

Including Editorial Boards in Your Communications Strategy

By Dan Ward, APR

“This proposal is so bad, so anti-competition, and hinders local governments so much, it defies logic that anyone would want to bring it back. Yet it actually may be worth another debate just so the public knows who’s in the pocket of the rich, powerful telecom interests.”

That statement, made in regard to a proposal to limit municipalities’ ability to provide wireless internet and other telecom services, was not made by a local activist, a city attorney or an outraged citizen. It was made by the Ocala Star-Banner, a daily newspaper serving more than 50,000 readers.

Newspapers, through their editorial writers, make such strongly worded – and often slanted – statements every day. They carry tremendous power to advance issues or destroy proposals, to help organizations succeed or fail. Yet many of us strangely ignore this audience when developing communications plans.

A news article will present objective facts, which is important to build awareness, but editorial writers tell legislators, community leaders and the public at large how they should think and act on those facts.

If your organization or client is seeking a change in public policy, trying to motivate the community to take action on some issue or simply trying to educate the community about an important topic, the editorial writers must be a part of your outreach.

But how do you do it?

First, determine your objectives:

Support – Are you asking for vocal, editorial support for your issue ... a written editorial asking the community to get behind blood drive efforts or to ask city and county leadership to fund economic development incentives?

Education – There are times where you may not be seeking vocal support, but simply want to educate the editorial writers about your position in case they decide to weigh in on an issue.

Response – You may not always get to them in time. Sometimes editorial writers weigh in without your input. Your objective may simply be to make sure that future editorials are based on a full review that includes your organization’s position.

Next, it’s time to research your audience. Consider this like any other publicity effort, in which you first research a reporter’s interests.

Go back through editorial archives and see who they have supported in elections. Do their editorials tend to be pro-business or pro-environment? Do they support government spending for arts and cultural events, or do they prefer private investment? The opinions in the newspaper often reflect the long-term bias of the organization.

Look at whether and how the newspaper has covered similar issues in the past. Do they generally side with your organization or industry, or with the organizations that oppose your issue?

Next, decide what it is you want them to know.

In this case, the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) rule always applies.

Editorial space is limited ... most editorials are only a couple of hundred words, and even if the editorial supports your position, there is only room for a couple of your key messages.

If you have 14 reasons why citizens should support the arts, start with items 1-3 and stop talking. Put the rest into a Q&A, or develop written back-up materials that clearly outline all your key points. Too many messages in your presentation, and you risk confusing your audience.

Most importantly, don't be shy. Use the opportunity to counter your opponents' arguments. We often are afraid to bring up what the opposition says about us for fear of lending credibility to their arguments. But if an editorial writer is going to weigh in on an issue, chances are they're going to hear those opposing arguments anyway. Isn't it better to get those arguments on the table yourself, and use the opportunity to respond?

Once, we were meeting with editorial boards around the state, trying to drum up support for a new kind of power plant that sells electricity only on the wholesale market. We knew our opponents were telling legislators that our plans were to ship the electricity out of the state for huge profits.

We started our editorial board meetings with written back-up, footnotes and charts to show this allegation didn't hold water ... partly because our opponents had already locked up transmission space to ship their own Florida-produced electricity out of the state.

How do you think the meeting went when our opponents sat down with the editorial board and made their allegations? They were hit with our charts, our footnotes, our messaging.

Next, tell them what you want ... if you're there to ask for their support in a written editorial, ask them. If you simply want to keep them in the loop, with a promise to provide updated information should they decide this is an issue for them, make that clear.

After you meet with them, keep providing updates on your issue: have other newspapers written editorials you'd like them to see, have new bills been proposed that warrant their attention, are your opponents issuing new allegations to which you need to respond?

Don't get cute. This is certainly not the time for spin. The people who sit on the editorial board take their responsibility very seriously, and so should you. Expect them to ask tough questions, and prepare to give them open, honest answers.

Finally, set realistic expectations. Just like with any publicity effort, you won't win every time. Sometimes the editorial writers may simply thank you for your time and do nothing. Sometimes they may side with your opponents, and write an editorial detailing the ways in which you are wrong.

So ... determine your objectives, research your audience, develop your messages, advocate for your cause, take your audience seriously and set realistic expectations for success. That's a good guide for just about any public relations plan, and it's especially important when trying to influence public opinion through editorial placement.