

EDITORIAL BOARD MEETINGS

What is an Editorial Board Meeting?

Most daily newspapers in the United States schedule meetings between their editorial staff and invited guests, called editorial board meetings. The purpose of such meetings is to explore an issue, which may be of sufficient importance to the community to justify the newspaper taking a position and publicly supporting it through an editorial article.

Some of the meetings are relaxed and informal with one or two editorial writers talking with the guests over coffee. Others are large, with numerous reporters and editors attending. For example, if the subject is air quality, reporters covering environmental, automotive, or health issues might be invited. These meetings last from 45 minutes to two hours.

Newspapers' approaches to these meetings vary greatly, but the purpose is the same — to evaluate the issue and decide if it warrants editorial support, and if so, what position the newspaper should take. Therefore, it goes without saying that an editorial board meeting is a serious undertaking. The editorial position taken by a major paper will raise the level of awareness of the issue, give it credibility, and often influence the position of other media in the metropolitan area. Therefore, if it is possible to arrange an editorial board meeting, it is well worth the effort; few undertakings offer greater potential for eliciting community support and providing the issue with visibility. However, a successful editorial board meeting requires planning and preparation.

Requesting an Editorial Board Meeting

Before you decide to request a meeting with the editorial staff of your local paper, it is advisable to take the following steps.

Narrow the Issue

Reducing air pollution and traffic congestion is a broad topic. It is easy to envision people becoming side-tracked with a variety of related issues from zoning ordinances to mechanisms for financing mass transit. While it is important to be aware of related issues, your focus will be on the importance of taking personal responsibility for improving air quality and reducing traffic congestion. Therefore, you should be clear about what you are asking the newspaper to support. In this case, it is your group's efforts to educate the public through the *It All Adds Up to Cleaner Air* public education program, and its messages.

Conduct Media Research

What has the newspaper written about air quality and traffic congestion in the past? Has it taken a stand on issues related to air pollution reduction? Mass transit? Related issues? The more knowledgeable you are, the more credible you are. Back issues of the paper can be reviewed at its offices, in the library, at a local college or university library, or on the Internet. Your subject

matter search should cover the past six months to a year. With this information, you will have a much clearer picture of the paper's thoughts on your topic.

Collect Information about Your Issue

In addition to your local newspapers, collect letters, articles, and editorials from other publications. In short order, you will have a useful resource file. When you write to your paper requesting an editorial board meeting, you could attach a supportive letter, article, or editorial from another publication to help build your case.

Call the Newspaper for Information about Editorial Board Meetings

While there are many similarities, each newspaper has its own approach to editorial board meetings. Call or write the paper's editorial department to express your interest in scheduling a meeting. Ask them who to contact and what the procedure is for requesting such a meeting. They typically will ask you to write to the editorial page editor outlining the reason for your request and providing pertinent information about the subject.

Writing the Letter

Occasionally, a newspaper will schedule a meeting based on your phone conversation. Even if this happens, a letter should be sent to the paper confirming basic points of discussion as well as specifics, including who will attend and the date and time of the meeting. It is more likely, however, that the paper will ask you to write to request an editorial board meeting.

Your letter should address your key points and contain appropriate background information about the topic. It is important to include localized information, if possible. For example, you should point out the extent of the problem in your area. If the area is in non-attainment of an air quality health standard and your efforts are directed toward correcting the situation, that should be emphasized. Include relevant fact sheets, if you have them. While you do not want to bury the editorial page editor with information, providing three or four pertinent documents adds substance to your request.

Your letter should specify who will present your information. Briefly state the credentials of that person and his or her affiliation with your organization. If more than one person will present, a description of each should be included. As a rule, no more than two or three people should attend the meeting, with one person acting as the primary spokesperson.

Once you've sent the letter, follow up with them if you have not heard back within a week. (In your initial conversation, the paper may tell you how long it typically takes to respond to a request and who you should contact to determine the status.)

What to Expect in an Editorial Board Meeting

Each paper has its own approach to editorial board meetings. However, most start with introductions and move pretty quickly to substance. Sometimes the editorial page editor may make a few introductory remarks or pose some questions. He or she may tell you that they are particularly interested in one or another aspect of the problem. Obviously, these areas need to be addressed in your presentation. More often, the meeting will be turned over to you following introductions.

It is customary for the spokesperson to give a 15- to 20-minute overview providing background information and making his or her case for editorial coverage of the issue. This is followed by a question-and-answer period. However, be prepared for the unexpected. Questions may come up at any time and people may come and go during the meeting. There may be a variety of opinions expressed during the session and differences of opinion on particular issues. If reporters covering issues such as the environment, health and medicine, transportation, and business participate, they may want to discuss different aspects of the subject.

The spokesperson should be flexible, composed, and well-prepared. He or she probably won't be able to answer all of the questions and may need to get back to the editor following the meeting. In some cases it may not be appropriate to answer a question, particularly if it pertains to issues outside the area of discussion. It will be up to the spokesperson to guide the conversation back to the topic at hand.

Preparing for the Meeting

The heart of an editorial board meeting is the question-and-answer period. This is the spokesperson's opportunity to convince those around the table of the merit of writing an editorial in support of the initiative. Therefore, one of the best ways of preparing for the meeting is to hold one or more question-and-answer rehearsals in advance.

If more than one person will be presenting, they should agree in advance who will cover specific issues. That way they can complement each other, and the amount of preparation necessary will be reduced.

The Day of the Meeting

Call the paper the day before the meeting to make sure that schedules have not been changed. The day of the meeting, plan to arrive at least 15 minutes early, because you usually will need to sign in at the visitor's desk and wait to be escorted to the meeting room. Also, participants will benefit from having a few minutes before the meeting to relax and compose themselves.

During the meeting, your spokesperson should be positive and well-informed. He or she should present information about the clean air initiative and local factors that relate to it and answer any questions to the best of his or her ability. If your spokesperson does not know the answer to a question, he or she should say so and offer to get back to the person asking the question. The spokesperson should maintain his or her composure at all times and avoid getting drawn into arguments or digressing into areas that are peripheral to the subject. If one of the reporters or editorial writers has not asked any questions or actively participated in the meeting, it might be

beneficial to ask that person if they he/she has any questions or comments he/she would like to share. At the end of the meeting, thank those who attended and ask if there is any other information they need from you. It is all right to ask whether they will write about the subject.

Following the Meeting

Shortly after the meeting, send a thank you note to each of the editors and reporters who attended the meeting. If nothing appears in the paper in a week or two, place a follow-up call to ascertain whether they will be writing an editorial supporting your issue. If not, you could ask for their reason.

If an editorial appears in the paper, watch for letters to the editor in subsequent issues. If letters of support are printed, you may want to enlist the writers in the initiative. You also may see a negative response — if so, you can ask the “letters to the editor” page editor for the opportunity to respond to the critic.

Editorial board meetings require a lot of advance preparation, but they offer the potential for rich rewards in terms of heightened attention to the initiative and increased credibility for the program.