

CEO UPDATE

Study: Quality of grassroots relationships beats quantity

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Quantity is a key determinant of success in Political Action Committee efforts: more PAC contributors and more money are, unsurprisingly, correlated with legislative success.

But the same does not hold for grassroots efforts, according to the latest study from The Showalter Group, Inc. While grassroots organizers seem to emphasize quantity – such as increased mobilization – the quality of relationships with legislators is what they report brings success. The firm’s latest Grassroots Influence Pulse (GRIP®) survey shows, as previous surveys did, that many respondents report a lack of quality relationships with policymakers.

That’s just one of the ways in which the actions that respondents reported taking most differed from those they said were most effective. The results of Showalter’s fourth GRIP® survey are based on a sample of 103 grassroots and PAC professionals, with responses dating to 2021 and 2022.

This edition of the biennial survey was the first to gather responses related to PAC activity.

“I’ve seen this in a lot of the surveys, where we have a disconnect between what people tell us is effective and what they do,” said Amy Showalter, founder of the Cincinnati-based firm.

Respondents said stakeholders who have relationships with elected officials were their most effective messengers. But mobilizing such stakeholders was not the most frequent action that grassroots professionals reported taking. It was tied for third, behind mobilizing allied groups and third-party stakeholders and activating stakeholders in targeted districts.

Text messages and video meetings with legislators are two other examples of the disconnect. Texts and video calls were among the most frequently encouraged modes of grassroots contact. Yet only 4.1% reported that text messages were among the most effective means, and face-to-face meetings were considered more effective than video meetings.

Jan. 6 Blowback

Most respondents reported that pausing PAC contributions to lawmakers who refused to certify the electoral vote on Jan. 6, 2021, hurt their chances of legislative success.

“They reported fewer legislators supporting their issues,” Showalter said. “Legislators were not voting with them as much. Lawmakers were not contacting these organizations as much asking, ‘Hey, how should we vote on this?’”

In the future, Showalter said PACs are unlikely to have such a response to a legislator’s actions. “It took into consideration one aspect of a legislator’s behavior when there are many aspects of a legislator’s behavior,” she said.

“If you’re disbursing PAC contributions properly, you have written criteria and you assign a weight to each element— what matters most to your organization and thus, how much you contribute to a candidate,” she said. “But after January 6, peer pressure ensued. That led to a lot of organizations following each other.