

# Virtual Advocacy During COVID-19 and Beyond: Best Practices



The Advocacy Association

# Virtual Advocacy During COVID-19 and Beyond

## Best Practices When In-Person Communications Is Not Possible

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives, more profoundly from a health and economic standpoint. The coronavirus hit the news in February and, in early March, became everyone's top priority. Our way of conducting business and living our lives has changed forever.

Those of us who work with government leaders at all levels were called into action by our organizations and our clients. It became increasingly important for government relations, grassroots and communications professionals to leap into action with accurate information, resources, relief and collaboration for the greater good.

The traditional methods of communications for advocacy and two-way dialogue with policymakers—face-to-face meetings, town hall sessions and hearings, well-attended rallies, gatherings over meals together as well as travel to view projects and programs—were soon postponed and then canceled. Yet, Congress, state legislatures and local governments had huge decisions to make in maintaining order, fulfilling government services and assisting those individuals, businesses, associations, higher education and non-profits most affected by the mandated stay at home orders and rising need for COVID-19 testing and treatment. Pandemic economic relief, reliable testing for the virus and a new vaccine continue to be pressing issues driving public policy.

Advocates are also educators and collaborators so we turned to some of our most talented colleagues, professional organizations and media partners to create a meaningful dialogue around virtual advocacy and technologies that could be tapped. We sincerely appreciate the incredibly positive reception we received, and that led to the compilation of this e-book.

Thank you for taking the time to read, reflect and share our insights on virtual advocacy best practices. We would welcome your constructive feedback and stories that will help broaden the body of information on this important topic.

— Mike Fulton and Joshua Habursky

# What's Your Digital Advocacy Credibility Quotient?

*Amy Showalter*

Every organization that wants to promote or defend their cause has a digital presence. In today's world of physical distancing, it's natural that groups will rely on that medium more than ever before for what it excels at: educating and mobilizing your advocates. As I have constantly reminded grassroots leaders, abundance dilutes impact. Therefore, the abundance of any tactic, in this instance digital advocacy, requires that organizations assess their online credibility by conducting a digital credibility audit. They also need to evaluate their advocate's online communications credibility. Credibility is not persuasion —it is, however, the aspect of persuasion that garners attention of those with opposing views. You are more likely to receive the proverbial benefit of the doubt, and that one of many steps to successful persuasion.

## **Risks to Online Credibility**

In the offline realm, we have several ways to determine an individual's credibility. Elements like body language, punctuality, use of language, education and experience are just a few factors we consciously and unconsciously use to judge (yes, we all judge) credibility. They flow into the mega-factors of credibility which are trustworthiness, expertise, and goodwill. Since the visual cues are largely absent online (except for the curated highlight reels), we use heuristics to assess an organization's or an individual's credibility.

Social psychologists have found at least 20 ways that consumers of digital content determine online credibility. Here are a just a few to help you assess your true DCQ – your Digital Credibility Quotient.

**Attempts at Sarcasm:** The Greek translation of sarcasm is sarkazein, which means “to tear flesh.” While your organization's online brand won't veer into this territory, what about your advocates? Remember, while you are an advocacy professional, they are mortals. Remind your advocates/ stakeholders to refrain from reading your opponent's posts when they are

stressed, tired or anxious —it’s the devil’s playground! It can lead to them writing their own sarcastic messages that reflect negatively on your advocacy credibility.

**Disseminating Inaccuracies:** Of course, honesty is critical, particularly when the information you distribute is easily verifiable as being incorrect or purposely dishonest. I realize that “truth” is unfortunately highly subjective at the present time, but that’s not a reason to jettison oversight of facts they disseminate. *Are you monitoring your stakeholder’s posts for accuracy, particularly those of your leaders?*

**Coarse Language:** While you may think “it goes without saying” that language sodden with profanity isn’t appropriate in any medium (I agree!) your stakeholders may think it’s acceptable —look at the number of book titles and acceptance speeches with profanity. However, people who must use obscenities instead of normal adjectives and adverbs don’t have the vocabulary or intellectual capital to find more powerful or refined words. And of course, the more it’s used, the more mundane it becomes.

### **Increasing Online Credibility**

What many organizations forget is that online credibility is also determined by your advocate’s offline presence —their trustworthiness, expertise, and goodwill.

### **Amyism #82 Maximizing Social Media Influence**

“Legislators who agree with your cause may cite your social media messages as an authentic influence on them, while those opposed cite the same messages as inauthentic ‘noise.’ Both characterizations cannot be true. To increase your social media authenticity and hence it’s influence, you must have *real, credible* advocates on the ground pressing your case.”

Therefore, how they communicated in the past when face to face with a lawmaker, their staff, the local media, or community representatives greatly affects your present online credibility. As I wrote in *The Underdog Edge*, lawmakers particularly examine an advocate’s reputation (or lack of it) when first communicating with them, particularly when face to face. I wrote

that “Where you are is who you were.” What your advocates do accumulates, so start planning now on how you can help your advocates ramp up their credibility quotient.

Other aspects of your digital presence that increase online credibility include:

**Communicating in the Correct Cognitive Place:** As my colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads stated in his *Ten Influence Errors Checklist*: “Novice digital advocates aim their message at the cognitive place they want their audiences to be, rather than where their audience actually is. Expert influencers first determine the latitudes of acceptance, noncommitment, and rejection ratio before aiming their messages, realizing that incrementalism may be required.” Translation: research is required.

**Links to Credible Sources:** All digital content is loaded with links to other sites, but are they *credible sites*? Are the sites trustworthy, do they display issue expertise, and do they convey goodwill? Connecting with other sites/organizations that don’t embody these three facets of credibility can obliterate your entire effort. This applies to coalition memberships, as well.

**Respond to Negative Stakeholder Comments:** The nuance here is *stakeholder* replies, not the general public or your opponents. I remember reading the blog post by an executive of a national public affairs organization with corporate and association members. The organization shares government relations and public affairs best practices. His public blog posts (and that of his staff) have no space to submit comments. That’s a mistake, because credibility is enhanced when we encourage reasoned debate.

**Stakeholder Attention:** To increase the credibility of your website, find out what elements your stakeholders, members, and/or advocates view most favorably and make those elements the most prominent. Yes, research is required.

Strategically improving your digital and offline credibility, and hence, persuasion, isn’t inherently unethical. Being judged for your credibility is, however, inherently unavoidable. Proceed accordingly.

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