

Have an Opinion? Pen It

By ELIZABETH LAMPERT
AND CHERYL RILEY

Writing a newspaper commentary brings attorneys the right kind of visibility.

Marketing

One of the best ways to gain visibility for your law firm is an opinion piece in a newspaper. Some of the most interesting commentary comes from attorneys who have been following a controversial story for professional reasons.

Opinion pages are among the most widely read parts of the newspaper, particularly in such national publications as *The New York Times*. So when everyone is writing about the next Martha, Enron, or HealthSouth issue, it's often a prime moment for, say, a criminal defense practitioner to weigh in as well.

Why an op-ed? Along with high visibility at a timely moment, opinion pieces offer an attorney the opportunity to really speak out on an issue. An op-ed presents your point of view in much greater detail and with more persuasion than a letter to the editor or a general article quoting you in a few sentences would allow.

Yes, we know that attorneys are busy billing hours and developing new business. Many of you say you just "have no time" to write an op-ed. But it doesn't take much time—if you are already following the news—to compose your thoughts and make your case. In an op-ed, a writer essentially states a conclusion first and then carefully spells out the argument. Make your strongest point up front and then give supporting details, in other words.

Consider what happened to one well-known lawyer in New York who was following the Enron case. He waited for an opportunity to pen an argument relating to the new Sarbanes-Oxley guidelines. When his opportunity came very early on in the case, he wrote up an op-ed that was short, bold, and timely. He sent a query e-mail about the idea to *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Both newspapers showed interest because of the strength of the idea and the status of the author. He decided, eventually, to send it to *The Wall Street Journal*, since this is where he felt more of his clients would see it. It came out seven days after he initially sent it in. After a few days, several clients e-mailed him regarding his op-ed. Two of the three said his opinion reaffirmed in their minds that they had a great lawyer. The other actually refuted the position over a lunch. A nice bounce in client relations, all initiated by the op-ed sighting.

STAY ON TRACK

Now, how do you increase your chances of placing your written work? Here's a checklist to keep your op-ed on track:

- *Choose the right publication.* Don't submit a piece that focuses on Minnesota labor laws to *The New York Times*; send it to a local Minnesota paper. On the other hand, a piece offering perspective on an issue that arises in a widely publicized story can be submitted to a national outlet.
- *Obtain guidelines.* Most publications have online submission guidelines. It's also easy to get a sense of op-ed style and policies by looking at the opinion page itself. For instance, you'll see that the typical length of op-eds is 750 to 900 words (although *Legal Times* op-eds often run as long as 1,500 words).
- *Be bold.* Use clear, powerful, direct language. Emphasize active verbs; limit the adjectives and adverbs. Short sentences work best, and paragraphs should usually contain no more than two or three sentences.
- *Localize it.* Adopt a local angle in your op-ed, even on a national issue. You are competing for space with nationally syndicated columnists, and a local angle can make your article more appealing. Know what your target publication published recently about your topic, especially on the op-ed page, and don't repeat those arguments.
- *Make a unique point.* You need to take a stand and come down hard on that side of the issue. Any time an op-ed goes against the conventional wisdom, editors will be more inter-

ested. Op-ed editors also prefer submissions that are strong in their viewpoint.

- *Be timely.* The news cycle is quick. If you want to comment on the news of the day, you will need to submit your essay ideally that day, and definitely within two days. Most newspapers now accept submissions by e-mail, which makes for a quick transmittal.

- *Provide examples.* Educate your reader without giving a sermon. Make your piece human and memorable. Are there similar matters that support your point that you can refer to?

- *Tell them who you are.* Include a brief bio, along with your phone number, e-mail address, and company name at the bottom. (Newspapers will not necessarily print all of this, but the editors need to know.)

- *Provide solutions.* Editorials that criticize current practices and policies, but offer no solutions or new ideas are much less likely to get published.

- *Make a single point.* In an op-ed article of only about 700 words, you will have a hard time successfully covering more than one topic.

After submitting a well-written, well-timed article, don't for-

get about it. Follow up within two weeks after submitting to find out if it was received, if the publication is interested, and if there's anything else you can do.

What if your article is turned down? Be gracious and let the editors know you will be sending in other submissions when you are following a matter that you feel strongly about. Editors have to select the op-eds that work at the time and in the available space.

Freelance writing is a competitive enterprise, so you need to accept the fact that your piece may not get published right away. Remember also that there are many major newspapers to consider. You can try another publication, or wait for a better time.

Despite the competition, it is well worth the effort to get an op-ed published. It can generate beneficial media attention to you and your firm.

Elizabeth Lampert is president of San Francisco-based Elizabeth Lampert PR. Cheryl Riley is principal of Alexandria, Va.-based Cheryl Riley Public Relations. Lampert and Riley can be reached at lampert@elizabethlampertpr.com and cherylrileypr@comcast.net, respectively.