SHORT TERM RENTAL ADVOCACY GUIDE

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THE SHORT-TERM RENTAL ADVOCACY GUIDE

SIMPLE TOOLS TO ADVOCATE FOR FAIR AND REASONABLE SHORT-TERM RENTAL REGULATIONS

As short-term rentals grow in popularity, providers of short-term rentals need to be at the center of any conversation about regulation. The goal of this guide is provide you, as an owner, operator, or host with a simple guide that helps walk you through the process of advocating for smart short-term rental regulations with local policymakers. Working with your fellow providers and other local stakeholders, you can build an effective organization and advocate for fair and reasonable regulations in your community.
WHY SHORT-TERM RENTAL ADVOCACY MATTERS

The popularity of short-term rentals as a travel accommodation has grown enormously in the last few years. With that growth, policymakers across the country have struggled with public policy to legalize and formalize short-term rentals. Unfortunately, many of them are working without much background or information, and in many cases, a great deal of misinformation. As a short-term rental owner, operator, or host, you have subject matter expertise that is valuable to local policymakers. As local policymakers address short-term rental rules and regulations, it is essential that you and your fellow owners, operators, and hosts become a part of that conversation.
ASSESS THE SITUATION

In order to address short-term rental regulations in your community, it’s important to first understand what the current regulations look like, local sentiment, and the ways local policymakers are looking at and talking about the issue.

The easiest way to assess the local landscape with regard to short-term rental regulation is to answer some simple questions about the issue:

• Is there an existing ordinance that addresses short-term rentals, and what does it say?
• Are your local policymakers discussing or considering short-term rental regulation, and in what stage of the process is any new regulation?
• Has a new ordinance or regulation been proposed or is the city in the “fact gathering” stage?
• Has local opposition to short-term rentals emerged, and what does it consist of?
• Has local media coverage been favorable or unfavorable?
• Are there any policymakers who are clearly supportive of short-term rentals?
Let’s talk about how you can gather this information.

First, you’ll want to perform a Google search for news that includes your town or municipality and terms such as “short-term rental”, “AirBnB”, “VRBO”, “HomeAway” or “vacation rentals,” as well as any others that you believe could be relevant. By reading through these stories you should be able to get a fairly good idea of the situation at hand. Next, if you’ve determined that short-term rentals are presently being addressed by your municipality or that an ordinance governing them already exists, you’ll want to proceed to your local government’s website and look for any additional information. Often, using the site’s search function will point you in the right direction. In the case of new regulations, a search of the site should help you to assemble a rough timeline for the policy-making process. In order to effectively advocate, it’s important to note not just what a proposal or recommendation contains, but where it is in the policy-making process and what the remaining steps are before it can become law. Remember, any documents posted on your municipality’s website should be searchable, and using search tools, you can quickly locate the language you’re looking for through keywords or phrases.

If you aren’t getting results you need out of your municipality’s website, don’t hesitate to pick up the phone and give them a call. Often, placing a simple call, or even dropping by, can be the fastest route to gathering the information you need.
GET THE FACTS

Short-term rentals provide tangible benefits to providers, residents, travelers, businesses, and the local community. As such, it is important to ensure that communities develop smart regulations for governing short-term rentals that establish safeguards for both providers and travelers, alleviate neighborhood concerns, and offer a framework that promotes compliance.

By definition, a short-term rental is a property that is rented for less than 30 consecutive days. And while the ability to locate short-term rentals online has made them more accessible and affordable...

Because technology has made is possible for travelers and providers to connect, the growing popularity of short-term rentals was inevitable. Remember, travelers have been utilizing short-term rentals in some areas of the country for more than a hundred years. As short-term rentals grow in popularity among travelers, policymakers should embrace the wonderful opportunity they present by formalizing and legalizing short-term rentals as accommodations.
In crafting short-term rental regulation, it’s important that policymakers recognize the value of short-term rentals in providing flexible housing, and legalize and formalize short-term rentals as a unique and valuable alternative for travelers. They also need to recognize that short-term rentals are a non-commercial activity, governed by the same or similar guidelines and laws as those governing long-term residential rental properties, including the absence of additional laws or ordinances for dealing with nuisance issues already covered under existing municipal and city codes. Under any regulations, all short-term rentals should be treated the same, without differentiations between residency, use, advertising or booking platforms or business models, and that if fees associated with licensing or permitting are part of the local regulation, ensuring they are manageable goes a long way to encouraging compliance.

Most importantly, successful short-term rental regulations should be developed through an open and transparent dialogue between you, as a provider, policymakers, industry stakeholders, and the entire community.

RESOURCES

Find downloadable fact sheets, infographics, case studies, videos and more on the STRAC website
BEGIN TO ORGANIZE

Once you know the status of local short-term rental regulations and have had a chance to gather the facts about the industry and the need for smart regulations, the time has come to start organizing your fellow stakeholders.

