Useful Guidelines

Show Employees, Supporters How to Write an Op-Ed

When someone with close ties to your nonprofit has an interesting opinion, encouraging them to write an op-ed article can serve as an effective way to garner media attention. A well-written opinion piece can reflect positively on your organization and shine light on pressing topics that surround your mission. For many, the actual task of writing an article may seem daunting. By providing your constituents with a set of guidelines, you can help alleviate stresses and facilitate valuable content generation.

"Clear guidelines will give your writers focus," says Director of Media Relations for Carleton College (Northfield, MN) Eric Sieger. "Lots of people have important things to say, but ultimately they need to present their ideas in a way that is concise and to-the-point. Opinion pieces drive people to take action and become advocates for your organization, so helping them achieve this goal through writing should be prioritized." Including tips provided by their colleague David Jarmul (Duke University), Carleton College offers detailed instructions on how to write an op-ed article on their media relations page (apps.carleton.edu/media_relations/about/op_ed_guidelines/).

So, how can you educate your employees and supporters to become powerful voices for your nonprofit? "With any communications plan, you have to know your goal and then craft the guidelines around it," Sieger says. "If you want to position your organization around certain issues, your guidelines should mirror those points."

Make your guidelines accessible. Place them on your website or remind constituents about these opportunities in an e-mail blast, especially when current events arise which tie back to the mission of your nonprofit. Guidelines must be easy to understand and should promote good writing practices. "We are living in the age of information overload, and today's attention spans are short," Sieger says. "Remind your writers to aim for engaging writing that is sure to capture the attention of readers at first glance."

Don't forget to broadcast on behalf of your MVPs. "We want to promote our faculty as experts to the media, because it gives us visibility," Sieger says. "Once your expert has placed an opinion piece in a local or national publication, take steps to share their article on your social media channels and website to maximize exposure. It validates their efforts and makes you look good."

Remember to review your guidelines annually to ensure they still support the communications goals of your nonprofit, as well as speak to the trends of the current media landscape. "Editorial boards change, so make sure you're aware of who's filtering op-ed submissions," Sieger says. "I always like to keep track of the pieces that go to print to see if competitors are getting placements." This kind of monitoring can help you refine your own approach for producing op-ed articles.

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Measure Your Results

Calculate the ROI on Your Communications

By Yvette Boysen

The budget. It's something all nonprofits need to keep a close eye on. While your department may or may not be under scrutiny, it's always a good idea to keep tabs on exactly how your communication campaigns are affecting the bottom line. To evaluate this, you need to calculate the return on investment or ROI.

"To calculate ROI, you need to be able to connect communication inputs with the outcome of a changed behavior, because only behaviors have a positive or negative financial value," explains Angela Sinickas, CEO of Sinickas Communications, Inc. (Laguna Woods, CA). "There is no financial value of increased knowledge or more favorable opinions until they lead to a person changing what they do with their hands, feet or mouth."

To collect starting point or baseline data, turn to other departments within your organization. For instance, development is already tracking information like who is donating and where the donors are from. To determine the resulting behavior, Sinickas offers two options:

"If you're trying a new type of communication, just embed unique URLs into each of the different communications that lead to the online donation page so you can track how many additional people made donations after linking directly from a newsletter article versus a social media discussion," she says. "Another way is to track if there is a spike in donations immediately after a particular communication has been launched."

With the data collected, you're now ready to plug that information into the ROI formula: [(Gain-Cost)/Cost] x 100 percent. The "gain" is what you achieved from the campaign, either an increase in income or a decrease in operating expenses. How did the final behavior increase or change after you launched the campaign?

In a campaign to increase donations, the data is pretty cut-and-dry. However, there are also broader, but perhaps less tangible ways to look at ROI.

"Sometimes you can calculate the ROI in terms of the benefit to society, not just to your organization," Sinickas says. "For example, if your nonprofit's goal is to reduce domestic violence or increase safe driving, when your campaign succeeds, society sees financial benefits. Police and ambulance responses are decreased. Death and disability payments by the government are reduced. So, the ROI of a campaign like that goes far beyond the organization's bottom line."

Regardless if you're calculating an ROI for your nonprofit or for your community, Sinickas says to use the information to determine the most effective and efficient forms of communication. And if you have the opportunity to share that ROI in an annual report showing donors and other constituents that your organization is fiscally responsible, that doesn't hurt either.

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