

# THE SHOWALTER GROUP, INC.

Momentum and Motivation for Grassroots Success

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## HOW TO AVOID THE FATAL FLAWS OF A GRASSROOTS PROGRAM

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**Q:** Amy, in one of your workshops you cover over 15 common mistakes public affairs professionals make with their grassroots programs. Which one is the most common?

**Showalter:** Probably the mistaken belief that a grassroots database is a program, or that an annual grassroots campaign on one issue constitutes a grassroots program, or my favorite, that conducting an annual legislative reception constitutes a grassroots program. A program is a commitment to the long-term process of constant education, involvement, and activation of your members that does not cease. There is no “off season.”

**Q:** Let’s say an association does have program and a plan. What is the biggest internal program mistake you see?

**Showalter:** There are too many to mention for purposes of this article, but what initially comes to mind is that very few programs evaluate and measure their efforts. Many government relations staff claim that “you can’t measure grassroots, it’s intangible.” That kind of thinking is so off base, it’s not even wrong.

This article does not permit space to go into all the various measurement tools, but you should measure more than just the won-loss on your issues, the number of names in your computer, or the most often- mentioned one, how many responses you received to a call to action.

For example, an invaluable intangible measurement would be a Key Contact who has a great relationship with the chairperson of the committee in which your legislation usually resides. Can you put a price on that relationship? What would it cost your association if you did not have that relationship? We tend to be very comfortable hiring and evaluating lobbyists by who they know, the quality of their relationships, etc., but we forget about it when it comes to our grassroots advocates. That’s not intellectually consistent.

**Q:** How can an association’s government relations shop get more respect?

**Showalter:** This is a real challenge for many organizations. I know of several prominent national associations that have a huge government relations staff and budget. They are competent and highly professional, but they admitted to me that their Board does not know what they do for the association.

No one is going to seek out ways to recognize your department’s work. You have to get in front of your Board, get on their meeting agenda as often as you can, and tell the positive stories of how grassroots and your staff have really benefited your members.

Let’s all make a pact right now to STOP with the “legislative updates” at Board meetings where you recite the latest status on a bill and all it’s boring details. Make it interesting by telling stories of what goes on behind the scenes and what your

members are doing through their grassroots and PAC involvement to change things. Talk more about results and goals, less about where the bill is in the legislative process.

You also have to adopt what I call the “broken record syndrome” and incessantly tell the positive stories of grassroots and PAC involvement to your co-workers, members, and other organizations as well. Your water cooler, elevator, and employee lounge conversations are all opportunities to sell your program.

**Q:** Any last thoughts on what fatal flaws to avoid?

**Showalter:** Just to remember that your technology is NOT your program. Technology does not equal grassroots. It’s a TOOL, not your program. People are your program.

I’m not alone in this conviction. TSG and the Public Affairs Council recently sponsored the Grassroots Innovation Awards. Of the over 25 nominees in 1999 and over 30 this year, about half were technology related. None of them received any first place votes. As a matter of fact, the top three winners utilized simple grassroots tactics in an innovative way that helped them achieve their goals.

*Amy Showalter, President of the Showalter Group Inc., is a national grassroots consultant based in Columbus, Ohio. She works with companies and associations that want to increase their grassroots effectiveness through establishing internal grassroots programs and training public affairs staff and grassroots volunteers how to build their programs and properly communicate with lawmakers.*

*For Amy’s latest grassroots tips and articles, go to the TSG web site at [www.showaltergroup.com](http://www.showaltergroup.com). Amy can be reached at [614.781.1300](tel:614.781.1300)/[amy@showaltergroup.com](mailto:amy@showaltergroup.com).*

