to prevent anyone from inadvertently walking through the shot.

One last (*redundant*) note. Never place cameras behind an audience. Again, you might be shocked at how often the strangest things happen.

The footprint of a camera, tripod and operator is roughly 95 cm² (9 sq/ft). A minimum of 1.2 m² (12 sq/ft) should be allotted for each camera.

Being portable equipment, cameras operate on battery power so local outlets are not required. For best results they do require a program 'audio' connection, described more fully in 'Sound'.



Lighting

Used properly, lighting can correct most visual issues; used poorly, it can ruin even the most carefully planned presentation.



Some feel the camera operators covering the event will provide any necessary lighting, and while it is true that most have a camera light, there is a huge difference between illumination and lighting. An element this critical to the success of the communication, both in the media and particularly as re-tasked content, should not rest on a disinterested third party.



Good lighting provides the illusion of depth while creating a centre of interest for viewers. It creates expressive images. There are several variations but the basic model used for most television applications is three point lighting.



The technique requires the careful balance of three lighting sources, one on either side and in front of the subject (*key and fill lights*), and one from behind (*back light*). Together they deliver rounded front illumination with highlights on one side of the face, and separation from the background with a soft halo effect across the head and shoulders. This combination creates depth and texture.



Every type of light source has a different colour temperature. All look white to the almost infinite adaptability of the eye, but the camera registers each as a different tint. For example, compared to 'studio white' (*tungsten at 3200 degrees Kelvin*), daylight is blue, fluorescent is green and incandescent is orange.

Cameras can adjust to be 'colour true' for almost any source of light. This is called "white balancing" and is done each time a camera operator sets-up. However, the presence of more than one type of light in a setting potentially distorts the colour rendition of the captured image.

Direct sunlight creates additional problems. Harsh shadows are difficult to overcome and presenters are often forced to squint. Neither look good.

Highlights and shadow create depth in a two-dimensional image

Nothing impacts images more than lighting. Compare a portrait by Annie Leibovitz to the average smartphone snap; a Zoom call to a TV news interview. The difference is immediately apparent.

Don't news 'shooters' deal with all that technical stuff? Camera people are there to capture a story – on a typical day, yours is one of many. They work hard to get the best possible results but they can only shoot what they are given. You are the 'Art Director' for your communications.

The spoken word is the most difficult thing for any sound system.

Without crisp, clean sound, all other communication components become meaningless. Without a 'message', news coverage and even re-tasked web content is not possible.

Sound

Media presentations have two audio requirements. The first, and obviously most important, is to provide clear, high quality program audio for recording devices. The second is sound reinforcement for those on-site.

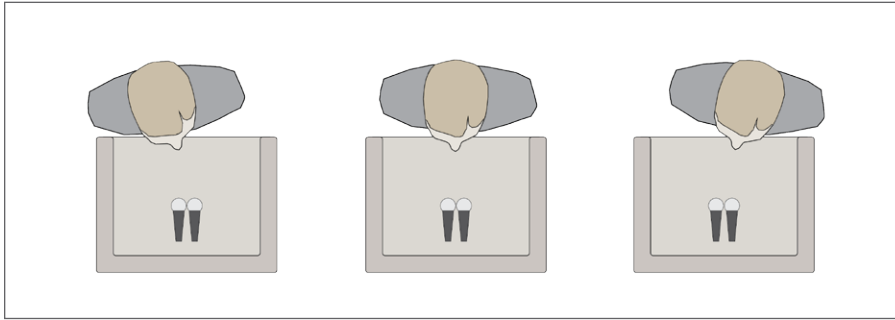
In a "scrum" (a huddle of reporters surrounding a news maker) and with many hard news items you see the subject amid a sea of microphones. This is a dramatic look but it creates problems for soft news. The 'ad hoc' microphone placement yields inconsistent audio quality while the jumble of hardware diverts viewer attention.

The solution is a media multi-feed, a distribution box that supplies the output from ideally placed 'event' microphones to all of those recording the presentation. The multi-feed should setup centrally but away from focalpoint of the event. The box should provide both line and microphone level connections, and each connection point should be 'isolated' to prevent any signal interference between recording devices.

The multi-feed should be fed by a dedicated mixer, capable of delivering a reference tone to permit level adjustment prior to the presentation. The use of a limiter to suppress the transient overloads, common with spoken delivery, is also recommended.



