

# AIA News

## MEDIA MAVEN MIKE

### Letters to-the-editor: A PR Pro's Best Friend



by Mike Janes

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As far as PR tools go, I love the letter-to-the-editor. While some organizations struggle endlessly trying to pen lengthy, time-consuming editorials (that newspapers like the *New York Times* publish once in a blue moon), a truly well-

crafted letter-to-the-editor conveys one or more key messages for your organization without sucking up a lot of your time or PR budget. Plus, because newspapers and magazines typically publish several letters in each edition, you stand a reasonable chance of seeing yours in print.

#### Why submit?

Don't make the common mistake of writing a letter only when you have a grievance or want to complain about an article the newspaper has published. Instead, consider the "Letters" section of the paper to be "Opportunity Central," a place to position yourself or the firm's principal as an insightful, experienced leader in the community.

A quality letter can establish the author as an expert commentator on a variety of important issues. Your profile among local residents—and among current and potential clients—will be raised when readers begin to understand the role of architects and architecture in schools, "livability," sustainability, residential design, and other topics of local interest. You might be surprised at the calls you receive following a successful placement.

#### Follow the news cycle

Rule Number One for submitting a letter-to-the-editor: You must have something to say. [Ed. Note, Amen, MMM!] Editors look for topical letters that take a stand, present quality information for readers, or offer an alternative viewpoint. Following the local press and having a keen sense of the "hot topics" in your community will boost your chances of placement. Some examples:

- It's September, and your newspaper has just reported on the region's 40-year-old high school that may be in need of renovation. A letter from your firm discussing recent innovations

in school design can help crystallize the issue for citizens and mobilize educators, legislators, and opinion leaders.

- A columnist has written about your town's traffic congestion and is calling for new road construction. Perhaps your firm can offer a counter argument, suggesting alternative planning and design strategies that would alleviate traffic and make your neighborhoods more "livable."
- An affordable-housing crunch has hit your city. How about commenting on the value of good design in creating housing solutions that wipe out the stigma of "affordability?"

#### Style counts

Usually, a good rule of thumb for a letter-to-the-editor is to try to focus on one or two key points. A template might look like this:

1. Briefly state the problem or issue you're addressing ("*The story on school districts that can't keep up with the ever-increasing student population highlights a serious local crisis: the physical state of our public schools. As architects, we...*").
2. Make your counterpoint, focusing on two or three concrete examples that dispel the original writer's arguments. This is the "meat" of your letter, conveying the key points you want to make.
3. Sum up. Brief, snappy, and to-the-point works best.

Though some letters-to-the-editor can be fairly lengthy, my best advice is to keep it short. Otherwise, there's a good chance your letter will be edited, which can obviously alter its meaning and tone.

Finally, a bit of grandstanding to offer you some encouragement. Following is a letter-to-the-editor we successfully placed in *USA Today* earlier this year from AIA President John D.

Anderson, FAIA. The letter keys off a *USA Today* report on sprawl and firmly positions the nation's architects as active, energetic leaders in the nation's quest for "livable communities." Feel free to crosscheck the letter with my template to see if we followed my own rigid standards!

So there you have it! Fire up the computer and get to work on that letter-to-the-editor. You'll be glad you did. ■■

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#### Letters

#### Put 'smart' back into 'smart growth'

USA TODAY's comprehensive and well-researched analysis of sprawl underscores the growing importance people everywhere place on communities that glow with livability, despite some skeptics who still believe otherwise ("What you don't know about sprawl," Cover Story, Feb. 22).

In the eyes of the nation's architects, the bedrock of livability — and the antithesis of sprawl — is citizen-led community design. Thoughtful and collaborative design helps create delightful and welcoming public spaces, neighborhoods that mix commerce and residential areas, and transportation options that allow for driving, walking, biking or mass transit.

While architects are an important part of the ever-changing tapestry that supports and nourishes the community-design process, citizens are the key. That's why the American Institute of Architects has just published *Communities by Design*, a booklet that outlines how citizens, civic and government leaders and neighborhood activists can work with planning, design and construction professionals to improve their communities' quality of life. Together, we can put the "smart" back in "smart growth."

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