

Write Letters to the Editor

by David M. Freedman

Writing letters to the editor is a respectable way to demonstrate your expertise in print by (a) correcting a mistake, omission, or distortion in a news story about finance or the economy; (b) illuminate one or both sides of a controversy; or (c) comment on how proposed laws, regulations, or policies may affect your clients. It is also a vastly underrated business development technique—a cost-effective way to gain exposure in the marketplace, earn credibility, and generate calls from prospective clients.

I met a New York City lawyer who has recently had 10 letters published in the *New York Times* and one in *Newsweek*. He said he has received dozens of calls from prospective clients in response. This lawyer, who practices in the areas of consumer and privacy rights and tenant-landlord relations, says one *Times* letter alone resulted in 30 or 40 calls, mostly from potential clients. (Your target media might not be consumer publications; you are more likely to target the professional, trade, and business media that are consumed by your clients, prospects, and referral sources.)

The value of writing letters to the editor can't be precisely calculated, but we know that letters enjoy high readership in most publications. The time required to write a publishable letter is not trivial—it might even require some research—but it is not half as time-consuming as writing an article. So the cost-effectiveness of writing letters to the editor is *huge*.

Letter Writing Rules

You can usually find guidelines in the letters-to-the-editor column in most newspapers and high-circulation magazines, or on the air when letters are read, or on the media outlet's website. You can also increase your chances of getting your letter published by following these guidelines.

- First and foremost, avoid expressing a point of view that might offend your clients, or that might create a conflict of interest.

- If you are responding to a news story, submit your letter as soon as possible, before the news is stale.
- Assume your letter will be edited, at least for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and style, and possibly to shorten it. Some letters are severely condensed. The shorter and more succinct your letter, the less likely parts of it will be excised.
- Newspapers commonly recommend a length of 200 words or less. But they often publish letters that are much longer if they are well reasoned.
- If you are responding to a published article or broadcast program, in your first paragraph refer to the title, author, and date of the article or broadcast.
- If you discuss a controversial issue, your own bias may be apparent, but it's best to show respect for both sides of the issue.
- Open your letter with a strong premise. This isn't the place for chatty, anecdotal leads.
- Use facts and examples to support your premise. If you make statistical claims, refer to your sources. For example, rather than say "Studies have shown that....," you should say "Study XYZ, conducted by State University Department of Finance, showed that...."
- If you disagree with an opinion expressed in an article or another letter, don't attack the author personally. Challenge the facts or the logic.
- Close with the single thought that you'd like readers to remember.
- Include your credentials after your signature. It's important for credibility. Many publications will include CPA, CVA, CFFA, etc., after your name if you're addressing a financial issue.
- Provide your mailing address, e-mail address, and phone number, in case the editor needs to talk with you before publishing the letter. Some editors will call you to verify the authenticity of the letter.

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or lost profits damages, the court found that evidence put forward was gross profits rather than net profits, and failed to account for the ever decreasing number of projects in the asbestos abatement field. With respect to the out-of-pocket losses, the plaintiff failed to introduce any evidence of difference in the value of the business as represented and the value received. **VE**

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Editor's Note:

The information in this feature is intended for informational purposes only, and should not be construed as legal advice.

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- Proofread. Ask a colleague or literary friend to review the letter and offer suggestions for improvement. Proofread again.
- Submit letters by e-mail whenever possible. Not only is it faster, but it's easier for the editor to process (cut and paste) and edit.

If your letter does not get published, don't get discouraged. It may take a few tries before a media outlet publishes, airs, or posts one or your letters, especially if it has a large circulation and receives many letters each day. **VE**

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