

Training for the

Legislative Marathon

To effect change in law and policy can be a grueling test of will and endurance, and even the most passionate grassroots movements can suffer fatigue after years of little or no progress. Here's how government relations professionals can help their volunteers face the challenge and find their second wind.

By Amy Showalter

The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) government relations program is on a roll. In the last four years, the number of volunteers participating in its grassroots advocacy program has tripled, and, not coincidentally, the association is celebrating a slew of recent legislative victories, including \$9 million in new state funding for nursing education and scholarships and \$500,000 for a project to increase patient safety.

At a time when other associations are seeing their government relations programs struggle, the nurses association is getting results because it tackled the most difficult problem facing grassroots advocacy today: issue fatigue.

Issue fatigue dogs just about every association's grassroots advocacy program. According to the feedback at my workshops and annual Innovate to Motivate conference, government relations executives are struggling to keep volunteers engaged over the long haul when they can point to little or no progress on their legislative issues.



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But some associations, such as NYSNA, have figured out how to keep volunteers fired up. They are overhauling the way they communicate with their members, giving them a more realistic view of what they can accomplish and the way the legislative process works. They are keeping their volunteers more abreast of what's happening on the most important issues, even when there is little good news to report. And they are deploying their volunteers strategically, ensuring that when they do engage legislators, they are making the most of the opportunity.

"Today we have a membership that is more highly educated about the process, so if volunteers are angry or frustrated, they know how to deal with it," says Shaun Flynn, who directs government affairs for NYSNA and its more than 36,000 registered nurses. "When issue fatigue sets in, people become discouraged and walk away. Instead of having people walk away, we have people energized for next year."

How We Got Here

In many ways, associations are the victims of their own success. Just 20 years ago many corporate grassroots organizations were in their infancy. In 1994, after the GOP takeover of Congress, associations began to recognize the power of their memberships. Since then, the number of grassroots volunteers trying to influence their elected representatives has grown exponentially, and their efforts have had a huge impact on the functioning of state legislatures and especially Congress.

Consider how Congress struggles to contend with the avalanche of emails and letters it receives. The number has quadrupled in the past 10 years, according to a 2005 Congressional Management Foundation study. Meanwhile, the number of people hired to read them has stayed the same.

While the number of grassroots advocacy networks increases, so does their sophistication. Today many buy software that routes email to legislators and members of Congress through vendor websites. One provider, Capwiz, reports that more than 1,800 groups used its service to power their online advocacy efforts, resulting in 17.7 million constituent messages sent to Congress in 2007.

The good news is that the playing field has been leveled to some degree. But the growth in grassroots advocacy had had a chilling effect on state legislatures and Congress in particular. The more people elected officials hear from, the more difficult it is for them to make decisions. The grassroots industry has become so good at getting people engaged that legislators are scared to do anything.

I interviewed a former member of Congress for a book I'm writing about "David versus Goliath" influence challenges. He told me about his decision-making calculus. He made up his mind after considering who would be helped, who would be hurt, and how long it would take the people he was going to hurt to recover. Grassroots volunteers have done such a good job making their feelings known that

lawmakers may feel they have fewer options these days.

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Set Expectations

This changing environment has been tough on the most important person in the process: the grassroots volunteer.

My research with volunteer advocates, "Winning Hearts and Minds: Attitudes Toward Political Involvement," shows that the number-one reason advocates burn out is that they feel their legislators aren't responding to them adequately. We work hard to recruit these advocates and help them engage their elected officials. When nothing changes, we shouldn't be surprised that they feel discouraged.

We create this problem by overpromising, giving advocates an unrealistic view of what they can accomplish. Organizational psychologist Victor Vroom, who made his mark researching workplace behavior, explained that, quite simply, people become demotivated when their expectations do not meet reality. That's the essence of what's happening in the ranks of our grassroots volunteers.

But some government relations professionals are confronting the issue with success. At the New York State Nurses Association, Shaun Flynn was so concerned about issue fatigue he decided to revamp the grassroots advocacy network. He began by rejecting the airbrushed picture of the legislative

process that many of his colleagues use in favor of a more accurate one. In a session called “How a Bill Doesn’t Become a Law,” he talked about legislative impediments and the tediousness of the legislative process.

“I said take everything you learned in Civics 101 and put it on the shelf. We’re going to take you someplace different,” Flynn says.

He also told his volunteers to think about issue fatigue as a strategy used by the opposition to run out the clock. He called grassroots work “a battle of attrition,” in which the last organization standing is the one that wins. At the end of legislative sessions, Flynn says he made sure everyone knew what happened to the bills they pushed. He sees “closing the loop” on the legislative session as tantamount to preparing volunteers for the next year.

“In the association world, there is a tendency to tout successes but not talk about it when issues don’t move,” Flynn says. “If you don’t explain why bills didn’t move, then you just leave the volunteers hanging. I think that’s very common in grassroots advocacy, and that’s a really easy way for issue fatigue to set in.”

Flynn says he believes associations also have to be more strategic in the way they deploy their networks. The nurses association typically works on 120 or more bills during a session. In the past, it used its network to push nearly all of the bills. Now the network focuses only on the association’s top four legislative priorities.

Focusing on fewer issues means the government relations staff has more time to give members more strategic guidance. They were able to help members make more specific requests of their legislators. Instead of asking legislators to simply move bills, they asked legislators to cosponsor bills or to push fellow legislators to vote to move bills out of committee.

For years NYSNA’s top legislative priority has been a bill that would eliminate mandatory overtime for

nurses. When the bill came up for a hearing in the New York Assembly’s labor committee last year, volunteers targeted labor committee members and the committee chair. The bill made it to the assembly floor and was passed by the assembly but not the Senate, making it the furthest the bill has gotten in NYSNA’s history.

