

Confessions of a former op-ed editor: 5 things I wish I'd known

The do's and don'ts of op-ed writing



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During my eight-year run as USA Today's op-ed page editor, I didn't understand the world of public relations. I wasn't rude or dismissive to PR professionals, and I answered every email submission that reached my inbox, but I viewed the columns that arrived from communications firms with additional skepticism. To be perfectly honest, I don't know that I always gave these pieces a fair shake.

Today, I write this as the VP of Content at Subject Matter, a communications firm in Washington, D.C. I regularly work with clients on op-eds and then help find a good home for the pieces. Having now been on both sides of the op-ed aisle, here are five things I wish I'd known while I was running the op-ed page:

Don't assume the piece is selling something. I didn't fully appreciate that some of the world's top experts on an issue may simply tap communications experts to bring their ideas and research to life. Our clients often just need an assist. Perhaps the author is not a professional writer and/or is time-pressed and doesn't know how to pitch a piece. These needs do nothing to diminish the substance of this work. Many pieces that happen to be pitched by someone from a PR firm will inform, delight and challenge your readers.

PR people's time is valuable, too. Sure, I was busy running the op-ed page, but the many people pitching op-eds to me were no less busy. I can say that I tended to be very prompt in replying to emails, and many submitters were astounded at my rapid-fire replies. Now I understand why. Many major news brands will tell you flat out that if you don't hear back in a week, you can move on. If editors understood that whole weeks of pitching are lost in the interim, perhaps they would take 5 seconds to type, "Thanks, but we'll pass," and let the pitcher turn to the next outlet.

(Fill in the blank) Day is a real thing. OK, so it became amusing to me when someone would pitch a piece that was attached to, oh, let's say National Umbrella Day. (I was making that up as I wrote this, but turns out National Umbrella Day is February 10.) But op-ed editors shouldn't give up on a piece just because there happens to be a "Day" attached to it. The fact that it's National Umbrella Day doesn't diminish a column illuminating new research on why climate change in some regions will bring longer periods of rain.

Feedback goes a long way. I'm not going to tell time-pressed editors to give a line edit to every piece that arrives. But one thing I did — often, in fact — is try to provide one line of feedback. Not for every piece — we received about 100 submissions a day, after all — but for the ones that at least came close to crossing the bar. "We just covered this topic last week." "Too much throat-clearing at the top." "The piece is interesting, but there's no opinion here." I had the benefit of some great coaches along my career in journalism. Paying it forward is the right thing to do, whatever your job.

Name-brand news outlets are a big deal. Sometimes when I would agree to run a piece from a PR firm, I could practically hear the confetti gun firing in the background. I signed off on thousands of pieces during my tenure as an op-ed editor, so to me accepting one piece was no big deal. But for PR firms and their clients, even amid today's infinite media landscape, there is still cache in landing a print or online op-ed with a legacy news brand.

When I left USA Today a couple years ago, colleagues who today are still friends joked about me crossing over to "the other side." Even from that vantage, I marvel at the great journalism being produced and every now and again feel the tug of the newsroom. But just as journalism has evolved, so has public relations. And the content being crafted in my new world — whether blog posts, long-form stories, or op-eds — would feel right at home on the websites or pages of America's best news organizations.

Next up: Do's and don'ts of op-ed writing

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