

Digging yourself out of a hole is hard work. So it is often easier to take a proactive communication stance versus a reactive one. You can have a great impact on positively influencing public opinion by using proven techniques and approaches. Try using these exposure generating tools to help formulate an assenting public point of view for your issue or cause.

## ***PE TIP SHEET NO. 8:***

### ***More Tools for Your Communication Toolkit***

***BY***

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Would you rather be in the position of responding to preconceived negative public opinion or, rather, leading the formation of such opinion? The choice is yours. A no brainer, huh? Not connecting with your stakeholders early in the process will surely result in having to communicate reactively and sometimes defensively. If you're proactive, you don't have to wait for circumstances or other people to create perspectives on your issues. As Mark Twain once said, "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do."

Despite today's Internet driven information culture, the good old-fashioned newspaper is still a tremendous way to reach your stakeholders. 850,000 adults read the newspaper delivered to my doorstep (or at least in fairly close proximity) every day.

Through your newspaper, there are several ways of generating positive exposure on an issue, any of which can serve to educate the public. Writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper is a one basic way. If you're already an expert and fairly frequent letter to the editor writer, you might consider writing an "op-ed," a longer opinion piece responding to an editorial written by the newspaper's staff. Another way of generating positive press is to influence editorials by scheduling a meeting with the editorial board of the paper, to educate them on an issue and encourage them to write an opinion in an editorial piece.

#### ***Letters to the Editor***

Without exception, the letters section is one of the most highly read sections in any newspaper or magazine. According to the newspaper I read, nearly 550,000 adults read the opinions section in the paper's Sunday edition. Letters to the editor are an easy way for you to educate readers about issues that concern your organization. You can use letters to correct or interpret facts in response to an inaccurate or biased article, to praise or criticize a recent article or editorial, or simply provide your opinion on an issue important to your organization and the public at large.

Make sure you read the paper before you write to get an idea of the format, and be sure to have the name

of the editor you're addressing. Don't miss out on this chance to reach the public -- write early and often. But not too often otherwise you may wear out your welcome mat and your letters could fall into the circular file! Keep these tips in mind:

- ◆ **Be timely.** Capitalize on recent news and events affecting your issue or organization, within 24 hours of a story if possible.
- ◆ **Keep it short and simple.** Keep your points clear and stick to one subject. If you look at the editorial page, a few paragraphs and sometimes as little as 150 words is all they usually print!
- ◆ **Think locally.** Demonstrate how this issue affects your stakeholders.
- ◆ **Sign your letter.** Include your name, organization, address and telephone number. Papers may need to contact you if they are considering printing your letter.
- ◆ **Follow-up.** If the newspaper doesn't call you, call the newspaper. Ask to speak to the person in charge of letters to the editor. Ask if they plan on printing your letter, and if not, see if they have any feedback for you.
- ◆ **Don't be discouraged.** Your letter may not get printed. But every time you submit a letter, you are educating the editorial board and paving the way for future letters to be printed. Keep trying!

### **Writing and Publishing Opinions-Editorials**

Opinions-editorials (op-eds) are written by citizens, experts, and leaders of organizations -- people like you. If you can get one printed, op-eds are an extremely powerful and cost-effective way to educate a large number of readers about your issues.

The pointers for writing a letter to the editor are also applicable for op-eds. In addition:

- ◆ **Timing is the most important factor.** Is this issue already in the news or is it stale? Is there an appropriate occasion (World Water Day, Earth Day, World Environment Day, some local event) you can relate your piece to, or is there a recent article or editorial to which you can respond? Remember that it can take up to a week for a paper to review submissions, but it's still a good idea to check and see if your piece is being considered.
- ◆ **It's the messenger AND the message.** Find a prominent person to sign the op-ed, which will have a big influence in the paper's consideration. Maybe it's the mayor or state representative or the chairperson of your governing board or your CEO. For example, if you and several other organizations with similar missions got together to write a piece about water quality or supply just as the Florida Legislature is considering legislation on water project funding, it would be great to have op-ed go out under the president of the FWEA's pen.
- ◆ **Know the guidelines of the newspaper.** Text of an op-ed should be 300-500 words. You'll need to identify yourself, and you might suggest a title for the piece. Many papers require exclusivity, meaning that you can't submit to another paper at the same time. Find out how submissions work -- increasingly, editorial departments prefer e-mail. Again, read the paper's editorial page to see how their format works.

- ◆ **Identify the largest newspaper in your area.** Maximize your exposure. If you don't have a copy of the paper, call or check the newspaper's web site to get the name and address of the op-ed page editor before you mail your piece off.
- ◆ **Call to follow-up.** Ask if your submission is under consideration. Again, even if they don't publish your piece this time, this is a great opportunity to educate the editor about your cause.

### ***Prepare Yourself***

- ◆ Read the paper you are approaching. Asking for an editorial when one has already been published will waste your time and hurt your credibility.
- ◆ Outline your intent for the meeting in a letter. State your goal, e.g.: "To educate citizens in your circulation area about how the city's proposed bond issue of \$40 million to finance needed utilities system improvements will benefit the people and the environment of the Wekiva Springs locale." Mail or fax your letter and any supporting information to the editor of the editorial page. Remember to keep copies for yourself.
- ◆ Follow up with a phone call. After a day or so, ask the person if they've received your materials. If not, be prepared to summarize. See if they have time to meet, or at least set up a phone briefing. It's okay to call back a few times until you get someone, but don't make yourself a nuisance -- editors are always crunched for time, so be courteous as well as persistent.

### ***Influencing Editorials***

Editorials are the voice of a newspaper, and the only place where opinions are openly stated, as opposed to "unbiased" news stories. Editorials are the first thing people look to when they turn to the editorial pages. An editorial endorsing a particular position can do much to positively influence public opinion.

Outreach to editorial boards can result not only in editorials that take a progressive stance on an issue; they can also affect news coverage throughout the paper. As discussed above, if you can develop a rapport with the editorial staff and are able to arrange a briefing, this is your best chance to make some serious headway on an issue.

Newspaper editorials can be inspired by submitted information, events, current opinion or even letters from readers. The single best way to influence the content of editorials is conducting a briefing with editorial boards, although influencing editorials can be achieved by simply sending materials and following up by phone.

### ***The Briefing***

Building relationships with editors and reporters will prove helpful and could lead to briefings with the editorial board or op-ed page editor. To be most effective, editorial board briefings should have no more than two to three individuals who make a combined presentation of not more than 10 to 15 minutes. Again, remember that it is the *message and the messenger* so bring a well-respected person to the table, though doing your homework and presenting your case in a clear and compelling way is equally important.

Leave plenty of time for questions, since that's how journalists are used to getting information. Although you should select individuals to attend the briefing who will be able to answer most if not all of the anticipated questions, if you don't have an answer, reply that you'll find out and then get back to them right away.

- ◆ **Show broad support.** It's great if you can demonstrate a coalition of support, through individuals, or a letter signed by a variety of organizations like yours.
- ◆ **Have a game plan.** Before you meet, decide who will take the lead and who will make certain points. Frame your arguments so they are locally compelling and would appeal to the average newspaper reader.
- ◆ **Ask them to write an editorial.** After you've made your case, ask them if they think they'll write an editorial on your issue, and if so, when. If they decide not to do an editorial supporting your position, or take a stance to the contrary, propose that they print an op-ed piece from you. Be sure to be gracious and thank the editors for their time, in any case.

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