



CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATIONS TIPS

Writing Sound Bites and Quotes

For Releases, Interviews, Talking Points, Newsletters, & Other Uses

Framing:

Briefly capture key message(s) in case the quote is all that is read or remembered

Appeal to the broad public interest through the way the issue is defined and tone is chosen. Start sentences with "Working people" or "Our community," not "SEIU" or "SEIU members"

Appeal to reporters/editors:

1. Make the quote interesting and lively.

- Conversational, idiomatic, expressions, images, analogies, tie-in to current events, word plays, surprising facts or twists, contrasts ("working families need this, not that")
- Make a list of words, phrases, and sayings relevant to the topic and see if they inspire a lively quote
- Explain the issue to someone who doesn't know the subject already and see what expressions or analogies you use

2. Don't make it sound too rhetorical. The media like to appear to be reporting points of view, not being used as a bulletin board for propaganda.

3. Make it credible and "real." Should sound like this person really said that. Read it out loud to see if it sounds too stilted or rhetorical.

Pitfalls to avoid:

- Too long and complicated. (A quote that is loaded like a Christmas tree with every important detail and nuance often fails by not getting used at all. An SEIU analysis of all 106 quotes in one day's front section of the Washington Post found that the quotes averaged 1.6 sentences and 19 words in length, with an average of 12 words per sentence.)
- Empty words that sound like pontificating, not like news: "SEIU applauds" or "SEIU today called for"
- Unnecessary words like "Today's action demonstrates that..." or "Our union believes that..." or "It is now clear that..." or "It is outrageous that..."
- Words like "demand" and "deserve" that reinforce our image as a special interest seeking conflict for conflict's sake at other people's expense
- Jargon the audience won't understand
- Rhetoric that is either overblown or overly emotionless
- Delays to get it "just right," with the result that the quote is too late to be used

Choices:

- Quote a worker if possible and appropriate; if not, an ally; if not, a leader; very rarely staff
- Give the media one quote, not two (if you want a worker quote featured, you usually can't also give a leader quote because the media will then ignore the worker)
- In an ongoing campaign, keep using sound bites to reinforce key messages but vary the wording or phrases so reporters/editors have something new to work with

Presentation:

May be at the top of news releases or worked into headlines and/or lead sentences
May be pull-quotes in newsletters or web material

APPLYING THESE PRINCIPLES

NO: "The proposed Hospital Safe Staffing Act would require hospitals to meet minimum ratios for nurses to patients. This long overdue reform would improve working conditions for nurses, which in turn would reduce turnover and help address the so-called nurse shortage."

YES: "'Trying to solve the nursing shortage just by recruiting new nurses is like pouring water into a leaky bucket. With a safe staffing law, we could give our patients quality care and keep the skilled nurses we already have.'"