

**REMARKS FROM STEVE HUNTLEY,
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The late playwright Arthur Miller once said a good newspaper is a nation talking to itself.

I like to think that conversation often occurs within a newspaper's commentary section ó the part of the paper that includes editorials, OpEds and letters to the editor. Here the newspaper talks to the community and listens to the community talk back. My purpose this morning is to inform you how your voice can be heard as your hometown newspaper talks with its community.

A newspaper is, among other things, a corporate citizen of the community where it is published. The editorial page is where a newspaper offers its opinions on issues of importance to the community. Those editorial positions are formulated by the paper's editorial board, which is the voice of the publisher. In formulating those opinions, editorial boards are eager to hear views about the important issues facing the community from experts on those issues and from interest groups with opinions on those issues. Sometimes we invite people in; more often, they ask to come in.

Editorial boards vary widely in size. Some big papers have a dozen editorial board members. For some small community papers the editorial board may be just one person ó and one person who may have other duties as well. At the Sun-Times, we fall in the middle with a board of half a dozen.

Now let's say there's an issue that you want to get before the editorial board of your hometown paper. How do you go about that? Just pick up the phone or send an email. If you know someone on the board, call him or her directly. Or if you know there's an editorial writer who specializes in writing about your issue, call him or her. If you don't know whom to call, call me, that is the editorial page editor.

Now, once you have a meeting set, don't show up expecting, even at a big newspaper, to sit down with a dozen or a half dozen people. Usually, two or three writers will show up. The others are working on other issues.

Now, we want as much as you do for your visit to be successful. So here are five suggestions or guidelines to help make your visit work for you.

First, have something to say. That may sound too simple to list, but a couple of times a year, I have a p.r. person set up a meeting for his group and then a few days before the meeting call up and say, "We're coming over

in a couple of days, what do you want to talk about?" My reaction is always the same: What do I want to talk about? ó You're the one who set up the meeting, if you don't have an agenda there's no point to having a meeting. They usually find they do have an agenda.

Second, have only one thing, or maybe two, to talk about. I've had groups come in, talking about something for 10 or 15 minutes, then turn to a new subject, and 10 or 15 minutes later turn to yet another issue ó once a well meaning organization came in and proceed to present us with four huge issues. We can only draw one conclusion from a meeting like that ó the organization hasn't set the priorities for its own agenda. That doesn't make a very good impression. And frankly, our attention span is rarely up to tackling more than one issue per meeting. Keep your agenda focused.

Third guideline: Keep your group to no more than four or five people. I've had groups show up with a dozen or more people. Too many voices all too often dilute your message. When you have many people clamoring to speak, it's very easy for one or more of them to wander off the focus you want. I've seen it happen time and again. And on our side of the table, when we should be listening to what you're saying, we find ourselves trying to remember whether it's Jim or Bill or Jack who's talking. Keep your group manageable.

Fourth, do bring printed material. It should track your presentation, offering a few more details and perhaps references to supporting viewpoints from other sources. It should be concise and relatively brief ó not a huge volume of information. If you do believe that you need to present 150 pages of detailed analysis of your issue, then bring one copy of that to supplement your summaries. The editorial page editor will see that the detailed analysis gets to the right writer. Generally you should hand out your papers at the start of the meeting, as it can help us follow your presentation and sometimes generate questions.

Fifth, plan to leave time for questions. These meetings can last from 20 minutes to an hour. Sometimes we'll wait to the end of your presentation to ask questions; sometimes we'll jump in before. That's especially true if we feel we know the basic issue you're discussing and what we want to hear are your opinions about it or answers to criticisms of what we know is your stand of the issue. In other words, be prepared to defend your position.

There you have my advice; following those five guidelines should help you get your message across and help you have a successful meeting.

So now you've had your meeting with the editorial board of your local paper, what should you expect next? You of course will leave hoping to see an editorial backing your viewpoint. Some times that happens. But don't be

disappointed if that doesn't happen. Many editorial board meetings in fact do not produce an editorial. But the meetings do provide for us important background information and context that will come up in discussions among the editorial board members and influence later editorials. Your views may actually persuade us not to write an editorial, that is, maybe we were thinking about taking a stand on the issue you brought up but one different from your position. After meeting with you, we're not convinced that you're right but we are no longer confident that our own position is the right one either. So no editorial can be a good result for you.

Now, an editorial board meeting is not the only way for you to participate in your newspaper's conversation with the community. Other avenues for this exchange of ideas are OpEds and letters to the editor.

The major portion of the OpEd page is devoted to a lineup of regular columnists who offer analysis and commentary of the important issues of the day. But there are open spots during the week for members of the community to present OpEds. For instance, the last couple of weeks in the Sun-Times we've had an OpEd by the ACLU of Illinois about the Patriot Act and one by a local housing expert on the progress of the Chicago Housing Authority's ambitious plans to transform public housing in Chicago.

When you do submit an OpEd, make sure you know the editorial requirements of your local newspaper. How long should your submission be? A general guideline is 650 to 700 words for a tabloid format like the Sun-Times OpEds and 750 to 800 words for a broadsheet newspaper. There are exceptions to those rules but they have to be negotiated with the OpEd editor. No one should send a 3,000-word OpEd to a newspaper and expect it to be published.

Be aware that newspapers receive many, many OpEd submissions. I'll get dozens each day. That means frequently that we don't respond to submissions unless we intend to use them. That leaves you wondering what happened to your OpEd. Here's one suggestion. You can call and let us know you sent an article in and leave your phone number in case we didn't get it. Of course, that will still leave you wondering if you will get published. A general rule of thumb is that if you haven't heard back within five business days of the submission, it probably isn't going to get used.

Unfortunately, we never have enough space for all the good OpEds that come our way. There's a lot of competition for limited space. But that shouldn't discourage you. Most papers prefer well written OpEds from local sources to freelance pieces from out-of-town writers - I know that's certainly true at the Sun-Times. And remember this simple guideline: If you don't try, you'll never get published.

The area where you do have an excellent chance of success is the letters to the editor section. That's especially true if the paper has taken a position opposing your organization's viewpoint. Every newspaper I know welcomes responses to those editorials. Again be aware of the paper's requirements. Your address and daytime telephone number, while they will not be published, must be included so that we can call you and verify that you did indeed write the letter. Occasionally we find people trying to play a prank or do mischief against someone by submitting a letter in their name. Keep your letter short ó the shorter the better, usually no more than 250 words. Even at that length it might be cut through editing. Email is the most efficient way to get your letter in, but fax and snail mail still work.

There you have it, the nuts and bolts of the commentary section. Please help your paper be a good newspaper by joining your community in talking to itself.

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