

ImPRESSive

A MEDIA TIP SHEET FOR ADVOCATES

March 1999

GETTING IN THE EDITORIAL/OPINION PAGES

WHY TARGET EDITORIAL/OPINION PAGES?

The editorial/opinion page is one of the most widely read sections of a newspaper or magazine. In addition to educating the general public about emerging issues, *editorials*, *opinion-editorials (op-eds)*, and *letters to the editor* are effective ways to reach opinion leaders and key decision-makers in your state. Being featured in the editorial/opinion pages will help raise the profile of your organization and infuse your point of view into debates on important issues.

VENUES FOR GETTING IN THE OPINION/EDITORIAL PAGES:

- 1) Op-Ed: An opinion-editorial, or op-ed, is an opinion piece sent in by a member of the community. Traditionally, it was placed opposite the newspaper's editorial page, hence the name op-ed. However, it has now come to be known as an opinion-editorial.
- 2) Editorial: An editorial is an opinion piece written by a member of a publication's staff or a contributing writer or editor.
- 3) Letter to the Editor: A letter to the editor is submitted by a member of the community, usually in response to something that has previously appeared in the publication.

WRITING AN OP-ED

An op-ed should call for change, critique policy and/or highlight a problem facing the community.

Make It Timely. Choose a current topic, or "news peg", to hang your opinion on.

Know Your Thesis. You should be able to sum up your argument in one sentence. If you can't, think about it more before you begin writing.

Argue. You are trying to assert your point of view. Express your opinion in a persuasive, argumentative manner.

Support Your Claims. Include a few key facts and/or statistics from studies. Effective use of research can reinforce your argument.

Use Plain Language. Write as you would explain your argument to a friend who is not familiar with the issue.

Be Brief. State your opinion clearly and concisely, back it up with facts and examples, and then conclude. Even a well-argued piece may be refused if it is too long.

Because each paper has specific criteria for publishing op-eds, it is best to call the editorial

department of the newspaper or magazine you are targeting to verify their policy, prior to submitting your piece. Determine length requirements, to whom you should address the final version, and whether you should send it via fax, e-mail, or regular mail.

Format

Introduction

Your first paragraph should grab your readers' attention and compel her or him to read on. Start with a surprising image or interesting anecdote that sums up what you are saying. Next, either in the first or second paragraph, state your thesis.

Body

The body of your op-ed should consist of evidence that backs up your argument. Before you give evidence, you might want to provide a brief background. Then, in subsequent paragraphs, state the remaining points of your argument, using data for support.

Conclusion

In the concluding paragraph, it is sometimes a good idea to rephrase or reference the kicker you began with. Also, try to finish with a call to action or something that leaves readers feeling empowered to influence the issue's outcome.

At the very end of the op-ed, provide a one-line biography of the author. (In some cases you may actually write the piece, but submit it under your director's name, making her or him the author.)

Along with your op-ed, submit a cover letter that outlines your major points using a few sentences or bullets (see example below). Also include the author's name, address and phone number in the cover letter. If a decision is made to print the piece, someone often will call. Submit your cover letter and op-ed to the *Op-Ed Page Editor*. (At some outlets this person may be the *Editorial Page Editor*, or *Commentary Editor*. It's best to call the outlet and ask for the name and title of the appropriate contact.)

SAMPLE OP-ED PITCH LETTER

(Date)

Dear Op-Ed Page Editor:

Consumer groups, Republicans and Democrats in Congress, the President and even some members of the HMO industry have called for legally enforceable standards for managed care plans. This session, Congress will be examining a number of bills that include basic managed care protections.

Ron Pollack, Executive Director of Families USA—the national organization for health care consumers—lays out in the enclosed op-ed compelling reasons for passage of consumer protection legislation:

- The public very much wants and needs such protection;
- There is no true marketplace today to drive health care quality; and
- By any reasonable cost-benefit analysis, the procedural protection being considered make very good policy sense.

I hope you will consider running the enclosed op-ed or editorializing on the subject. If you have any questions or need more information, please feel free to call me at 202-628-3030.

(signature block)

WRITER'S WORKSHOP

- ▶ Express your point of view clearly and boldly in the first paragraph.
- ▶ Be concise in your argument, limiting yourself to three major points.
- ▶ Use simple, short sentences.
- ▶ Use short paragraphs.
- ▶ Avoid flowery and technical language and jargon.
- ▶ Use active rather than passive language: e.g., change “This bill was vetoed by the Governor” to “The Governor vetoed this bill.”
- ▶ Your piece should be approximately 700 words or less, typed. (Both Microsoft Word and WordPerfect offer a word count tool.)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A letter to the editor is an opportunity for readers to correct and/or comment on an article or statement that recently appeared in a publication, voice their opinions to policy makers, and educate people in a community about issues. You can use letters to:

- explain the connection between a news item and your priority issues;
- clarify an issue after a misleading, inaccurate, or biased letter or story;
- respond to other editorials;
- rebut a news or feature story; or
- compliment the publication for a recent article or editorial.

