



Interest Groups Rely Too Much on E-mail Advocacy

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Last month, some House Members quietly erected an obstacle between them and their constituents.

They now required e-mail correspondents to solve a simple math or logic problem for their e-mails to get through. The electronic roadblock drew howls of protest from public interest groups and trade associations, who denounced it as a threat to democracy. The idea, of course, is to ensure that only actual people — and not mass-mailing computers of the kind often used by interest groups — send e-mails to the House from now on.

Instead of raising a ruckus, the interest groups can learn a lesson from this. E-mail campaigns have a place in today's political process, but grass-roots advocacy groups rely on them far too often, and their usefulness is increasingly limited.

In fact, advocacy groups are in danger of demotivating their volunteers who may get a false sense of accomplishment from their e-mail advocacy. When their e-mails seem ineffective, they might get discouraged and burn out. Interest groups and trade associations spend a lot of organizational resources on the software they use to send e-mails to Congress, but now it looks like their investment, while necessary and worthy, may not be paying off as intended. It represents the classic case of failing to listen to the customer — in this case, the legislators who receive their missives.

But let's go back to the nut of the issue: Is anyone reading these mass e-mails?

Probably not, according to a recent survey by the Congressional Management Foundation. Most Congressional staffers polled — 75 percent — said they believe the cookie-cutter e-mails from constituents are sent without the constituents' knowledge.

The staffers' skepticism over the e-mails may be related to findings from another CMF survey. That survey found that the number of letters and e-mails received by Congress has quadrupled in the past 10 years. Meanwhile, the number of people hired to read them has stayed the same.

The good news is that e-mail is encouraging more people to participate in the political process, the staffers said. The bad news is the avalanche of electronic and postal mail isn't improving the quality of the debate.

The smart grass-roots organizers already knew that.

Carter Headrick, director of field operations for Tobacco-Free Kids, has 160,000 grass-roots volunteers he calls on to lobby elected officials. He said he rarely uses the network to send e-mails to Congress because he's learned that his volunteers' e-mails often don't make it past the low-level staffers who open them.

"We do very little e-mail with Congress because there is tons of evidence that it doesn't get you

very far," Headrick said.

Headrick said he understands why advocacy groups have been distracted by their e-mail advocacy software, which costs tens of thousands of dollars: "It's very easy to sink money into an online piece of software and get so focused on it that you quit doing the real work that needs to be done."

Mass e-mails have a place in grass-roots activism — as long as they are part of a plan that includes personalized, customized communications between constituents and lawmakers. Even in today's digital democracy, any credible, experienced grass-roots activist will tell you that a good campaign culminates with an old-fashioned lobbying technique — face-to-face meetings with legislators and their staffers. The problem is grass-roots organizers have spent too much time organizing their online troops and not enough with their ground infantry.

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