Study: Shoe Leather Moves the Advocacy Needle More Than Social Media

BY Ernie Smith / January 16, 2020

While it's easier to send a tweet or a social media message than to have a face-to-face meeting, legislators tend to react more strongly to advocacy efforts focused on in-person meetings, a new report finds.

Social media seems to be where all the political discussion is these days. But is that medium having a real effect on legislators?

Maybe not. A new report from The Showalter Group, an advocacy-minded consultancy, finds that digital-minded tactics such as social media and email do not resonate as much as face-to-face contact. Despite this, emails to legislators tend to be the most popular grassroots advocacy approach, used by 78 percent of respondents, and organizations were making more of an investment in social media (21 percent) than face-to-face communication or events (19 percent each).

Amy Showalter, the group's principal and a primary author of The Grassroots Influence Pulse 2019 [registration], notes that email and social media are widely used for advocacy reasons—but they may actually be going against the primary cause.

"While email is still the most frequently deployed advocacy tactic, it isn't associated with increased legislative victories. In fact, the statistics show that email negatively correlates with legislative success—the more time spent on it, the less successful an organization is," Showalter said in a news release. "We also found the more time an advocacy leader spends urging stakeholders to post social media messages, the less success they experience."

The report also found that organizations tended to have more success with passing legislation when more grassroots events were held, when the party in power is aligned with their general position, and when the discipline of their approach receives notice. Interestingly, advocacy teams with flagging email campaigns often had more success with their legislative efforts.

Kelton Rhoads, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Southern California and a coauthor of the study, pointed at organizations that built a grassroots "army" around their efforts, with the National Rifle Association, the National Association of Realtors, and AARP cited as examples of admired organizations.

Showalter and Rhoads surveyed 241 grassroots professionals over a yearlong period for the report, now in its third edition. Other highlights from the report:

The impact of burnout. The report noted that, when it comes to recruiting grassroots advocates, burnout is often the biggest factor that discourages participation, something that around half of respondents (50.8 percent) say they run into. Other deterrents to grassroots support include negative political or cultural events (35.9 percent), a minority political party (32.2 percent), or a lack of legislative or regulatory process (32 percent). On the other hand, a key factor that makes it easier to recruit an advocate is an engaged opponent (42 percent) and some promising legislative or regulatory results (41 percent).

"Those reporting more legislative success were more likely to choose 'good army' as their basis of admiration of successful organizations, than those reporting fewer legislative successes," Rhoads said in the study. "Successful organizations admire discipline; struggling organizations admire discipline somewhat less."

Legislators want your feedback—but may not give you their vote. One interesting finding in the report was that more than 60 percent of respondents reported that legislators were reaching out to either staff or volunteers for advice on specific issues more often than in prior years, while another 43.9 percent were providing greater personal access and 42.6 percent were making public statements supporting a specific issue. However, this doesn't necessarily lead to votes—just 21.3 percent of respondents said that legislators were voting with respondents more than the prior year.

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