

## THE BASICS - HOW TO WORK WITH YOUR LOCAL MEDIA

Recommendations taken from "Messages, Media & Momentum, A Media and Public Speaking Primer"  
by Lisa M. Baumgartner of M&R Strategic Services, May, 2001

### Areas where concerned local citizens can make a difference with the media:

- **PARTICIPATION:** become a voice in the media by getting letters and articles published and doing interviews.
- **EDUCATION:** develop relationships with journalists, editors and other media professionals and providing them with accurate news and alternative views.
- **ACCOUNTABILITY:** act as a check on inaccurate and unfair reporting and analysis.

### Writing a letter to the Editor

A letter to the editor should be first and foremost concise. Very few newspapers will publish any letter over 250 words. If you want your letter to be published, you have to pick only the most important issues to write about. The tone of a published letter should be calm and matter of fact.

### Writing an Op-Ed

Most newspapers accept unsolicited submissions of "Op-ed" articles from members of the public. An op-ed is simply an opinion piece. Sometimes they are called "commentaries." Though there are no solid rules about how to get one published, some general principles are:

- An op-ed should be well-written and topical. For example, when an issue is in the news, most newspapers will be looking for one or two op-ed pieces on the subject. This is your chance, especially if they recently published something from an opposing viewpoint.
- Very few newspapers publish op-eds over 800 words, so keep your article within that limit. It is hard to write with so few words, ask a friend to help you edit unnecessary words, phrases and information. Your op-ed should use simple language that will ensure that all members of the public will understand what you are writing about.
- Boil your argument down to three major points. Use simple, short sentences. Write in short paragraphs with no more than three sentences apiece.
- Newspapers like op-eds from members of the local community who have some personal stake in the issue.
- Having a title, such as "...the writer is a member of Pleasantvillians for Peace" sometimes helps but is not necessary. Having a personal connection to the issue is usually enough.
- Call the newspaper and ask the op-ed editor what the guidelines are and how they like to receive the op-eds (in the mail, via fax, e-mail, etc). After you submit your op-ed be sure to follow up with a phone call to be sure that they received it.
- The best bet is to send your op-ed to your local paper. Op-eds are most often rejected. This does not mean your piece is not worthy; it just was not exactly what the paper was looking for at that time. Try again later with another piece. Send your op-ed to many sources. Your neighborhood paper, Synodical newsletter or organizational newsletter may want to publish it. This is a good way to educate your local community and to stimulate more discussion around the issue.



## **Meeting with the Editorial Board**

Newspapers typically have an editorial board. This is the group of people who decide on what stands a newspaper will take in its unsigned editorials. These articles represent the newspaper's position on a given issue.

Any group of people can ask for a meeting with an editorial board. Write a letter talking about your group and the issue you want to address, follow up your letter with a phone call the next week to the editorial department. Be prepared to tell them why they should meet with you – with reasons that this is important to readers and to the community. It is best to use a title for your group, for example, if you have three or four people, call yourselves “The Circleville Committee for Fairness for Women in Global Trade” or something like that.

Before you ask for a meeting DO YOUR RESEARCH!! Look through old reporting done by the newspaper. What reporting and opinion was good? What was bad? What do you want them to know? Bring information with you to the meeting and be sure that all of your facts are substantiated and ready to be shared with a news agency. They will appreciate the information and look it over after the meeting. Invite experts who you work with on the issue to attend the meeting if you feel that they could be helpful to the editorial board. No more than three people should attend the meeting.

## **Six Steps to Successful Media Participation for Concerned Local Citizens**

### **1. Become an analyst**

For every report you hear or read ask yourself, “what is good about this, what is bad? Whose voices are included, whose are excluded? What would it take to make this report better? When taking your concerns to the media source try to find areas of the reporting to praise and use that as an example of what you want to see more of as you contrast it to the bad ones. Avoid making blanket or accusatory statements like “all your coverage is bad.” To be a good analyst you must simply pay close attention to the coverage of the issues you are tracking, stay up to date on the issue through other sources so you know how to evaluate the news, and use your common sense. Often a good sense of logic and propriety in reporting is the most important tool of news analysis.

### **2. Choose your battles**

No one can track all of the media on one particular issue. Instead of trying to get it all, pick one or two sources – radio, TV or newspaper and try to monitor them consistently. This way you are able to identify patterns in good or bad reporting, get to know the styles of certain reporters, and build a good case for your arguments when you want to establish dialogue with the people who produce the news.

### **3. Know your facts**

- a. Maximize your use of available information through local and national groups and by monitoring the internet
- b. It is easy to search through the stories of the wire services (Reuters, UPI, the Associated Press) at: <http://dailynews.yahoo.com>.



- c. Look at international press coverage of your issue. Sources like the BBC and other European Newspapers can provide helpful contrasts with what you are seeing covered by U.S. media sources.

#### **4. Communicate**

- a. Use e-mail, send faxes and letters and be sure to follow up with phone calls. If you are unsure of how to reach a journalist or editor directly, just call up the newspaper/radio/TV station and ask directly. Most media outlets have websites where they post information on how to contact them.
- b. Be courteous and professional. When communicating with journalists or editors remember:
  - They are under a lot of pressure. They hear from a lot of nutcases so you need to take the time to present yourself factually, professionally and politely.
  - When writing a letter, assume that the reader knows little about the topic. If you are writing in response to a story always include relevant information (date, name of reporter, subject), and briefly remind the reader of what was presented in the article. If your letter is intended to educate the journalist you can include more information than if you want your letter to the editor to be published (see letter to the editor section).
  - Never give in to frustration or emotions. You want to establish a dialogue and not to make the conversation personal. You may disagree but if you keep the dialogue professional you are much more likely to talk in the future.
  - Praise the good and criticize the bad. Journalists are much more likely to take you seriously if they feel that you are trying to fairly evaluate their work. Remember, if the truth is on your side you have nothing to be afraid of!

#### **5. Become a Source**

Most journalists are kind people. They may not be experts on the issues that you care about, and they rely on the information that their sources provide for them. You can become a source of good, timely reliable information and analysis. As a source you should not bombard them with information but be selective: what are the most important things that they need to know? If the opportunity rises, ask them what kinds of things they are interested in hearing about. Once you establish credibility, journalists will begin to turn to you – to discuss ideas, or even ask for quotes or interviews.

#### **6. Develop Networks**

Share your letters with interested friends and other concerned citizens. This will encourage others to follow your example and also give you another way to share information with your community members.

## MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT AND USE

- What is the **ONE POINT** we want to make to engage the public?
- What is our over-arching message? – **You** (the audience) should support/denounce/act on \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
- Start where **THEY** (your audience) are, now where you are. You need to begin communicating with the same premise as your audience. The way to persuade people is to listen first and listen as much as possible, then talk.
- Who is your primary focus for this message? Remember: You can't persuade everyone.
- **A GOOD MESSAGE IS:**
  - **Clear**
  - **Concise**
  - **Connected** – to where people are emotionally. To the things your focus audience cares about, to what is important to them and not important to us.
  - **Contrasting** – why is this course of action better than the alternative? Make it concrete, not abstract.
  - **Consistent**
- If difficult situations or when an interviewer wants to get you “off message” you need to know your **ABCs**:
  - **Acknowledge** – their question
  - **Bridge** – build a bridge to your key message
  - **Connect** – highlight your key message

### Key Questions for Message Development:

1. What do you want as an end result? (Communication outcome)
2. With whom do you want to communicate? (Focus audience)
3. What are the self-interests of your audience? (needs/concerns/interests)
4. What do you want to say? (Message)