At the outset, it will be easy to engage fellow owners, operators, and hosts who are interested in supporting an effort aimed at fair and reasonable regulations for short-term rentals. Initially, you should look to recruit as many providers as possible, knowing that there will be some natural attrition over time. Once you’ve assembled a core group of providers you should begin to think about adding additional allies and stakeholders for your effort.

As a short-term rental owner, operator or host, it will be obvious to local policymakers why you and your fellow providers support formalizing and legalizing short-term rentals. But it’s also important to ensure they understand the full impact of short-term rentals in your community, and the numerous local residents who derive both direct and indirect benefits from them.
There are some obvious places to start looking for allies.

The first group consists of those who understand and can speak to the local economic impact of short-term rentals and the travelers that use them. Consider reaching out to organizations such as the local economic development authority, chamber of commerce, small business association or tourism board.

Next, think about the local businesses that you and your fellow providers regularly recommend to out-of-town visitors, such as tour operators, bike rental companies, restaurants, specialty shops, and unique tourist attractions in your area. As you conduct your outreach, be sure to ask these business owners and employees how many of the travelers they cater to seem to prefer staying in short-term rentals. Often this kind of simple question can prompt some great anecdotal stories about short-term rental guests-stories that will be important later on.

Finally, ask you and your fellow providers need to think about the businesses that may service your short-term rental(s). Local vendors and services suppliers will not only have a firm grasp of how many short-term rental industry customers they have, but also its impact on their business, employees, and bottom line. Owners and employees of local businesses such as house cleaning services, general contractors, laundry mats, and landscaping companies will often have compelling stories that detail the positive impact of short-term rentals on their businesses and families.
But there also may be some allies in less obvious places as well. For example, you might consider reaching out to a local hospital or patient advocacy group, as many patients and their families prefer to stay in short-term rentals when they have to travel away from home for an extended hospital stay or medical treatment. Another audience to consider are wedding planners, particularly if you live in a “destination wedding” hotspot. Often groups of friends or larger families will opt to stay in a rental property for a long wedding weekend. Also think about any local businesses that frequently employ out-of-town consultants or workers who may prefer short-term rentals for lodging when they’re in town. Examples might include production companies who rent short-term rentals for actors and crew-members in town for a filming, or corporate sponsors for large events who may choose to house a group of company representatives in a home rather than a hotel.

From all your recruitment activities you will also want to keep a simple database or running list of allies and fellow stakeholders. We suggest collecting simple contact information like names, emails, and phone numbers so that when the time comes to mobilize your group you can quickly and easily communicate with them.
BUILD AN ONLINE PRESENCE

Critical to becoming an effective advocate for any issue or cause is developing an online presence.

There are many ways to go about building a home online, some STR groups utilize Google or Facebook pages to organize stakeholders, files and relevant conversations but many coalitions across the nation have found great value in constructing a basic website. This approach is ideal because, not only is it legitimizing in and of itself, but also it can serve as a much more accessible, centralized space for a wider range of interested parties.

While a group on a social network may easily function for active stakeholders, a website engages more broadly by giving potential new members a simple point of entry, equipping reporters and politicians with your group’s positions and relevant STR facts and studies, and serving as a resource for interested voters.

Note: The process for setting up pages on social networking sites is relatively straightforward: to create groups on Google, Facebook or Yahoo click their respective links.

A quick Google search will reveal a number of platforms offering free or inexpensive template-based DIY web design, of these many groups have
found WordPress.com to be a good option. Even for people without much tech-savvy what-you-see-is-what-you-get platforms such as WordPress can be very easy to use. To give us a launching point we’ve built a demo site (stradvocacydemo.wordpress.com) and will walk you through how to reproduce this for your group step-by-step. You’re free to use our template as-is or to explore the hundreds of themes, widgets and style-sheets WordPress offers to customize your group’s site to your liking.

Let’s begin off-line. Before constructing your new site it is important to set out a blueprint for what content will be important to present. An easy place to start is with the menu. On a most basic level, your menu will likely include buttons navigating to three distinct types of content:

• **Link** – A graphical item that, when clicked, causes another webpage or section of the same webpage to be displayed.
• **Page** – A static online document consisting of text, images, links etc.
• **Feed** – A stream of content containing separate posts, pages articles etc.

Spend some time thinking what content your group will need on its site to best communicate your message. You can and should add more later on, but before your site goes live it is crucial to have the basics covered.