Strengthen the Commitment

Social science research has shown that people remain engaged, even when discouraged, if they commit to a cause in two specific ways, according to Dr. Kelton Rhoads, a psychologist and co-collaborator.

“Dedication to a cause can be dramatically enhanced if grassroots volunteers are encouraged to make public and active commitments,” says Rhoads. “By ‘public,’ I mean that volunteers are given the opportunity to express their dedication to the cause in a public forum, where they go ‘on record’ in front of others. And by ‘active,’ I mean that volunteers should be given the opportunity to expend some effort to join the grassroots team. The research is clear that the easier it is to join a team, the more quickly people will leave it when it’s no longer personally rewarding. So grassroots managers actually do themselves a disservice when they make it too easy to ‘join the team.’”

Some associations give their volunteers the opportunity to earn successive “stripes” as they accomplish challenging tasks. The accomplishments can be recognized with titles, ranks, badges, or in annual awards ceremonies.

Motivate the Troops

Issue fatigue can be most frustrating when associations are working on the issues most important to their memberships—the really difficult bills that can take a decade or longer to move.

That’s exactly the kind of issue that Leann Fox, director of communications for the Washington, DC, office of the

American Osteopathic Association, has been working on with her grassroots network, since she joined the association in 2001. The association’s top priority is changing Medicare’s payment system so that doctors are paid the same way as hospitals and nursing homes.

The association has been able to win short-term fixes but seems to be making little meaningful progress. “When I’m meeting members at conventions, you can just see the fatigue and frustration. When you try to get them to stop and send a letter or make a phone call, they are so frustrated and angry. ‘They say nothing is going to change, so why should I bother?’” she says.

Fox blamed issue fatigue when she put out a call to action to her network and didn’t get the response she needed. So she changed her communication style and sent a blunter, more pointed message.

“We sent messages saying that they were really only harming themselves. We told them that out of the thousands of people who got these messages, we only got 300 calls and that [advocacy] is up to them,” she says.

Fox’s more aggressive tone got results: The number of people using the hotline system to call Congress skyrocketed. “We went from only a few hundred calls to a few thousand calls, so the difference in tone seemed to resonate.”

Change the Messenger

Use a third party to reinforce your message. That’s why Lisbeth Lyons, vice president of government affairs for the Printing Industries of America, invited Representative John Peterson (R-PA) to speak to a group of volunteer leaders about a domestic energy bill he was sponsoring. The volunteers had already decided to support the bill. And the congressman didn’t say anything about the issue that Lyons hadn’t already said, but hearing the message again from the bill’s sponsor, who was a congressional leader, energized the volunteers, Lyons says.

“Changing up the messenger can

keep the message fresh, and it shows advocates there are a lot of people working on the issue,” Lyons says.

Grassroots volunteers that lobby state legislators struggle with issue fatigue, but it is an even bigger problem for volunteers who lobby Congress.

Brian Pallasch, who runs the Washington, DC, office of the American Society of Civil Engineers, worked with his volunteer network for three years on a highway bill that authorized \$286 billion in funding for new roads, bridges, and mass transit projects. Issue fatigue was an obstacle, but Pallasch says he found a way to combat it when he heard volunteers say the stalled bill had begun affecting their ability to get work.


“We focused on how this was important to their everyday work,” Pallasch says. “The issue fatigue ended when people’s personal economics got involved.”

Fight Back

Finally, learn a lesson from the labor movement, and keep your membership informed about what the other side is doing, especially when the other side makes mistakes. Living in a 24-hour news cycle means your volunteers may hear about those mistakes anyway, and isn’t it better that they hear about them from you?

The formation of a cohesive group that regularly discusses its shared values can sustain a group’s motivation, even in the absence of encouraging progress, according to Rhoads. “This is especially the case if a grassroots group is made aware it is under attack by outside forces who are motivated by starkly different values or if the opponent’s leadership shows a lack of concern about the grassroots group’s welfare,” he says. “Under these conditions, a grassroots community will continue to press for its goals even when the going is rough and encouraging progress is rare.”

When I managed Nationwide’s grassroots advocacy network, one of



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our top priorities was promoting safety issues, specifically proposed legislation that would require motorcycle riders to wear helmets. In one heated battle before the state legislature in Pennsylvania, opponents in the motorcycle rider community, which happens to have a very adept grassroots network, told *Motor Trend* magazine that Nationwide was “coercing” employees to contact their legislators and even “bribing” them by giving them a “wear-jeans-to-work day” if they wrote to their lawmaker.

We knew that an employee who liked to ride without a helmet was behind the report, and that was fine. The ploy helped us. No one at Nationwide coerced employees to call their elected officials, but the media report actually reinforced not only the employees’ support but also our senior executives’ commitment to the mobilization. Some customers canceled their policies because we supported a mandatory helmet law. But I was told by our vice president of safety, “Whatever you are doing, keep doing it. We are on the right side.”

The controversy helped me keep volunteers motivated. I made sure our grassroots volunteers knew of the executive’s support, despite the fact that we were losing customers.

Deal With It

The worst response an association can have to issue fatigue is to pretend it isn’t there. The dynamics that created this playing field aren’t going away. In

fact, the gridlock that has slowed action in state legislatures and Congress likely will intensify before it gets better. Government relations programs that address issue fatigue acknowledge that the game has changed, and they’re planning for the future. Ignoring issue fatigue, however, makes life harder for everyone in the association, and the person who pays the biggest price is the grassroots volunteer, the linchpin of any successful advocacy network. [an](#)

Amy Showalter is president of The Showalter Group, in Cincinnati, Ohio, which aims to help organizations improve the effectiveness of their PAC and grassroots advocacy programs. Email: amy@showaltergroup.com