

Give It a Rest: How to Rejuvenate and Keep Grassroots Support Strong



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Organizations may try to use grassroots advocates year-round to ensure that members stay engaged. But giving your volunteers a break may actually help them be more productive in the long run.

One of the most common questions among advocacy professionals: How do you keep grassroots advocates active all year? There is concern that neglecting them will result in legislative defeat. But a little rest may go a long way.

I grew up on a farm, so I routinely observed the laws of nature, particularly the laws of seasons and harvests. For instance, did you know that some of the most productive agricultural land is intentionally left fallow to improve future crop production? I believe these laws also apply to grassroots advocacy and leadership.

Exhausting your advocates leads to inertia, which is why your grassroots advocates need to rest. That's right, letting your grassroots go fallow may actually rejuvenate advocates and make them more effective.

Excuses for Not Resting Your Grassroots

There are several reasons why advocacy professionals are reluctant to allow their grassroots advocates to rest. Among them:

1. Technology justification. You paid for the tools, so you feel compelled to use them. Ask yourself: Are you maximizing their use or instead sending incessant "action alerts" to advocates?
2. Adrenaline addiction. Many grassroots professionals love adrenaline. A little bit of adrenaline isn't bad, but it's not productive to be in a constant state of agitation and high alert for the entire legislative session.
3. Attitudinal deficiencies. You may have heard people say they "use" their advocates to engage in certain activities or initiatives. My blood nearly curdles when I hear this because that's not transformative grassroots leadership. Rather, it's transactional leadership if all you do is ask for things.
4. Narrow focus on tools. We all want the newest tools and tricks to spur more grassroots engagement, but we should also maintain a spirit of curiosity and learning about them. But as these technology tools and tactics become more abundant and common, what will differentiate winning organizations are those that not only use the tools but also insist on stellar grassroots staff and volunteer leadership. In fact, in our recent Grassroots Influence Pulse research that surveyed more than 130 grassroots professionals, respondents said it was easier to recruit grassroots advocates when there was "new or better volunteer leadership" in place.



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Intentionally Rest

Rest is critical because timing matters in grassroots leadership. The right action, like contacting legislators to keep them aware of an issue, at the wrong time can create resistance. Resting your roots mitigates resistance because your advocates will appreciate not being asked to do something every few weeks and will benefit from the developmental and recognition opportunities you'll be providing instead.

Associations should take steps to build a rest cycle into their government relations strategy by intentionally setting aside time to rest, though the timing will look different for each organization. Use the Congressional and state legislative calendars—after all, you plan everything else around them—to select options for rest time, known as advocate development time. In addition, examine your advocacy program and plan activities and rest based on the program's and your volunteers' strengths and deficiencies.

When communicating that you'll be giving advocates a rest period, don't forget to not only express gratitude for their time and efforts but also share the new ways your organization will be giving back to your advocates through development opportunities or celebrations.

Here's a list of five Rs to use for resting grassroots supporters:

1. Retention. Our research with more than 20 top-performing lobbying organizations that represent diverse industries and professions revealed that retention is a discipline. Successful organizations have a plan to retain their most productive advocates that involves a consistent system for obtaining volunteer feedback.
2. Recruitment. Do you have a grassroots recruitment system? Or do you rely on last-minute recruitment as your bill is being voted on? Successful associations have a recruitment system that is strategic and based on your priority legislative outcomes.
3. Recognition. Woe to organizations that don't have formal and informal recognition programs. Also, understand the difference between recognition and rewards, and engage in what I call "strategic spontaneity," the intersection of recognition and strategy to get the behavior you want more of. While the most effective recognition is spontaneous, we have to align our recognition with the advocacy behaviors that lead to our strategic outcomes.

4. Rejuvenation. When is the last time you held a celebratory party or event for your star advocates? Another way to rejuvenate your grassroots team is to use the off season to enhance their influence and leadership skills.

5. Reproduce. Top-performing lobbying organizations also have formal advocacy mentoring programs to reproduce new grassroots leaders. You can likely trace current leaders in your association to the tutelage of past association leaders, and the same principle applies to grassroots advocacy leadership. Let your roots go fallow now and then. Take that time to assiduously recruit, retain, recognize, rejuvenate, and reproduce. You'll morph into a more dynamic leader, and your ~~grassroots~~ will be more energized for the next battle.

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