President’s Pages Without Fear (BLI 2013)

Filling The Blank Page – Generating and Managing Topics

Use Your Magic Wand or ease button and...breathe deeply. Relax. You will write great presidential articles in which you will take pride.

Plan Ahead. Keep an "ideas" folder, beginning in your president-elect year, so you’ll have plenty of ideas going in (you can always swap in new ones later). Create a calendar showing when each column is due and list a possible topic for each. And be sure to consider the lag time between submission and publication.

Mine Topic-Generating Themes. Bang the drum/celebrate successes, promote upcoming or just-completed initiatives, discuss legal trends or broader public issues, write something personal to you. You have your source material – each of you has thought deeply about your presidential year. You know what you want to accomplish. Use your columns to communicate that to your members.

Think Outside the Box. Try something different – maybe work with a co-author (e.g., the executive director or a community leader), recruit multiple contributors for a single column, or use a Q&A format.

Ask Your Colleagues (ask anyone!) for suggestions.

Look at Other Bar Publications for successful president's columns.

Connecting with Readers

Less is More. Make your column a one-pager if possible (ask your staff how many words). You’ll have more readers if you do.

Dialogue, not Narrative. Invite readers to respond and give them a way to do it (e.g., include an email address).

It's About We, Not Me. Avoid using "I"; talk about "we" and refer to others by name.

Make the Headline or Title a Grabber. Start each column with a quote or catchy title.

Write About What Matters to You. Passion is infectious, as long as it connects to your readers as lawyers and members. Write about what they care about. Universalize your particular experience (e.g., the IL bar president sharing his discovery of social media).
The Medium Is the Message. How you say it is as important as what you say, so dress it up with photos, subtitles, quotes, etc.

It's a Conversation With Your Members. Use a personal, conversational prose style to draw readers in; consider dictating and then transcribing your column.

The Devil Is in the Details. Proofread carefully and make sure staff (or someone else) does, too – fresh eyes are important.

"First Taught Best Learned, Last Taught Best Remembered"

Introducing Yourself: The First Column. Give special care to your debut column, maybe starting with your key initiative.

The Final Column. Wrap up your year. (Or not?)

Help Bar Staff Help You

Meet Deadlines. They're usually driven by logistical imperatives (e.g., printers' needs); last-minute scrambles and manufactured emergencies lead to errors and anxiety.

Encourage Staff Editing/Input. It gives you another perspective and can tighten and strengthen your prose. If your firm has a marketing department, ask them to review the article before you send it to bar staff.

Respect Your Bar Culture re: staff intervention and input (maybe ask your predecessors or ED what you should and shouldn't expect from staff). Consider “last look” protocols with bar staff that ensure you'll see what is actually going to print.

Resources

• ABA Division for Bar Services President's Page Resource Library  
  http://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar_services/resources/presidentpages.html

• National Conference of Bar Presidents "Your Best President's Pages"  
  http://www.ncbp.org (click on “Resources,” then “Presidential Year”)

• Bar Leader magazine  
  http://www.americanbar.org/publications/bar_leader

• Links to other bar associations and their publications (to see what other presidents are doing/have done)  
  http://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar_services/resources/state_local_bar_associations.html