

Why Aren't My Advocates Advocating?

by Christopher Glen

So, you've got a long list of advocates willing to take action when important issues arise. But when you put out the call-to-action, only a few of your 'regulars' actually responded. What's the deal?

It can be extremely frustrating and confusing when your grassroots advocacy network fails to deliver on key issues. After all, your advocates signed up voluntarily and are directly affected by the issue at hand, so they must *care* and *want* to be involved. Let's look at why they're not.

There are three main reasons why your organization's advocates aren't advocating.

- 1.) They don't know why
- 2.) They don't know how
- 3.) They don't have time

The good news is that these are easy problems to fix. Let's look a little deeper at each reason.

THEY DON'T KNOW WHY

Under this category fall a number of 'They Don't Know...'*s*. They don't know why they should care. They don't know why they should get involved. They don't know how the issue affects them directly or indirectly. They don't know why it matters. These are all simple obstacles to overcome. Your advocates just need a little background mixed with a little big-picture.

You need to let your advocates know that *all* policy and legislation has the potential to affect them in a big way. Don't butter it up for them, either. Let your advocates know exactly what is at stake for *them*. If a policy has a fiscal impact, this means less money for raises, benefits, possible layoffs. Or it could mean less funding for research, disappearing grant money, cut programs. Whatever the impact on your advocates, association membership, or membership organizations, be upfront, honest, and direct.

You also need to let your advocates know that they can't stay on the sideline and be immune from change. The government makes the rules and regulations under which we all have to live and work. If your advocates want to have a voice in how they go about their lives, or how they do their jobs, they need to be involved and advocate for *themselves*. Do your advocates like their current atmosphere? Great, be vocal against anyone trying to change 'their world.' Do your advocates *not* like their current atmosphere? Give them the power and tools to be the voice of change. A highly engaged advocate for themselves will be a highly engaged advocate for the organization.

Lastly, let your advocates know that advocacy is important because it works. Be sure to highlight past advocacy victories fighting against unpopular policies, or for legislative wins. If your organization is just getting started with advocacy, use a recent example from a similar industry or issue.

THEY DON'T KNOW HOW

Your advocates not knowing how to advocate is a big problem. But again, it's fairly easy to remedy. The biggest mistake that organizations make is assuming that their advocates feel comfortable and confident interacting with government and elected officials. The vast majority of people are hesitant to become involved in advocacy for fear of doing it incorrectly.

Few, if any, of your advocates are going to readily admit that they are uncomfortable being actively involved. It's up to you to give your advocates the tools and know-how necessary for them to become highly engaged.

Providing advocacy 'basic training' to your advocates will give them the confidence and comfort level they need to become Super Advocates. What's a Super Advocate? A Super Advocate is an advocate who has been trained and educated to proactively build relationships with their legislators, to not think twice about picking up the phone to call their legislator or to write a thoughtful and persuasive letter, and to encourage and educate those around them to do the same.

Correspondence with elected officials is the most often used form of advocacy. As such, initial advocacy training should focus on communicating with elected officials. The thought of calling a legislative office is enough to put some people into an absolute state of panic. I've had to assure, and reassure, many advocates over the years that the actual Senator or Representative would *not* be the person answering their call.

Training your advocates on how to properly address government officials, how to persuasively craft their messages, and how to properly follow-up are instrumental skills that your advocates absolutely *need*. Once your advocates know the basics and make a few calls or write a few letters, their confidence and comfort level will grow and they will be well on their way to becoming Super Advocates.

The next step is having your advocates interact directly with the legislator. Your advocates need to be educated on how to properly interact with legislators in public places, such as fundraising events or site visits. Teach your advocates how to set up office meetings with their legislators and how to plan for a successful meeting. Role playing this situation is a great way for people to loosen up and have fun while learning. Be sure to let your advocates know that office meetings don't always go according to plan, and how to respond and react to meetings being cut short or taking place in hallways.

When having first time advocates attend office meetings with legislators, it's *paramount* that they are accompanied by someone who has attended meetings in the past. Let your first timers know that it's ok for them to listen the first time if that makes them more comfortable. They will soon see that meeting with legislators is nothing to be afraid of.

Dealing with the staff of a legislator is also an extremely important topic to discuss. Legislative staff is the gatekeeper to the legislator, and probably have political aspirations themselves. Stay on their good side.

THEY DON'T HAVE TIME

Your organization's advocates have full time jobs, and it isn't being an advocate. Sure, every organization has one or two advocates that are so committed to the cause that they will drop everything to get involved. Most, however, will not.

Unless you are making advocacy action a one minute or less activity, the 'I don't have time' excuse is valid. You need to make advocacy so easy and problem free that it takes half-a-thought to accomplish the action item. You need to give your advocates absolutely *everything* that they need. If your advocates have to look up a phone number, or a web link doesn't work, then there is a good chance that your advocacy participation will go down dramatically. To be 100% clear, you need to hold your advocates' hands through the entire process.

Your advocates don't need handholding? I don't believe you. They all do. Your advocates are C-level executives and Senior VPs? They *especially* need handholding.

Executives need special attention not because they don't have the skills, but because it's imperative that they participate and they are used to things being 99% done by the time projects get to them. Executives have worked hard to get to where they are in life. They've put in the hours and the grunt work. They are now big picture people. They help initiate ideas and strategic direction, and they sign off on them once completed successfully. Think of your advocacy action item as a project completed for your boss. They review it, perhaps make a change or two, and put their signature at the bottom. They don't have time for typos, they don't have time to add information that *should* have been there before it got to their desk.

Information that should be included in *all* advocacy alerts is:

- Contact names
- Phone numbers
- E-mail addresses
- Fax numbers
- Street addresses
- Talking points
- Issue briefs/background information
- Pre-crafted message

Again, if your advocates need to hunt for any necessary information, advocacy participation drops dramatically. Not because they don't care, but because they don't have time. Don't let your advocacy alerts get pushed to the side because of poor planning. Your cause depends on it.

Ideas to Remember

To ensure your organization's grassroots advocacy network is as robust and effective as possible:

- 1.) Make sure to clue your advocates in on exactly why they are advocating. What is the direct impact to them? Remember, good or bad, they *need* to know the reasons and the possible outcomes if no action is taken.
- 2.) Give your advocates the tools and resources to be successful. Remember, it is unlikely that your advocates are going to tell you that they don't know how to advocate. Proactively train them to be Super Advocates.
- 3.) Make advocacy easy and enjoyable. Remember, your advocates have a fulltime job to focus on. Give them all the pertinent information and facts so they can quickly and effectively make their voices heard.

At the end of a grassroots advocacy initiative, be sure to follow up with your advocates. Advocates need to feel engaged through the entire process, the post-game included. Share the victory with them and be sure to let them know that it wouldn't have been possible without their efforts. If the initiative was unsuccessful, thank them for their efforts and reflect positively on the organization's teamwork. There are always other issues on the horizon on which to advocate, don't get bogged down in the past.

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