On the demo site we have a link to the national STRAC site, home, about, facts, contact and join us pages, as well as both news and press release feeds. Your group will want to begin with a similar set of pages and feeds and may also consider adding calendar/events, our team, or policy positions pages and/or a blog feed.
Try sketching out a menu for your group including your desired arrangement of top-level buttons and drop down menus. Once you know how you want to organize your content, create a folder on your computer and begin to fill it with resources you’ll need to assemble your site. For instance, you’ll certainly want to have a home page, so go ahead and compose the text you’d like displayed there and save it in this folder. Gathering up also the images and graphics you’d like to display throughout your site. Check out sites that offer free use of images like Flickr’s Creative Commons.

Note: As you select various images, especially if you’re pulling them from online sources, remember that too-small files will become pixelated and will look unprofessional. Try to find graphics that are at least 800 pixels by 600 pixels, but greater than 1 megapixel is optimal – you can easily filter Google’s Image results by selecting “Large” under search tools’ size menu.

Once you’ve gathered the documents, images and other content you’d like to display on your site its time to begin construction. Navigate to WordPress.com, find the “Create Website” button and, on the next page, scroll to the bottom and choose the option skipping theme selection for the time being. On the next page you can choose a plan and domain name. It’s free to create a site like our demo site with an address such as “MySampleSTRGroup.wordpress.com,” but for just a few dollars a year you can lend significant legitimacy to your cause by purchasing a .com or, more preferably a .org domain. Ideally your group will live at “MySampleSTRGroup.org.” Choosing a domain name is an important step because you want to create an address that is short, memorable and recognizable. For example the Alliance for Neighborhood Prosperity, an
STR group in New Orleans, Louisiana chose the slick domain “AllianceNOLA.org.”

Once your group has settled on a great domain name you’ll be guided by the WordPress platform to create a login and will ultimately reach a page thanking you for signing up.

Note: Some STR web-masters ask whether they should create a universal login that can be shared among all administrators or just log in as themselves. We’d advise each user to set up a separate account and let administrators set their roles on the site through the Users panel. For more information we’ve linked to an article from Wordpress in the online version of the Advocacy Guide.

Navigate to Themes and click “customize” there you will have the option to browse the various layouts created by professional designers. We’ll be using the free “Apostrophe” theme in this tutorial. Once you have selected a theme a customization panel will open, once there, update the title, tagline, logo, fonts, and header image fields to your liking and then open the widgets menu.

Note: The default in this theme is to display widgets on the right side and in the footer of any page, where you don’t want widgets to be displayed change the template style from default to “full-width” in each page’s settings. You can see an example of the difference between the default layout and full-width template by comparing the demo home page with the demo news page.

Apostrophe comes with a host of pre-set widgets; poke around in the primary, secondary and footer folders—each arranged top to bottom by page placement—learning what each widget does and deciding which
widgets you’d like to display where. The last tab theme settings permits the administrator to make global site choices as whether to display or hide author bios and/or enable featured content—on the demo site we’ve hidden author bios and enabled featured content.

Note: The featured setting will allow you to pin posts within your feed pages to the top of the stream. If you have a feed page with a particularly potent post that you’d like to be the first item visitors to that page see you can set a keyword tag under this menu such that any time you mark a post with that tag it will become featured content.

Go ahead and click “Save and Activate” and then navigate to the WP Admin dashboard. There you will be able to create each of the pages you’ve outlined and select settings for each such as to enable commenting, display like and share buttons and/or choose template styles. After you finish editing each page hit “publish” to push that content onto your site.

Similar options exist when creating posts from the WP Admin dashboard. One important difference is categorization and tagging. If you plan to have a stream or streams of content such as news, press releases, or blog feeds it will be important to create categories for each of these separately so they will be easy to your site’s visitors can easily find them through distinct menu buttons.

Dive back into the theme customizer to set a home page. Automatically “home” is set to be a feed of your most recent posts across categories, but likely you want to display a static home page like we’ve done on the demo site; if so, simply choose this option and select the welcome page you just created to be the front page under the “Static Home Page” menu.
Now that content is live on the site it’s time to use our blueprint to organize it effectively. On the old WP dashboard you can build menus by navigating to Appearance > Menus and on the new dashboard “Menus” is displayed on the left-hand side of the page. Create and name a new primary menu. Menu items will begin with “home” at the top and descend in the order they’ll be arranged from left-to-right. Some menu items will point to static pages such as our “about” or “contact us,” others will point to category feeds you’ve created such as our “news” feed on the demo site, still others will be direct links to outside webpages such as STRAdvocacy.org. To create drop down menus simply indent a menu item beneath its parent heading, an example of this can be seen in the relationship between the “About” and “Facts” pages on the demo site. You can nest up to three menus as needed.

Once you’re satisfied with your menu return to the theme customizer and ensure that it is set as the primary menu under the navigation tab. Hit publish and check out your live site. Now you’ve built a very professional website for your STR group in no time at all! Try adding other users who can help you publish content and edit and manage the site. Maybe even use your new WordPress expertise to explore other themes, widgets and designs, fine tuning this site to your groups specific needs, and, when you’re confident in your creation, spread the word.