Microphone Technique



Microphone technique is important for any presentation. Many suggest an optimal distance from the microphone. Pick one and remain consistent. The microphone will do the rest. Speak across, not into the microphone. While looking left, shift weight to the right leg, and vice versa. Doing so keeps the microphone in front of the presenter.

Two microphones should always be used for a media event. The redundancy insures against embarrassing equipment failure. Microphones must be close together to avoid phase cancellation, and should be stand or 'shock' mounted to reduce transmission noise through the lectern.

The reinforcement system uses the same microphones as the press, but these must be split prior to, or picked up from the media multi-feed. Separating the control of each system provides consistent program audio for recording devices, without tonal and volume adjustments dictated by local considerations.

While most meeting rooms have 'house' sound, the importance of the event usually dictates the installation of external equipment. Any good quality professional sound system will do the job. Speaker placement is important and should not be impinged upon by aesthetic concerns.

In some locations the 'house' systems may seem adequate, however, this equipment is often poorly maintained and prone to hums, buzzes and pops. In addition, ceiling speakers are prone to feedback. Special care must be taken for media events.



Pro Tips

The image composition of the close-up, the principal window of information, is crucial. Nothing must upstage the presenter. Both white and reflections from shiny surfaces force cameras to darken subtle flesh tones. The presenter must remain the focal point.

Remove any name badges, buttons and in some cases pins prior to formal delivery and during any subsequent interviews. These are scene-stealers. Even event-specific attachments are typically too small to be read, confusing viewers.

On camera, what one wears makes a significant statement. Is the message authoritative, informative or collegial? Wardrobe defines substance. There is lots of information on the web about the best wardrobe choices and to a certain extent, what viewers expect changes over time. But the mediums technical limitations do not change. Shirts and blouses should be light blue or grey, not white. Avoid any detailed patterns, especially in accessories like ties and scarves. Patterns cause camera moirés, strange visual distortions where two areas of detail overlap. Also, keep jewelry to a minimum. Glints and reflection distract viewers.

Avoid drinking fruit juices, milk and coffee before to the presentation. The acid in juice and milk triggers a build-up of phlegm in the throat while coffee accentuates natural nervousness and jitters. Presenting to the media is stressful. Don't worsen the situation.

Glasses of water (*no ice*) should be within easy reach. This provides relief from 'dry mouth' without the tinkle of ice ruining

the audio track. Never use bottles of water. These look exceedingly clumsy on camera. Just ask Marco Rubio.

Never use balloons as part of the decor at a media event. They often pop at the most inopportune moment, with potentially ruinous effect.

If possible the presenter should avoid wearing eyeglasses. In the studio, technicians minimize the shadows caused by eyeglass frames. At a media event mitigation falls to the organizers. On site shadows are minimal. On screen they are more prominent. Contact lenses are a better choice.

Do not place people 'in-frame' with the presenter. This is a favorite for political announcements, to persuade viewers that an action is not unilateral. For soft news items it diverts attention. People moving and looking around in the background suggest the topic is boring.

The Secret Weapon of all amazing presentations

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. It is shocking how little rehearsal occurs in business presentations. People in the executive suite are busy. We get that. Some believe themselves 'gifted' communicators. Regardless, rehearsing 'in position' provides a level of confidence that telegraphs. For media events in particular, the stakes are high. Unlike staff, the public are not required to listen. Rehearse.

A Thousand Words, Maybe More

Both television and the web are visual mediums. Add impact to any presentation by incorporating unusual visual elements.

With so many baying for attention these days it is exceedingly difficult to engage. So relentless are brand efforts that many, maybe most, have become very jaded.

In our ultra-competitive environment, an unlikely lever has evolved, 'click bait'. Who hasn't stumbled onto YouTube and found themselves still there 20 minutes later? Therein is a powerful allegory.

Interest people with a 'hook' and attention follows. It's an almost universal truth. At your next media event, trade show or even the AGM, include a 'ramp' to engagement, an evocative visual element that arrests attention.



Imagine the possibilities!

The word "aubrum" is written in a bold, white, lowercase sans-serif font. To its right is a large, decorative graphic consisting of numerous white, curved, dashed lines that form a series of concentric, overlapping arcs, resembling a stylized fingerprint or a series of ripples. The background is a solid blue color.

aubrum

Media Events in an Internet World

Television news may not be the influential juggernaut it once was, but neither is it down for the count. The internet has had a profound impact but there are significant advantages for those choosing the road less traveled.