



## **Seven Things Your Grassroots Advocates *Don't* Want to Hear Government Relations, January 2008**

**By:** *Amy Showalter*

In the same way that politicians carefully choose their words in order to send the right message to their audiences, so should GR professionals carefully craft their communications with members and volunteers. Think before you speak, and avoid these seven ineffective messages.

How we talk about grassroots sends clear signals to our volunteers as to what is possible. Even more important, the words we use affect how we are perceived by our volunteers—and influence their motivation to heed the call to action.

There are certain messages our constituents just *don't* want to hear. It is important to share information in a manner that motivates. The following tips will help you avoid the "trial and terror" approach to grassroots recruiting.

### **1. "When we contact you to communicate with your legislator, it may be the first time you've heard from us—but we just can't predict the legislative process."**

True, we cannot predict the legislative process. If we could, no one would need lobbyists or grassroots networks. However, any government affairs department that is budget worthy should have some knowledge of the issues that will be debated in the upcoming legislative session. It is just not fair or realistic to expect a voluminous grassroots response the first time your volunteers have heard of an issue.

Your audience needs to be edified and equipped. To that end, prioritize your issues each year, and notify your grassroots advocates well in advance of your action calls or legislative alerts. Start educating and influencing early.

### **2. "Thanks, you did a great job!"** (smartly accessorized with the requisite thumbs-up gesture)

You may be tempted to thank your advocates in this manner after successful meetings on the Hill or at the State House, or after an action call or legislative alert. And it is better to say a quick "thanks" than to say nothing. However, considering the time, effort, and thought that go into grassroots advocacy, we can do better. They are volunteers. They do not *have* to do anything for us.

Rather than, "Good job," how about something more specific that enumerates the value of what they just did and the results to the organization? People have a craving to know the significance of their work. It's our job—our privilege—to encourage and motivate our grassroots volunteers.

### **3. "We can't possibly quantify our results."**

My natural response to this is, "Then why bother?" Grassroots can be measured beyond the ubiquitous number of contacts with legislators. I have come up with more than 40 grassroots metrics, and my colleague, Peter Kennerdell, and I have devised over 30 PAC metrics. In today's hypermetric world, government relations professionals cannot afford to neglect this important aspect of their work. It impacts our credibility and professional reputation.

### **4. "Email is the best way to influence your legislator."**

The research overwhelmingly demonstrates that face-to-face communication is the best way to influence. If email were the most influential way to communicate, we wouldn't need professional lobbyists. We all could save lots of money by asking them to work two hours a day and send emails to legislative staff.

I will admit that this phrase is something your volunteers may *want* to hear, but it's not what they *need* to hear. If their question is: "What's the easiest way to communicate with my legislator?" this is the answer. But *easy* and *effective* are not the same—those are two different roads.

### **5. "We like to *use* our members to communicate with legislators/go to town hall meetings/participate in online communities, etc."**

I hear this refrain when I am with a group of government relations professionals talking about who they prefer to recruit and activate on their issues. It's as if their volunteers are some type of handheld electronic device.

When I hear the word *use*, it gives me that queasy feeling that the person talking probably does not have their advocates' interests at heart, and really views them as a means to an end—rather than individuals who should be served and receive value from the organization. Better words are *engage* or *involve*.

### **6. "When you meet with your legislators, just tell your story—that's all they need to know."**

Anyone who knows our practice philosophy knows that Dr. Kelton Rhodes and I are big believers in the persuasive power of oral narrative. We try to teach people how to create compelling stories. However, we have to remember that legislators hear lots and lots of stories. If stories were all that were needed, then everyone would win their issues because everyone simply tells their story.

Grassroots advocacy is a competition. We have to be better than the next guy in line. Thus, try telling your advocates: "Tell your story, and be aware of what the opposition is saying as well." This is a more realistic advisory.

Of course, as a savvy government relations professional, you have an issues historian who knows what your opponents have said in the past and are currently saying about you and your issues, right? You are relaying this information to your volunteers, are you not?

## **7. "It doesn't matter what you think; *this* is the association's position."**

This response hardly engenders any type of credibility and goodwill. Rather than wailing and hand-wringing about those who "don't get it," we really should be asking ourselves, "Why don't they get it?"

When a member—especially an influential one—publicly defects from the fold on public policy positions, congratulate him or her for thinking independently about the issue, ask if you can better understand how he or she came to that point of view, and take notes on how you can do your best to prevent it in the future.

In addition, I recommend that you incessantly acknowledge that you welcome independent member thinking and dialogue. Your members may not possess the depth of issue knowledge that you do, but they are not stupid. Give them both sides of the issue. If we can't persuade our own members, how will we persuade the public? Challenges in this area reveal a need to work on building the emotional allegiance of your members.

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