Note: While “MySampleSTRGroup.wordpress.com” will be live immediately, due to nuances of domain acquisition and mapping it may take up to 48 hours before “MySampleSTRGroup.org” is up and running from the time it is registered.
CRAFT YOUR ARGUMENTS

Once you’ve assembled a group of stakeholders and built your online presence, you’ll need to start thinking about how you want to present your supporting arguments and documentation. Often those who oppose short-term rentals will be fueled by emotion and their approach is for the most part, and anecdotal one.

Remember, when it comes to the value of short-term rentals, the facts are on your side.

So how do we go about putting together some of the more compelling facts that show local policymakers the value of formalizing and legalizing short-term rentals in your community?

Let’s start with some basic arguments about economics and tax revenue. And while the figures we’re putting together here aren’t exact, they provide a very solid approximation for local policymakers. First you’ll need to assess how many short-term rentals there are in your area. Look at the listing on popular short-term rental sites like Airbnb.com, HomeAway, VRBO, and Flipkey. Then you’ll need to get an idea of exactly how many nights per year on average, those properties are occupied. This
is where the group you’ve formed can really be helpful. By working together, you can usually arrive at a fairly solid figured for average nights of occupancy. You can also use that same conversation to determine the average number of visitors you and your fellow short-term rental owners, operators, and hosts are seeing with each stay. Then you’ll want to visit the website for your state or local Convention and Visitors Bureau. A quick search at either one should yield the average daily spend of a visitor to the area. Now you’re ready to starting plugging numbers into the calculator on the STRAC website.

Another issue that often becomes part of the short-term rental conversation when cities and municipalities consider new regulations is the impact of short-term rentals on the overall housing stock of a community. One of the most affective ways to dispel the idea that short-term rentals are negatively impacting the housing stock of a community is to simply illustrate just how small the portion of available residential housing, short-term rentals make up in your community. The calculator our our website requires you to once again take the estimated number of short-term rentals in your community, and then pull some quick basic facts from the U.S. Census Bureau.

By clicking on the “Quick Facts” map on the homepage, you will land on a search page and can enter any city or town in the United States in order to obtain some simple facts about the local housing stock. Once you search a city or state, scroll down until you find the section entitled: “Housing” and then look for the total housing units in your community.

Now that we’ve covered the numbers, let’s talk about some other supporting ideas for short-term rentals in your community.
• What are some reasons why guests have chosen to stay in your short-term rental?
• What are the benefits to the guests?
• Besides income, what do you personal benefits do you derive from short-term renting?
• What sorts of people have you met and what have been your experiences with them?
• Do you use short-term rentals when you travel? Why?

No matter what you do to support your argument for fair and reasonable short-term rental regulation, remember the following:
• Stay positive and offer solutions, not criticism
• Use a combination of facts and stories to support you arguments
• Always be respectful and constructive in your conversations with policymakers
CONNECT WITH POLICYMAKERS

Local officials need to hear from people like you: the short-term rental operators, renters and supporters in their communities. Personal outreach puts a name and a face on the issue and reiterates that this is an important issue that directly impacts their constituents and neighbors. Remind policymakers that if they are able to strike the right balance by collaborating with the entire community, short-term rental regulations can benefit all stakeholders.

Identify the Key Players

Figure out which policymakers are your most important allies and opponents when it comes to crafting short-term rental regulation.

Present your Case

Call and email them to request a meeting. State your messages in any conversation or email, making it clear that you and your group bring value insight to the issue and discussion. As always, be positive in your approach. Aim for a face-to-face meeting, rather than a phone call. And try
to bring a group that represents the wide range of local stakeholders who support short-term rentals. Be friendly, but persistent.

**Practice Your Pitch**

Even the best communicators practice. Don’t make the mistake of going into a meeting without rehearsing your key messages. Focus on specific, constructive policy goals (e.g., we want to see this definition changed, we think registration fees should be lower, we’re concerned about these limitations or burdensome criteria, etc.) and explain why these changes are important to making short-term rental regulation work in your community, and while they will help, rather than hinder compliance. Know what you absolutely need to communicate and ask for before the meeting ends. Other keys to a successful meeting:

- Arrive early and be courteous. Tailor your message to the person you are meeting with – offer reasons why they, especially, should support short-term rentals.
- Bring it back to tangible benefits to individuals within the community whenever possible – officials need to understand this issue matters to voters.
- Leave behind your contact information, and printouts of your letter, fact sheet and other relevant materials.
- Finish the meeting with another thank you and offer to follow up on any outstanding questions.
Deliver Your Message and Materials to Local Officials

Who do we really need to talk to?

