

From E-volement to In-volement: How to Get Your Advocates Off Their Computers and On the Streets

Government Relations, January 2009

A couple of years ago, my colleague, Dr. Kelton Rhodes and I, were discussing virtual teams in the workplace. The conversation naturally turned to virtual grassroots advocacy. We agreed that the organizations that harnessed and successfully executed new technologies would have a *momentary* advantage over those who did not adapt or execute, and that the upstream issues that organizations need to focus on is developing persuasive messages and compelling messengers. We concluded that the hysteria over the tools would be more productive if it was focused on how to get people to do what the science shows over and over and over works best – face to face interaction.

Addressing the limits of technology tools, even David Plouffe, President-Elect Barack Obama's Campaign Manager, was quoted in the November 4 *New York Times* as saying: "Without the candidate who excites people, you can have a grand strategy and machinery and it will not matter."

The Confession

Dr. Rhoads and I were discussing the evaluations from a conference I produce for senior level political involvement professionals. We found that the number one concern of these very experienced (over 70% have the Manager, Director, or Vice President title) grassroots organizers, PAC managers, and lobbyists was "how to move online advocates offline." To be honest, that was a nice moment. Not that we were happy that they were having challenges, but that they, as Kelton said, "Have tacitly (and finally) admitted that there are limits to online persuasion." Now we know you can't run an effective shop without these tools. But when all of your persuasion eggs are in one basket, there will be a judgment day.

The confessions are becoming more public. I attended a conference a couple weeks ago and heard veteran grassroots professional Ann DeSeta Darconte of the American Chemistry Council admonish her audience to "get back to basics" regarding grassroots communications. She said, "We all tell ourselves that our advocates can personalize those email forms on our web site, but how many of them actually take the time to do it? Come on, really, how many do that?"

The playing field has been leveled. Most organizations have some kind of online advocacy capability, and while there are exciting new developments in that arena that will present advantages for those who implement successfully, that advantage will likely level out over time as these technologies become more commonly used.

The Past is Prologue

I believe the reason the movement to offline advocacy is so tough for many smart government relations professionals is because of their organization's advocacy history. When the technology tools first were integrated, many organizations were creating unrealistic expectations among their members on how their one email would change the world. I wrote a piece for *Roll Call* on the limits of email advocacy, and the need to use all of the tools in the persuasion toolbox.

I received two reactions. The first was from those who have invested their money and ego into only one tool, e-advocacy, and they expressed a nuclear stockpile of vitriol. They were livid that I suggested that there are limitations to their techniques. They even demanded that the Congressional Management Foundation write a rebuttal to my article. I was reminded of the Turkish proverb: "When you speak the truth, have one foot in the stirrup."

The other response was from a couple organizations represented on *Fortune's* "Power 25" list of the most effective lobbying groups in Washington. One wrote: "Amy, I agree with you and frankly, I hope our opponents keep relying on e-advocacy because then I know we will continue to beat them."

Fair or unfair, electronic access to lawmakers is being winnowed, especially in the halls of the U.S. Congress. Members of Congress and their staff simply cannot handle the email volume. Thankfully, the Congressional Management Foundation is working with the Congress and service provider firms to figure out the mess, but in the meantime, if you have promised to your grassroots team that their email will change the debate, it's time for a candid conversation.

And, you will have a harder time moving them offline if they were told years ago that online communications were the panacea for communicating with lawmakers. So, if you had a culture of e-volement and now you are nagging your volunteers to build relationships, it's time to show some industrial-grade grit and let them realize that times have changed. The days of putting our persuasion eggs in one basket are over, and to compete in the legislative process, they have to be willing to go to the next level.

Walk Away Slowly and No One Gets Hurt. . . . Building a Bridge From the Computer to the Outside World

Here is a basic checklist of what you'll need to do to get more of your advocates off the computer and in front of their legislators and community groups.

1. Know your organization's ultimate persuasion goal. That will help you define #3 below.

2. No matter how slick your tools, you will have little success moving people offline without a compelling message and a compelling messenger (See: Obama, Barack). This makes it vital to test your messages, rigorously evaluate your messengers, and recalibrate as necessary – be nimble. No one is stupid until he or she stops asking questions.

3. Define the “next level.” This is different for everyone. One of my first clients told me they “wanted their advocates to go to the next level.” Knowing that many of them were active PAC fundraisers and already had relationships with their elected officials, I asked him to define what “next level” means to their organization. It meant getting them in front of opposition as well as allied groups to get support for their legislative issues. So, we conducted workshops on how to give a persuasive presentation. That was the “next level” for them. It may be different for your team members.

3. Once you know the next level, create a path (with options) the advocate can follow to reach it. Ask yourself, “What is next logical step of involvement?”

4. When you have determined the path, create the infrastructure. Without this, it’s like trying to build a plane while you are flying it. Resources should include training, team structure, defined team member roles, team resources, team communications, reporting structures, events, rewards and recognition, for a start.

5. Get real. Find out who is willing to go to the next level, and what they are willing to do. I call it measuring commitment intensity. My “Winning Hearts and Minds” research with over 400 grassroots and PAC professionals revealed that *commitment intensity* is one of their top volunteer management challenges. Be careful here. You have to ask the questions in such a way that reveals the respondent’s true motivation. A simple “Would you be willing to. . .?” type of question won’t cut it.

One of our clients asked us to conduct a volunteer engagement survey. They wanted to move them into more offline community and legislative involvement programs. We asked the members how important they thought it was to have a relationship with their elected official. Encouragingly, 80% responded but it was “very important.” Later in the survey, we asked them: How willing are you to meet with their lawmaker once a quarter, conduct a facility tour, etc.?” The dismal response? Less than 30% were willing to do those activities! So, we clearly had a disconnect, but it showed the client that they would need to enroll their members in some gentle “re-education camps” to help them understand that relationships are important, and that they will have to change their advocacy habits to achieve their relationship goals.

6. Be a *transformational*, rather than a *transactional* leader. Believing that it’s crucial not to excessively breathe one’s own exhaust, I’ve always been honest with my community about any disagreements between Dr. Rhoads and I. One of our favorites is the importance of transformational leadership in getting people offline (I think it’s very important, he’s not convinced). As with any persuasion effort, there are lots of things that impact the process and the ultimate persuasion outcome.

Since I have been in this business, I have seen many grassroots and PAC programs (as well as the entire government relations shop) rise or fall, all other things being equal, *based on the program leader*. Those that lose their momentum tend to engage in what I call transactional leadership behaviors. They ask their volunteers to do something, they comply, the staff says thanks and that they will be in touch if they need them again. It's a business transaction. There isn't a lot of inspiration or sense of belonging to a community or to a movement.

The *transformational* leader, however, is positive, lets people see what is possible, and seeks ways to drive personal engagement with his or her volunteers --- both those that rave *and* those that rant.

7. Know your "peeps." Think like Margaret Mead—you have to be a grassroots anthropologist. What are the behavior patterns of those who started out online and now are your offline avatars? It is driven by the issue? The time of the year? A friend's activity? If you see a pattern, that will help you know what the offline triggers are and you can integrate them into your communication strategy.

Bottom line, this is a persuasion issue. The vehicles to communicate may have changed, but the science of persuading human beings has not. Be aware of what it takes to escalate existing commitments, and you are off to a fine start.

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