



K Street Café

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Managing the Influence Parity Dynamic: Lessons from the Most-Admired Grassroots Organizations

In my previous post, <http://kstreetcafe.com/grassroots-stakeholders-and-their-legislators-who-is-influencing-whom-part-1/> I promised to share who our Grassroots Influence Pulse (GRIP) respondents believe are the most admired grassroots organizations, and how those organizations manage the influence parity dynamic. The top three “most admired grassroots organizations” included the AARP, the National Rifle Association, and National Association of Realtors. This is almost identical to the “most envied grassroots organizations” cited by over 180 grassroots professionals in our 2009 research.

Respondents were asked to also indicate *why* they admired these organizations. We categorized their answers into the following characteristics, in order of mention:

1. **Army:** implying discipline, good followership, big numbers, well mobilized, good turn-out. Focus here is on the followers.
2. **Craft:** good blend of outreach activities, creative, good educators, frequently in touch, effective influencers. Focus is on the organization.
3. **Resources:** power, money, reach, formidable. Focus is on wealth and intimidation.
4. **Noise:** implies passionate and loud, able to get attention, aggressive, moralistic. Focus is on “being seen and heard.”

I interviewed representatives of these groups with the promise of anonymity and lack of attribution. Therefore, we are sharing their common techniques on the above challenges, although not every observation applies equally to all three organizations. We wanted to find out how they make sure their advocates are influencing legislators versus legislators influencing them.

Addressing Parity Influence Challenges

Each of the top-ranked organizations experience the challenges of parity influence. Legislators commonly tell their advocates that they “support” their organization generally, that they “would like to learn more” about their issue, and that they can get behind one aspect of their legislative proposal but not another part of it, which leaves them in a liminal commitment zone. How do they manage parity influence?

1. They trust their advocates. This is demonstrated by an advocacy culture promotes not just volunteer education, but volunteer empowerment that gives their advocates confidence to assert themselves with elected officials. They



trust their advocates with “insider” information that allows them to politely push back to legislators who misrepresent the facts or equivocate.

2. They have defined systems for managing legislator misinformation campaigns and legislator influence parity, which falls into the “craft” category above. They have tight communications procedures between the grassroots advocates and their government affairs team, whether it is the lead lobbyist, the grassroots director, field directors, etc. Because there is a *system* to communicate and verify lawmaker sentiments, there is very little room for elected officials to equivocate between advocates in the district and Hill lobbyists.

One group representative stated, “We put a lot of emphasis on sharing information. We record what happens in meetings, via correspondence, and hold legislators accountable. This has made our advocates more passionate and frankly less willing to compromise.”

3. They train volunteers beyond the “do’s and don’ts” of grassroots advocacy. Their grassroots volunteers have been trained to understand the difference between an elected official stating to them, “I’m with you most of the time” vs. “You have my vote.” As one organization representative told me, “We are not amenable to being co-opted. The relationship between our lobbyists and grassroots Key Contacts is very good. Our legislators know our grassroots volunteers are talking to our government affairs staff, so they can’t dupe us. It really puts them on notice.”

The “calling” of a profession also impacts the ability of grassroots advocates to recognize when lawmakers are telling them what they *want to hear* versus what they really think. “When you have volunteers who have communications backgrounds, they can recognize B.S. and are not afraid to delve further into an issue,” said one grassroots leader.

Ask yourself...

Is your team willing to publicly challenge misleading and untrue statements by elected officials?(and make your grassroots volunteers aware of them?)

Do you have a formal feedback process between your grassroots Key Contacts and your government affairs team? (Do you even have a Key Contact program?)

How would you rate the feedback and communications loop between your grassroots team and your lobbying team? Is one team having difficulty getting timely information?

Do you leverage the statements and behaviors of your legislative opponents?

Does your program have levels of grassroots engagement, each with clear role descriptions and expectations? Are you willing to reassign, provide sabbaticals, or even “fire” low or non-performing volunteers?

Do you recognize grassroots volunteer behaviors that you want more of, or just when they engage in major legislative achievements?

In my next post, I’ll reveal the “elephant in the room” regarding parity influence. Don’t read it unless you are willing to “get real” about grassroots influence challenges and more important, raise your grassroots advocate’s persuasion skills to a higher level.



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