The first step is figuring out where the local conversation about short-term rental regulation is currently taking place and who needs to take action in order to make your policy goals a reality. Every time you meet with a policymaker or their staff, you’ll want to make sure to record the date and time of the meeting and some brief notes about what was discussed, as well as any unanswered questions you might have come away from the meeting with. This will give you a good reason to follow up, both as a thank you for the policymaker’s time, but also as a means to provide additional information or reiterate an important aspect of your conversation.

Keep Track of Everything

Make a detailed contact list and try to capture the following:

- Each official’s name, title, phone number, and email (this information should be available on your local government website)
- Names and contact information for any staff members your may have spoken with or who helped facilitate your meetings
- Date of last outreach and any feedback or follow-up items from that meeting
Especially in larger municipalities, staff members often help make a lot of the decisions in local government. Don’t underestimate the importance of getting to know them, in addition to your local elected officials.

Engage local officials beyond the one-on-one meetings you and your group request

Some ideas:

• An existing city council meeting or hearing in which short-term rentals are a topic on the agenda. Most City Councils post their meeting schedules online and provide opportunities for citizens to present concerns publicly.
• Also be on the lookout for social engagements. For instance, the chair of the local planning commission might belong to the local Rotary Club or be active in a local charity. If so, you or someone you know is involved in the organization or cause could casually mention the issue at the next meeting or charity event to make sure it’s on his or her radar, but also to reinforce that local citizens outside your group are paying attention.

What if an official already supports short-term rentals?

It’s even more important to stay in close contact with policymakers who are already supporters. Make sure you are relaying a consistent stream of
new information and facts that demonstrate how short-term rentals are benefiting the local community, as well as examples of good short-term rental policy from other communities. Offer to help them make the case for fair and reasonable regulation any way you can, by appearing at public meetings, joining local government working groups or talking to the press. Remember, policymakers see public support as a crucial component to making policy decisions. Also, don’t be afraid to ask them what kind of help they need—either in talking to their fellow policymakers or perhaps a key piece of information they believe is important, but hasn’t been introduced to the conversation yet.

Remember, you want your group to be the go-to resource for local short-term rental information and discussions—you need to position yourselves as the experts.
AMPLIFY YOUR MESSAGE

Messaging is everywhere, from the coffee shop tip jar to highway billboards, from the stories featured on the front page and the evening news to our social media feeds.

But not every message format is created equally: a bus advertisement is unlikely to be taken as seriously as a well-worded editorial, a single tweet less effective than a cross-platform social media push. Now that you’ve brought together short-term rental owners/hosts and other stakeholders, carefully crafted your arguments and made strategic connections with policymakers its time to turn up the volume and be heard.

Media Advocacy

If your issue is to gain momentum it must emerge from the small group of citizens that it directly affects and become part of wider public discourse. Galvanizing media interest will be crucial to bringing about this emergence.

On an academic level public opinion dictates action, the media influences public opinion, and therefore to incite action one must create a dialogue in the media.
The media advocate must bring his/her issue into the public conversation and will not be effective unless he/she can win the undecided or sway the entrenched. At his/her best he/she will manage a consistent and unified stream of cross-channel content designed to target segmented demographics and motivate concerted action.

Among other things, one may turn to public channels to:

- Inform the electorate about the implications of upcoming ballot measures
- Influence policymakers to change or implement regulations
- Disseminate a story relevant to coalition activities
- Persuade community members to take action
- It’s important to recognize that by utilizing the media an advocate may gain a valuable audience but may also loose a certain degree of control. Your message will need to be managed and followed so that editors, journalists or social networks accurately depict the story you’re trying to tell.

Any anecdote that provides a platform for the advancement of your cause is an opportunity for advocacy. The better your group can combine compelling narratives with interesting issue angles the more successful you will be in the media.

This guide will outline the fundamentals of media advocacy, strategy development, and the approaches one may take to amplify his message. Regardless of strategy or platform the advocate can prepare himself to tackle just about anything by filling his toolkit with a few basic skills.
Strategy Development

For better or worse, the media is much more complex than it once was. Now formats, platforms and styles are as varied as the advocates that use them. Each group and issue will call for its own approach and therefore it’s important to design a strategy tailored specifically to your group’s needs.

Follow this simple workflow to easily develop a messaging strategy:

Goal

What do you hope to accomplish?

You’ve already assessed the situation and honed your message so you should have a good idea of your goals. Begin by thinking about what you hope the ultimate outcome of your advocacy will be.

Audience

Who will you need to persuade to accomplish your goal?

For instance: If you are targeting primarily people under the age of thirty your campaign may want to focus more on social media and grassroots platforms than if you hope to influence local lawmakers.
Approach

How will your group reach its audience?

