

Working with a group of influencers

► It requires a nuanced, well-crafted approach to connect with the newspapers' editorial boards. By *Craig McGuire*

Consolidation, competition, and declining readership may plague newspapers, but the editorial page still influences opinion leaders and policy-makers. "There's no shortage of opinion out there, but few bloggers offer the value of being associated with a brand-name newspaper," says Doug Holt, a Burson-Marsteller media practice director.

And when pitching an editorial board, it is important to remember that it comprises the publication's most accomplished veterans.

"This is an intellectually curious, rigorous group with highly sensitive BS meters, so don't try to bamboozle your way past tough issues," Holt adds.

Before joining Burson, Holt was a reporter at the *Chicago Tribune* and did a stint writing editorials when a board member went on leave, where he worked under Pulitzer Prize winning editorialist Bruce Dold.

"The best PR pros know exactly who on the board is most likely to be sympathetic to their issue," he says. "What I do not like is institutional writing. When it's too

well-crafted, too stiff, too turgid, we just throw it out. I find the pitches from many professionals are often not nearly as interesting as those from amateurs."

When pitching an editorial board, you must use a more nuanced approach, advises Thomas Graham, EVP and GM of Weber Shandwick's Austin, TX, office.

"These papers are under tremendous pressure to grab market share in the most competitive media environment ever," he says. "But the board is still the conscience of the community."

To tap into this conscience, Graham suggests reading the paper's editorial pages religiously, or at least compiling a media analysis of the board's position on key issues.

And, with so much one-sided noise online, know both sides.

"[Papers] may be pressed for news, so arrive with a timely piece"

— *Sam Singer, president
Singer Associates*

"In this hyper-competitive media environment, there is greater polarization around hot issues, so the more balance you bring, the more credibility you will have with the editorial board," Graham explains. "I am not advocating arguing the other side's position, but be prepared."

If a PR pro can land an audience with the board, don't expect more than an hour. The pitch should be no more than 20 minutes, with the balance reserved for Q&A.

To prepare his clients, Sam Singer, president of Singer Associates, opts for media training "to field the harder-hitting questions and frame the conversation.

"And, depending on the paper, they may be pressed for news and receptive to it, so arrive with a timely piece... in hand," he adds.

Meanwhile, Rich Opiel, editor of the *Austin American-Statesman*, says today's PR pros, in general, are not nearly as effective as they were 20 years ago in pitching his editorial board.

"Maybe I have too nostalgic a view of this, but the best PR people — and they are few — are the ones who read the newspaper carefully and develop personal relationships with reporters," he notes. "Don't flood us with bad e-mail press releases; we receive thousands, don't have time to read them, and now set up spam filters to block you."

Opiel suggests recruiting a respected community member to write an editorial letter.

Technique Tips

DO

- Read the editorial page regularly and know where members stand on the issues
- Show up with timely news and have something new to say about the issue
- Be patient and build relationships before requesting an audience

DON'T

- Ask for a meeting unless your issue is significant to readers
- Get angry or confrontational. Be ready for difficult questions and to address opposing views
- Hide the client. If the issue is of interest, it will be covered

"Keep it short and to the point, include a full name address and daytime and evening phone numbers," he says. "Focus on a single idea and do not exceed 150 words."

As SVP at The Marcus Group, Richard Aregood leverages his years of experience as an editorial page editor of the *Newark Star-Ledger* and the *Philadelphia Daily News*.

"The presentation always has to bear in mind that the goal is to use valuable space in the paper," he notes. "It's better not to get the meeting if you can't see a possibility for the paper in it. Clients have to understand that this is a subtle art."

Aregood also warns that confrontation is always possible, so you can't lose your cool. "I don't think the Pennsylvania state official who tried to come over a desk to get at me did his cause any good," he recalls, "but he was doing fine up to that point." ■