

Integrated Online and Offline Advocacy Campaign Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

Advocacy campaigns are considered by many to be the second cornerstone of a pluralistic, democratic society. While many may focus on the first cornerstone, voting, advocacy campaigns provide the opportunity for citizens to pool their voices to influence public policy in between elections, when the business of governing takes place. Historically, citizens would return their focus to their immediate lives shortly after a presidential election, with a more modest peak during off-year congressional elections. But with the convergence of the Internet and politics, mid-election participation is easier. Online grassroots advocacy tools help interest groups organize in a day, or two, campaigns that can easily generate tens of thousands of e-mails, faxes, telephone calls, and telegrams to policymakers at any level of government, or even at any private or international organization. These campaigns have had a major impact on the legislative process, including drastically reshaping the workload of congressional (Fitch & Goldschmidt, 2005) and agency (Shulman, 2005) staff responsible for processing citizen communication and making legislative and regulatory decisions more responsive to citizen concerns.

Perhaps the most colorful story of the origins of legislative advocacy in the United States focuses on meetings between legislators and favor-seekers in the lobby of the Willard Hotel, near the White House, in the early 1800s. These “lobbyists” would wine and dine lawmakers in order to gain favor on the various issues before congress (American League of Lobbyists, 2003).

While early lobbying was (and to a great degree remains) a process that relies on personal relationships and interactions between a lobbyist and lawmakers, the scope of lobbying has evolved over time to include the integration of more widespread citizen participation through interest groups and grassroots campaigns. According to David Truman in his seminal work on pluralistic politics, interest groups form as a result of a disturbance in the polity that makes people take notice of an issue (Truman, 1958).

Initially, interest groups started locally and grew into national organizations. As they grew larger and more unwieldy across great distances, they faced inevitable

stress on an occasional breakdown of their internal lines of communication. The Internet gives the opportunity for immediacy of communication and drastically reduces the effort involved. Interest groups now have a wide range of online tools for developing and nurturing thriving communities of like-minded people without concern for geographic proximity or scheduling/time-zone differences.

From television to the Internet, the public has seen dramatic increases in their access to information about the issues that matter to them. By providing an explosion in the number of channels of communication, television (and radio) broadcasted huge amounts of uniform information. But the communication was only one-way. The Internet added multi-way communication and full-text searchability to a wealth of information on an unimaginable number of topics.

This increased access to issue information, combined with the advent of new, online tools to help citizens communicate with lawmakers, has ushered in a new era of mass movement-based advocacy politics. Educating and mobilizing hundreds of thousands, and potentially millions, of activists to voice their opinions to congress in a short period of time, even in just a day or two, is a reality now. With a good strategy, interest groups can provide sufficient education and guidance to their advocacy communities to make a clear and effective chorus of voices heard in congress.

Early Internet advocacy campaigns tended to focus almost exclusively on the use of Web sites, e-mail, and online advertising as the means for educating and mobilizing citizens to get involved with advocacy campaigns. As citizens and lawmakers have become more comfortable with the Internet, advocacy strategies have become more integrated, combining the new online strategies and tactics with traditional offline strategies and tactics. Where early Internet-era advocacy campaigns were “siloes” into separate online and offline tracks, the turn of the twenty-first century has seen the separate tracks weave into an integrated strategy that uses online and offline tactics to reinforce each other in a manner that dramatically increases the effectiveness of these campaigns, both with respect to mobilizing larger numbers of citizens and giving citizens more influence over public policy formation.

As a result of these new digital tools connecting citizens to policymakers, the line between e-politics and e-government is blurring. Digital technologies bring citizens, either individually or organized by interest groups, deeper into the governmental process—from legislation, to rulemaking, to enforcement, and even into the judicial process. Indeed, the focus among e-government scholars on issues related to transparency speaks directly to this blur. Lack of transparency produces greater citizen calls for more transparency and transparency makes governments more accountable to the citizens at all process levels. Thus, no discussion of e-government is complete without a discussion of e-politics and the heightened involvement of citizens in the governmental process.

BACKGROUND

To be *integrated*, an advocacy campaign uses *multiple outgoing communication channels* to educate, recruit, and mobilize citizens to take action supporting the campaign. It also sends citizen messages to policymakers through *multiple incoming communication channels*. Where using multiple outgoing channels extends the reach of the message to more citizens, delivering messages through multiple channels into the policymaker's office makes the messages more noticeable and harder to ignore.

Outgoing citizen mobilization and incoming policymaker persuasion messages require distinct strategies to be effective. Outgoing messages to citizen activists must be an eye-catching and a compelling call to action. Incoming messages to policymakers must persuade them to support the campaign's policy position on a bill before congress.

Campaign channels of communication include both online and offline modes. Online channels include online advertisements, e-mail, Web sites (both the campaign's and others'), digital video, and digital animation. Offline channels include direct mail, telephone, fax, television, radio, print ads, and billboards.

In addition to employing multiple outgoing and incoming communication channels, what makes an advocacy campaign integrated is the strategy for using these multiple channels in a mutually reinforcing manner, with two goals. The first goal is to mobilize citizens to express their views to policymakers. The second is to persuade the policymaker to support the campaign's position, which, if achieved broadly through members of the decision-making body, yields the desired policy outcome.

While congress and state legislatures are the most common recipients of integrated strategies, they can be targeted to any policymaking body, including regulatory

agencies and corporations. Grassroots advocacy software delivers e-mail and faxes to state legislators, governors, even to city council members. Most provide easy-to-use Webforms for sending letters to the editors of local and national news publications and broadcasts. Some allow campaign managers to enter the contact information for anyone (i.e., the president or board of directors of a corporation) into a custom target field to direct a campaign at just about anyone.

Integrated citizen outreach strategies reach more people than online-only strategies because they can reach the third of Americans who do not use the Internet and the other third that use the Internet through a dialup connection. Once they reach people, the campaign can easily identify the best way to contact each person for future communication and mobilization. Once contacted through offline means, it is important to move as many people as possible to an online activist network, but it is also important to identify those who prefer to be contacted by mail or phone and continue to communicate with them in that manner. Since campaigns need to remobilize their activists throughout a campaign, as well as for subsequent campaigns, respecting the wishes of would be activists as to their preferred modes of communication helps to keep them loyal and reliable.

Another key component of an integrated campaign is a centralized database providing a regularly updated, or real-time tracking of activist communication and activity. Using this relational database, a campaign can make strategic decisions regarding budget allocation as a campaign progresses. For example, as the number of messages to specific members of congress reach target goals, online ads and phone calls that were going to be sent to people in those congressional districts and states can be redirected to citizens in other districts and states where performance levels are lagging. This allows a campaign to maximize the efficiency of its ad buys and phone banks, ensuring that all the congressional targets receive sufficient constituent messages to hold some sway.

While the rise of the Internet's popularity has opened new opportunities for engaging the polity in a meaningful way, especially in between elections, the fact remains that a sizable number of citizens remain offline and among those online, many still prefer to do politics the "old fashioned" way. Let's look at the numbers.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, about two-thirds of Americans are online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004a) and 88% of those online say "the Internet plays a role in their daily routines and that the rhythm of their everyday lives would be affected if they could no longer go online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004b)." That said, there are still sizable gaps in access that leave seniors, African Americans, households making under \$30,000 a year, and those

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