Depending on whom it is that your group would like to reach you may consider writing opinion pieces, creating social media campaigns, buying advertisements or pitching stories to journalists.

There are three broad categories these approaches may take depending on goal and audience:

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<tr>
<td>Authoritative Opinion</td>
<td>1 to 1</td>
<td>Wielding individual influence</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Learn:</strong> Write and successfully publish editorials and letters to the editor</td>
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<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>1 to Many</td>
<td>Managing the spread of information</td>
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<td><strong>Learn:</strong> Pitching stories, offer statements, craft fact-sheets, and effectively advertise</td>
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<td>New Media</td>
<td>Many to Many</td>
<td>Keeping your audience engaged</td>
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<td><strong>Learn:</strong> Understand and leverage emerging platforms</td>
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Authoritative Opinion

Conversations are a form of advocacy. In our discussions with co-workers, friends, and family we often exchange viewpoints. When we find ourselves at odds with one another we provide anecdotal evidence and data to support our claims. The Authoritative Opinion is simply a conversation held in the public eye – on the most fundamental level it’s simply one person talking to another. As with all strategies, the Authoritative Opinion will be most potent if it is used to target the appropriate audience. Almost half of all weekday readers browse a newspaper’s editorial section, to put that in context, the sports section gets about the same level or readership. These readers tend to be older, better educated, more affluent, and inclined to political activity – this often includes policymakers and their staffs. The most successful of these pieces leverage the writer’s positional leadership within a group making a compelling and persuasive case on behalf of a united coalition.

Depending on the situation at hand your group may consider the following approaches:

Opinion Editorial (Op-Ed)

Weather print or digital, one of the most powerful formats for spreading any message is the opinion editorial, or op-ed for short. All newspapers devote a few pages or column inches to concerned readers with points to make. To write a great op-ed one must simply select an issue and convince readers why they should care about it. Clearly a task much easier said than done, but with some patience it is very attainable.
Begin by choosing an issue you’d like to address. You can’t solve the world or even your group’s problems in less than 750 words—the recommended maximum for most editorials—but you can fully explore a single idea. Op-eds are places to make affirmative claims about topical concerns, so if you’d like to debate an article or comment you believe to be incorrect or insulting consider writing a Letter to the Editor (LTE).

Opinion editors are pitched numerous op-eds each week, to increase the chances of your article being placed it’s important to give your piece immediacy by linking it to current events. Especially if you’re pitching a local publication, pay attention to activities of regional government bodies, widely visible organizations, or other large happenings. For instance, while not a traditional editorial, we wrote this piece using the Pope’s visit to the US in September of 2015 to highlight the benefits of short-term renting in his final stop, Philadelphia. This is not an academic article so get creative and choose a theme to draw in your audience. Travel Tech placed this op-ed in the Washington Post using a Trojan horse as a metaphor to outline the negative effects of proposed travel tax increases.

As you write try to establish and maintain a personal connection with your reader by using the active voice, speaking plainly, using a relaxed tone and telling interesting, true stories. Support each of your claims with data and be fair to those with opposing viewpoints. Don’t hit your reader over the head with statistics or focus only on the shortcomings of your rival. Op-eds that have a strong voice, and successfully blend anecdote with evidence will be very persuasive.
When you’ve finished writing and editing your article you’ll want to pitch it to the appropriate publication(s). Think about publications that are widely distributed in your area that you and your friends typically read. The website of these target publication should have the contact information for an editor of opinions or editorials – if not, try calling the newspaper’s offices as they’re sure to have an email address or phone number on file. It’s a good idea to begin establishing a positive relationship with this person starting with your first pitch, as they are responsible for giving this piece and all your future submissions the green light for print. Avoid submitting your article through an online form: you’re unlikely to receive a quick response—if one at all—and, as you may be required to upload your document, you essentially lose the ability to pitch other publications until you get a hard pass from the first. By targeting only one publication at a time and being diligent but not irritating in follow-up you can begin to develop a relationship with an editor that will surely prove valuable as you continue to advocate in the media.

*Letter to the Editor (LTE)*

In a Letter to the Editor you get to make one point well. An LTE is quite short, ranging in length from 150 to 400 words, so to be most effective be concise, be articulate, and then be quiet.

Open with a salutation like “To the Editor of the Daily News” followed by an attention-grabbing opener—few will stick with your article if it’s not engaging from the start. Make your point succinctly and support it with good evidence. Your reader does not care about this issue as much as you so explain why they should. Many LTESs serve as public complaints; rise
above this norm by proposing a solution. Shorter letters have a better chance at publication so make every word count.

Sign the letter with your full name and relevant title making sure to include your contact information and where you live, as the opinion editor will likely call to confirm that you did in fact write the letter. While they will sometimes withhold your name on request, newspapers won’t print anonymous LTEs. Generally, the editorial pitching best practices for op-eds apply to LTEs as well.

