

ROGUE ACTION CENTER

Tools for Organizing: Editorial Boards

At some papers, an editorial board meeting means a discussion with an actual board made up of newspaper editors, editorial page writers, and community/corporate representatives. Usually, it just means a meeting with the editors, editorial page writers, and reporters who have an interest in the subject you want to discuss.

Deciding whether to request a meeting. You might want a meeting 1) if you think you can influence their editorial policy and news coverage on a particular issue or campaign – so they will be favorable or at least less unfavorable or perhaps neutral – or 2) if you think you can use the meeting to establish a better long-term relationship.

You may not want a meeting if you think the effect would be to prompt them to write negative editorials when they wouldn't have written any. In that case, you may just seek space for an op-ed by an appropriate community voice.

In some cases, you may have more luck trying to provide background just to one particular editorial writer who covers that subject and may be sympathetic.

Timing may make a big difference. You may need to approach them quickly before they get locked into a negative position. Or you may want to wait until the issue is about to reach a visible stage and you will have lined up substantial community support.

Requesting a meeting. It's not automatic that they will meet with you, given that many groups want a piece of their time. You'll need to show that you have an issue of interest to their readers and the community and that the time for them to cover it is now.

- Try to figure out who is on their editorial board and which editorial writer handles this subject or might have an interest. You can ask a reporter for advice, or try an ally or elected public official with good connections at the paper. (In fact, sometimes the request will be more successful if it comes from them.) A few papers give useful information on their web site. Or call the paper and ask.
- Give them a one-page summary (two pages maximum) of the issue, its importance to the community (not primarily its importance to you), its timeliness, polling data if you have it, what organizations and public officials are involved, who you would like them to meet with, and why those individuals would be interesting and credible.
- If needed, attach a few very short articles or documents that support your claim that this is an issue worthy of attention now, but limit the amount of paper to read.

Preparing for the meeting. You may meet with the whole board, but it's more likely that you will just meet with the editorial writer and reporter with most interest in the subject and maybe one or two other people. It's usually to your advantage for the reporter to be

present. They will know more about the subject, and editorial writers usually will ask the reporter their opinion anyway.

- Prepare talking points with your spokespeople, including key arguments and facts and, if appropriate, anecdotes that establish their credibility and make the issue come alive.
- Take along short packets of materials, including bios of the spokespeople.
- Don't take a big group. Usually just two people -- three if there's a good reason.
- Depending on the issue, include community allies in the delegation. If it is especially important to emphasize the broad public interest and not your organizational interest, you may not want to include a spokesperson from your group at all.
- In general, choose local spokespeople. Sometimes you can impress the paper with national leaders. If you do that, however, be prepared for the editorial or news coverage to emphasize national rather than local agendas.
- In most cases, send leaders or activists who can talk policy as well as give anecdotes from their own personal experience.
- Be prepared for other topics besides what you proposed.

Conducting the meeting.

- Talk briefly (5 minutes max.) to explain your basic rap/concerns. They usually will not sit still for a long speech and will be more interested in dialogue and questions and answers.
- Don't say something you would not want to see in print since everything in the meeting is on the record and can be used in an editorial or in news coverage.
- Know ahead of time how much time they have so the meeting doesn't end before you made key points.
- In most cases, don't use up your time to bring up the other side's arguments -- unless they are so likely to have to be dealt with that you may as well try to knock them down.
- Don't be put off by behavior that is argumentative, condescending, distracted, or offensive in other ways. That may or may not be an indication of what they may write, and in any case you need to build long-term relationships even if you don't get what you want this time.
- Listen to what *they* say. People like people who think their opinions are interesting.
- Don't expect them to reverse already publicly stated positions. It could happen, but if they are on record against you it's more likely that the best you can hope for is to get them to stop being active on the issue and give you and others space for your views.
- Ask if they may do an editorial in your favor. If clearly not, ask for op-ed space.

Following up.

- Thank them for the opportunity. Don't take it for granted.

- Take notes and debrief afterward to identify individuals likely to be helpful in the future, as well as parts of your message or materials that either worked well or need to be strengthened.
- If you have a contact, such as a reporter, ask what the paper's participants thought.
- Send them additional materials that strengthen your case or answer particular questions or objections they raised.