Writing Your Letter

Make it Timely. If you're responding to a news story, or someone else's letter, try to mail your letter within a few days.

Be Brief. Your letter should be between 250 and 300 words, typed and double-spaced.

Use Plain Language. Write as if you are addressing a friend.

Localize Your Letter. Editors will be much more likely to publish a letter, and the letter will have much more impact, if it demonstrates local relevance.

Use Your Credentials. If you have expertise in the area you are writing about, say so. Sign your letter to the editor with your affiliation if the letter is the only one (or one of a few) being sent. On the other hand, if you and coalition members are writing letters to the editor as part of a targeted campaign, you should not include your affiliation. Publications will usually not print letters that they think are part of a letter-writing campaign.

Address it Properly. Your salutation should be “Dear Editor.”

Keep a Copy. If your letter is published, compare your original with how the newspaper or magazine printed it to make sure the intent of your letter wasn't changed by editing and that no crucial points were eliminated. It will also help you write a better letter next time.

Sign it. Remember to sign your letter and provide an address and phone number. The publication will usually contact you if they've decided to print your letter.

Format

Introduction

Letters to the editor are used to respond to a news event, not to create news. Therefore, in writing a letter to the editor, you generally want

to begin by referring to the article to which you are responding. In the first paragraph, give the title of the article and the date it was written. The first paragraph should also state your reaction to the article.

Body

The body expounds on the article you are responding to and explains why you agree or disagree. If the article that was written missed an important point, say so, and explain why it is important. If it did not provide the full story, give the full story. If someone gave an explanation that was unclear or misleading, clarify the point for the newspapers' readers. Inject anecdotes, quotes, statistics, and any other information that supports your point. (Make sure all facts and figures are correct.)

Conclusion

In your final paragraph, include a call to action for members of the community. This will vary depending on the circumstances. It could be calling their legislator, attending a rally, or organizing a campaign. Whenever possible, suggest a call to action to motivate readers.

Often the letters to the editor section of the paper gives guidelines for sending a letter. If this information is not published, call and ask the paper's desired method (mail, e-mail, or fax) of receiving letters and the preferred letter length. Be aware that the newspaper or magazine may shorten your piece if they decide to publish it.

PLACING AN EDITORIAL

Editorials outline a newspaper's position on a newsworthy issue. Some possible editorial topics include: how the governor's new budget will affect low-income people, what a new report on uninsured means for the state, or how a health care proposal pending in Congress will impact people in your community. The key is to convince the editorial writer(s) that the topic is relevant, newsworthy and worth taking a position on.

The first step in placing an editorial is to meet with editorial board staff members. Depending on the outlet, this may be a small or large group of the paper's staff, including various reporters and editors. Call the *Editorial Page Editor* and ask who covers health for the editorial board. Then call that person, and describe the issue you want to discuss (e.g., a new study shows the number of uninsured children in Florida is increasing or the governor's proposed budget will cut funding to vital Medicaid programs), and that you would like to meet with the paper or magazine's editorial board.

The Meeting

The Editorial Board (ed-board) consists of writers and editors who meet on a regular basis to decide upon content for the publication's editorial section. If the editorial board agrees to hear your case, here's how to prepare:

- Plan to present your case in 10-15 minutes. Know your thesis and prepare talking points to help you focus on the most important information during your presentation.
- Give the editorial board members background information about the organization or coalition you are representing.
- Bring studies, papers, and fact sheets to support your position. Your fact sheets are particularly important in summarizing the key points that you want the ed-board members to focus on. To make your viewpoint more credible, use various sources of data to support your claims.
- Be prepared to answer questions. Editorial writers may want to ask you questions about related issues. For example, if you go to the editorial board to discuss funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program, they may also ask you questions about Medicaid. Don't feel you have to know the answer to every question or that you have to answer

on the spot. It's fine to say "I'll have to look into that and give you a call," or "Let me send you a study that can explain that issue better."

- To prepare, practice answering questions with someone who has only basic knowledge of the issue *and* with someone who knows the issue inside and out.
- Remember: Since you will not be writing the editorial, your goal, in addition to getting an editorial about the issue placed, is to influence the way in which the publication addresses that issue.

Sometimes it is appropriate to bring one or two representatives from other groups who have the same position on the issue. An

editorial board meeting is not meant to shine the spotlight on your organization, but to convince the paper to take a certain position, and bringing supporters or a list of groups that support your position can only help.

IN CONCLUSION...

Editorials, opinion-editorials and letters to the editor are wonderful venues for expressing your points of view. Without overdoing it, build a relationship with editorial writers and editors by keeping them updated from time to time about what's going on as it pertains to the issues they're working on. Gaining their support for an issue will better position your organization or coalition to get placement on the editorial pages and achieve success on the issues you care about.

Tell us what you think...

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For an example of an op-ed, visit our website: www.familiesusa.org