

Congress, Lobbying, Strategy

# For advocacy effectiveness, email trust trumps email volume

February 5, 2016 [Amy Showalter](#)

*Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.*

As I have researched grassroots best practices, I am more and more convinced that “abundance dilutes impact;” the more abundant a grassroots tactic or technique, the less its impact. I uncovered a PhD dissertation from John Cluverius at UNC – Chapel Hill that expands on this dilemma.

Cluverius' research findings have applications for any group that uses online grassroots tactics to influence legislators.

Interestingly, he initiated the research after his employer claimed that in the previous year, employees had sent more than 1.2 million emails to their elected officials. He thought it odd that the number of emails was the primary measure of assessing legislative advocacy effectiveness (Smart guy). He decided to find out how legislators judge online advocacy communications.

### **The New Mental Shortcut**

Cluverius contends that because the cost of producing online advocacy communications has flattened, the communications are now judged differently. He found that while email volume gave legislators useful signals as to an issue's importance, volume is no longer the heuristic used to determine the information's validity or value. Legislators he interviewed talked about *trust* in evaluating messages more than *volume*. As in the information marketplace, the legislative marketplace uses trust to quickly determine message value and credibility, which leads to message persuasion. Trust is the new heuristic.

### **Why Trust Over Volume?**

We know from the social sciences that the degree of communications "expense and effort" perceived by a message recipient impacts message credibility (Gass & Seiter), which adds to feelings of trust. Cluverius found that legislators expressed an inability to determine from email volume "how hard the group worked or how salient the issue might be."

This translates to grassroots advocacy because while the profusion of online advocacy may grant more access to lawmakers, it is *easy* access, and represents one of the lower forms of engagement.

It's easier to mobilize an email campaign than to mobilize attendance at a district town hall meeting, meet with lawmakers in the district or on Capitol Hill, or to host a legislator on facility tour—and it appears that legislators take notice of your effort.

### **Where You are is Who You Were: Developing Trust**

In addition to demonstrating work and sacrifice, a constituent's reputation, as well as a group's reputation, is an element of trust. As I like to remind audiences, "Where you are is who you were." A trusted reputation requires consistent interaction and exposure to the information source, whether a grassroots advocate or lobbyist. During that consistent interaction, you must provide unbiased information and provide two-sided arguments, particularly with those who will be later exposed to counter-arguments to your position. How many lawmakers hear counter-arguments to your position? You guessed it — all hear counter-arguments. The legislative "do's and don'ts" don't cut it anymore. If you aren't training your advocates to provide two-sided arguments, and be prepared for a dialogue v. a presentation, their results will be minimized.

### **Trustworthy Information**

According to Cluverius, legislators perceive information to be trustworthy if it: 1) Is from constituents; 2) contains true and relevant statements; 3) "reliably reflects the issue preferences of the mass public in the lawmaker's

district” ( it’s authentic); and, 4) “reflects the attitudes of those who consistently pay attention to particular issues.”

Note the sentiment in number four above. Those who “consistently pay attention to particular issues” can be translated to single issue voters. It is intriguing that the attitudes of single issue voters, despite candidates who wail against those voters, are considered to provide trustworthy information. These voters have a high commitment to the political process. They monitor legislator behavior. And lawmakers appear to respect them, regardless if they agree with them.

### **Ask Yourself. . . .**

- Do you foster email message *volume* or email message *trust*?
- What’s the organizational and individual grassroots advocate’s energy expended to communicate with lawmakers?
- Do you develop trustworthy information by striving to show support for your issue among a majority of voters in a lawmaker’s district?
- Do you have a culture that values and teaches advocates how to build trust?
- What’s your ratio of high-trust advocate behaviors (effort, authenticity, unbiased information) v. low-trust behaviors?
- What advocacy behaviors do you emphasize and reward?

Email volume is often the lodestone that draws us toward the belief that more email = more persuasion. We want to believe in its efficacy. After all, it’s

easy to produce and easy to attach numbers to email advocacy; just start counting. The problem is that reams of emails don't insure persuasion success.

<http://about.bgov.com/blog/for-advocacy-effectiveness-email-trust-trumps-email-volume/>