

A Matter of Opinion: Risk Aware Publishing Insights



By Glenn Mott

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Media relations once meant anticipating, reacting to, and responding to the media and their requests. This presumed some ability to control the message, and took place through the cultivation of networks and relationships with journalists, who in turn came to rely on individuals and organizations as credible sources. Now that every organization is its own publisher, media relations also means the person or team that produces and distributes your content, and the readership that consumes your news and information. In ways that are less predictable than before.

Your public relations team is still writing press releases, promoting experts from within the organization who can be connected with reporters, and works to keep your organization in the spotlight. While your content team is a small newsroom doing what most individual journalists are being asked to do—most everything: podcasts, video, social media, graphics, and printed matter.

Nonprofits are making short films and documentaries that newsrooms once produced, while many news orgs are producing paid media sometimes labeled “sponsored content.” Some may lament the new responsibilities and obligations. Others will dedicate their organization to producing the highest quality media in their new role as publisher, telling their own stories, and coming up with new ways to present their mission.

Engagement: In And Out Of Crisis

Nonprofits facing a crisis need to communicate a message quickly and to a diverse audience. A good starting point in dealing effectively with the media during a crisis is to try to appreciate the ability of the media to play a crucial role.

It's also helpful to understand the motivations of the media engaging you, and countervailing this, the reason for your engagement with the media. With respect to their interest in your crisis, reporters will be looking to uncover the truth, an engaging story, determine the cause of the crisis, and hope to identify the roles of heroes and villains. How a media organization chooses to edit and publish a story will be the result of deadlines, headlines, and the economics of attracting reader attention.

How and when to engage with media is important; however, it's equally important to consider the vital and long-term audience for the organization. What matters to the organization? Who does your organization matter

to most?

A Matter of Opinion

Communications should flow consistently, and not be left to crisis management situations alone. There should be an ongoing effort to effectively communicate with your constituency, lawmakers, allied organizations, and to the public.

Occasionally, this will involve writing an opinion piece for a local or national news outlet. Eventually, every nonprofit will be compelled to set the record straight, or add their expertise and experience to critical concerns in the public interest. This often takes the form of an op-ed column.

To be effective, you'll need to express an opinion with the same urgency of purpose as your stated mission. One that:

- Calls out an issue of timely importance
- Presents a role for the reader
- Offers a critical solution

You'll also need to attract the attention of an editor. In addition to the basic mechanics of writing, the timeliness of your information, and the potential interest to a broad readership are major criteria in an opinion editor's determination to publish. Your piece should be:

- Newsworthy, and tightly-focused
- Express a personal opinion (one only you would have the authority to put forth)
- Backed up by hard evidence, logic, reason
- Insightful, offering information unique to your organization
- Analytical: speculative, personal, subjective

Opinion takes many forms: op-ed columns, editorial cartoons, essays, documentaries, advocacy, and punditry. Beyond format, it's important to make a distinction between opinion journalism and the journalism of affirmation (the strategic flogging of partisan information for a self-selecting and affirming audience, generally disguised as "fair and balanced"). It's also not desirable or necessary to reinforce views that are already widely held. Avoid bland commentary. Strong opinion should elicit a strong response. Ask why your topic is timely (tied to something in the news cycle), and demonstrate where the solution is being done well or differently, including, but not exclusive to your own organization.

Finally, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* garner high visibility, but when looking to place your opinion piece, try the opinion page editors at major metros serving your area or stakeholders: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Houston Chronicle*, or *Kansas City Star*, for instance. Once published, the op-ed can be linked to your feeds. Try large online news portals and magazines. Try the leading professional publications in our nonprofit sector, such as *NonProfit Times*, *Nonprofit Quarterly* and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, for instance. If at first you don't succeed in getting an editor's attention, consider the perennial interest in your topic. If it won't perish quickly, you can reach out to a different editor soon after a related news item breaks, by revising with a more timely lede.

Risk leaders who double as (or aspire to be) editorial writers might also find this advice from the editorial page of *The New York Times* to be helpful: see ["Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers"](#).

Accuracy, Completeness, Verification, and Value

Nonprofits in the headlines: rarely something a risk professional dreams of hearing. Too few informational or celebratory pieces about nonprofits make the news. But for those leaders and leadership teams who prepare, there is an opportunity to provide value, continuity of information, and credibility for the organization.

It might be helpful to think critically about the value of your organization's thought leadership and expertise, putting aside a specific agenda. Consider the due process of information, as well as the news cycle. When a crisis occurs in the community you serve, nonprofits (community-based and community-serving) are ideally situated to provide information that may be more in-depth, measured, and sober than the frenzied headlines in buzz feeding media. Be prepared with a ready list of contacts and a plan of response. Your information is

valuable. Your research, field reports, whitepapers, surveys, studies, and data play a role in supplementing what news orgs and others aren't focusing on—as yet.

Glenn Mott is a recent addition to the lineup of NRMCA Associates in the role of Senior Consultant. When he's not writing about risk and reward in the trenches of the nonprofit sector he's Partner at New Narrative North America, a media and communications firm with offices in New York and Hong Kong.