Here are some good examples of LTEs from the University of Kansas’ Community Tool Box (a good supplement to this advocacy guide).

Public Relations

Every organization wants to be covered by the press; every journalist is on the lookout for article fodder. Public Relations is the practice of pitching your group’s story in such a way that it meets the needs of both parties.

How to pitch the media

You need something to pitch. Your pitch should cover a happening within or about your organization: a new project, an event, a protest, an achievement — but it also must appeal to a journalist.

Reporters have beats, specific article topics and genres on which they tend to work, make sure you propose articles to writers that are likely to care about what it is you’re pitching. As silly as it sounds, many people
use a shotgun approach simply blasting content to a long list of media “contacts” often with whom they have little or no actual contact. Not only will this almost guarantee your email is deleted before it is opened but, especially if it’s a regular occurrence, it will hurt your chances of ever pitching that reporter with even relevant content.

Relationships are key to getting your story to the presses. Ultimately you’ll want to establish working connections with local reporters who are likely to pen stories relevant to your group’s cause, but, at the beginning, you’ll need to do a bit of leg work to prove yourself and your content to these journalists.

Start by researching who’s writing similar stories to the one you’d like written and then approach your columnist of choice with a brief, well-worded message that optimally cites a one or two of their previous articles as support for the connection between their beat and your story. In exchanges be pleasant and respect a reporter’s time, she likely won’t be able to get to your story right away so if you have a deadline, consider giving her some lead time.

Depending on what type of content you’d like to get to press there a few different approaches you might consider:

*Press Release*

The first step to crafting an effective press release is to recognize that you’re pitching a narrative. Journalists’ inboxes are daily bombarded with press releases. The writer’s task is to sift through all the content they receive that is relevant to their beat and find compelling stories to tell
readers. The most successful releases are those that are already written like an article.

Begin your release with a short, captivating title and then dive right into the details. In the first paragraph succinctly explain the situation. Journalistic articles use an inverted pyramid structure that opens with the crucial information and then outlines any other details in subsequent paragraphs. Don’t use industry jargon, rather focus on making one concise story broadly relatable.

When possible, supplement your content with photographs; newspapers are usually on the lookout for pictures and by providing download links through public sharing sites like flickr.com you can easily give your release a boost.

Finally, send your release to one reporter at a time addressing him or her by name and never dump it in the slush pile by sending it to news@thedailypaper.com.

Here’s an example of a recent STRAC press release.

**Press Statement**

If the press is already reporting on an issue relevant to your cause but have yet to include you in the conversation, consider interjecting with a press statement. Unlike in a press release you’re not pitching a story but rather offering a viewpoint in a developing storyline.
A statement is essentially one long quote that a journalist can put into conversation with other content he has received, so write in the first person and include information that will fit well into the broader ongoing narrative.

Use this simple example as a template.

**Creating News**

Releases pitch stories, and statements contribute to ongoing dialogues but sometimes it is advantageous to manufacture newsworthy content either to start a discussion or to redirect a conversation. Finding or repackaging data is the best way to create a newsworthy moment. Do this by organizing fact-sheets and info-graphics or conducting public opinion surveys and economic impact studies. Such data can easily be crafted into a narrative and released to great effect.

Check out Airbnb’s economic impact studies for inspiration. You may consider something like this to enhance your online presence as well.

**A Note on Advertising**

If you have resources on hand and a few catchy ideas you may consider purchasing space in the newspaper or time on television. This will give you maximum control over what is said and how but it is worth noting the audience who may be persuaded by such a strategy—likely not policymakers—and critically analyzing how it affects your group’s broader perception and may fit with your organizations other advocacy efforts.
New Media

Over the past few decades, new media outlets have forever altered the way content is reported and received. To be an effective media advocate in the 21st century one must understand and leverage these platforms in addition to utilizing “old media” strategies. These platforms range from social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to niche publications and local blogs. An effective new media strategy, regardless of channel, must be consistent and integrated.

These are some of the tools at your disposal:

Social Media

The secret to social media is good content posted regularly. You have to earn your credibility online: it is crucial to understand that, since each user curates his or her own feed, if you post boring content that is irrelevant to your target audience they will not engage. As an advocate you can leverage social media to remain in constant conversation with your support base by attract them to your page and giving them compelling reasons to stay.

Some rules of thumb:

• Post often at different times of day. Use a tool like HootSuite or TweetDeck to plan and manage posts.
• On Facebook: don’t post more than twice a day probably less or people will hide your content or un-follow your page.
• On Twitter: post multiple times a day, reiterating key messaging points and action items.
• Interact with your target audience and encourage them to interact with you. If someone tweets at you, or comments on a Facebook post engage with them in real time.
• Use images, graphics, and videos. Anything eye-catching is more likely to stimulate your audience.
• Give links and data context
• On twitter always use hashtags like #STRAdvocates
• Don’t be scared to reuse or repackage the same content, but don’t do it too often.
• Social media can be a very powerful tool if used correctly. Check out the STRAdvocacy Twitter feed for ideas.

Blogs and Online Publications

For every print publication there are countless websites, blogs and feeds that serve smaller, more specific and often more devoted readerships. As you write opinion pieces and pitch press releases, research some of the niche publications that may serve the audiences you hope to target. Trade websites and local blogs will typically be very interested in a version of your story.
CONTINUE TO ENGAGE

“Success is never final, failure is never fatal.”

If you have successfully advocated for short-term rentals in your community and seen positive policy enacted, congratulations! You have shown what a little passion and hard work can accomplish. But, don’t be lulled into a false sense of completion. The fight continues as proponents of dangerous short-term rental policies will continue to seek new ways of attacking the short-term rental economy. If success is to be sustained, you and your fellow advocates must continue to engage with local policymakers, community leaders, neighbors, and media outlets. By ensuring that your voice continues to be heard by all stakeholders in the local community, you ensure that short-term rentals continue to have a seat at the public policy table – protecting yourself and future generations of short-term rental travelers from damaging STR initiatives.

To continue the engagement consider the following:

• Keep your STRAC chapter active by continuing to meet and share positive short-term rental experiences.
• Keep the lines of communication open with your elected officials by attending council meetings, sending positive press to your legislators office, and meeting your elected officials out at public events.
• Ensure the drum beat of positive messaging carries the day with local media outlets by writing periodic letters to the editor or releasing new or updated data from surveys and economic studies.
• Continue to engage on social media by posting relevant articles and proactively sharing stories from your guests.

Never forget that you are on the frontline, protecting short-term rentals in your community.

Encourage smart enforcement, track local progress, promote continued engagement with stakeholders, and share your experiences with the Short Term Rental Advocacy Center.
ABOUT STRAC

THE SHORT-TERM RENTAL ADVOCACY CENTER

The Short-Term Rental Advocacy Center (STRAC) is a broad-based coalition of property owners and managers, hosts, travelers and local businesses that recognizes the value of short-term rentals to both travelers and the local communities they visit.

Increasingly, travelers are looking for alternative accommodations, and short-term rentals provide flexible housing options that allow them to spend longer periods of time in communities, in unique accommodations while contributing to the local economy. As such, municipalities should embrace this economic opportunity by working with industry stakeholders to establish a reasonable framework for regulating short-term rental activity so that all may benefit.
Any short-term regulation should be developed to protect the community, property owners and managers, hosts and travelers. The adoption of oppressive or limiting regulations on short-term rentals can have the detrimental effect of driving the pro-growth industry underground, effectively eliminating accountability and depriving communities of any corresponding tax and revenue benefits. Communities throughout the United States rely on local taxes to promote travel and tourism, and the fair and reasonable regulation of short-term rentals has the ability to ensure increased compliance, and in turn, increased tax revenue. At its core, successful short-term rental regulation allows municipalities to easily identify and contact a short-term rental owner, make the tax collection and remittance obligations clear, and ensure that short-term rentals remain an option for travelers. Importantly, successful regulations also balance the needs of long-term residents and the community as a whole.

We believe successful short-term rental regulation should:

• Recognize short-term rentals as a non-commercial activity considered under the same or similar guidelines and laws as those governing long-term residential rental properties.
• Apply to all types of short-term rentals without differentiations between residency, use, advertising or booking platforms or business models.
• Acknowledge that no additional laws or ordinances are necessary for dealing with nuisance issues, and that the enforcement of existing municipal and city codes is sufficient.
• Recognize that tax collection and remittance is not responsibility of the platform through which a short-term rental is located by a traveler or through which a reservation or payment is made.

• In cases where the registration of short-term rentals is desirable and includes the payment of an administrative or licensing fee, mandate that such fees shall be limited to a one time cost of $100 or less and an annual renewal cost not to exceed $25.

• Recognize the value of short-term rentals in providing flexible housing and legalize and formalize short-term rentals as a unique and valuable alternative for travelers.

• Be developed through an open and transparent dialogue among policymakers, industry stakeholders, property owners and the community.

Background:

The Short Term Rental Advocacy Center (STRAC) was created by Airbnb, HomeAway, TripAdvisor and FlipKey, in response to requests from owners, operators, and hosts who are seeking help to engage with policymakers that may be considering how formalizing fair and reasonable short-term rental regulations can responsibly foster this growing industry. STRAC is a project of the Travel Technology Association.
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