

How to Win Campaigns: 100 Steps to Success

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Introduction: How To Campaign

There are but two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the mind -

Napoleon Bonaparte

There are two forces in the world today – US military power, and world public opinion

Time Magazine, 2003

Campaigning involves a conversation with society. So campaigning is inextricably lined to communication, but it differs from the communication we do one-to-one with our friends or colleagues. Campaigning uses communication to persuade large numbers of people to act, as a matter of urgency. There is no time to stop and make friends in the usual way. Many campaign techniques are those of influencing people without having to stop and make friends first, so in this respect it's like 'PR' or Public Relations. But unlike PR, campaigning is an element of popular democracy; it creates new channels of influence for the public, in the public interest.

Advertising campaigns sell things, electoral campaigns get politicians elected but the sorts of campaigns this book is about bring neither money nor formal power. Instead, they harness the collective will and effort of a large number of people as

the engine of change for public benefit. As corporations have grown in power and trust in politicians has tumbled, campaigning has become a new public form of people's politics: non-violent wars of persuasion, waged in many a good cause.

What power and influence campaigns have, depends upon the scale and intensity of their public support. This is their source of energy and an inbuilt test of legitimacy. Generally the rich and powerful do not campaign - they do not have to. Most campaigns are a reaction against an abuse of power.

Campaigns use communication to gather support, create pressure and exert influence. For most non governmental organisations (NGOs), their only resource to secure real change is public persuasion. Business has money, government has law but campaigns have only public support. Communication is the campaigners' instrument for change, not simply a way to publicise an opinion.

I think it is important that campaigns succeed. Lives may depend upon the outcome of campaigns over access to health, medicines, clean water, or to justice. The survival of nature depends on the success of campaigns to change policies and industries that are destroying our atmosphere, oceans and forests. If campaigners for education, child rights and fairer trade are to fail, then the poorest of the poor will be condemned to a more miserable future.

Yet most campaigning does fail, and there is remarkably little effort to learn why, or to analyse and replicate the campaigns that are successful. It is good that thousands, perhaps millions of people devote their lives to campaigns, but tragic if their efforts are mostly wasted, and a scandal if that could be avoided. This book cannot provide a comprehensive plan for success but it contains some 'tools' which have a track record of helping campaigns work.

The best campaigns seem to communicate themselves. Others go down in a blaze of publicity but achieve no real change; many more struggle on in obscurity. A high failure-rate is to be expected. Campaigning is a high risk venture. In business, most new enterprises will fail. In nature, few species of wildlife reaching a new land will ever become established – most, as with campaigns, will die out.

In business or ecology though, we expect to know the reasons for success and failure. We have studies and colleges devoted to the subject. Much the same is true of politics – getting elected is not generally regarded as an accident. Yet with campaigns the reasons for success and failure are often treated as an impenetrable mystery.

Such explanations as are given often descend into glib circularities such as ‘to be effective, campaigns must communicate effectively’ or effective campaigns need to be ‘well planned, adequately resourced and engaging for the public’. This is about as useful for planning real activity and expenditure as saying that in order to be healthy, people must not get diseases – and should avoid getting ill.

Campaigners need to understand three things: their issue, how it can be changed, and how to use communication to enlist and focus the support of others. There are lots of books about issues. This one is about the tactics and strategies of campaigning and communication. Even though it is evident that most campaigning relies on communication, and some organisations excel at it, a route-map or strategic advice on how to organise it is hard to come by. Some ‘campaign manuals’¹ contain valuable advice but most tend towards details of individual communication practices or specialisms such as lobbying at international negotiations². The more recent ‘grass roots’ and direct action-

based campaign groups have produced a lot of useful websites but these too tend to be either practical (how to encase your arm in concrete) or polemical (why capitalism must be defeated).

The marketing and 'public relations' literature is large but campaigns for corporates are very different because they don't have to appeal to anyone's better nature. They rely on self-interest and normally start from the position of an insider.

It is surprising that even some voluntary campaigning organisations which rely so much on communication, don't treat it with the seriousness it deserves. Many managers and directors are prone to the belief that communication is a low-value extra, something 'handled' by the press office, while other staff are given little or no training in it. All politicians are said to be susceptible to the conceit that they are economists. The NGO equivalent is to assume that everyone can communicate. One commentator³ has put it like this:

communications is seen as "soft." While program development and practice are seen as requiring expertise and the thoughtful consideration of best practices, communications is an "anyone can do it if you have to" task. It is time to retire this thinking. Doing communications strategically requires the same investment of intellect and study that these other areas of nonprofit practice have been accorded.

Today most managers are at least dimly aware that they *ought* to have a 'communications strategy'. It's seen as good practice. Unfortunately even many campaigners also think that a communications strategy equals a media strategy. In reality using the 'media', that is press, radio, tv etc., may not be the most effective way to communicate⁴. As a consultant and campaigner for over twenty years, I've lost count of the number of directors who assess the success of

campaigns by weight of press clippings, and campaigners who are better able to tell you about how the media is covering their campaign, than what effect that campaign is having in terms of change.

The assumption that communications = media can more easily become automatic if an organisation has a specialist media department while others may not be called 'communications' even though that is mostly what they do, for example 'campaigns', 'marketing' or 'public information'.

We are all creatures of our background and training, so it's no surprise that lawyers tend to think campaigning hinges on making arguments, scientists want to progress campaigns by research, writers and academics by publishing, and teachers may believe education is how to change the world. Each can play a part in campaigns, it is true. Yet effective campaigns are usually better prosecuted by showing rather than arguing, by motivation rather than education, and by mobilisation rather than accumulation of knowledge. Doing this to order, means planning communication like a composer or film director.

There is no absolute right answer to effective communication. Communication strategy for campaigns is like chess but with your opponents changing all the time, and with rules that are a matter of opinion. My general advice is:

- Keep it short and simple
- Be visual
- Create events
- Tell stories with real people
- Be *proactive* - don't just respond
- Get your communication in the right order

- Communicate in the agenda of the outside world – don't export the internal agenda, plan, jargon or 'message'

Easy to say; harder to do.

A common pitfall is to get stuck arguing over 'messages'. It's best to avoid discussing 'your message' altogether and instead focus on the elements that are often critical to the success or failure of communication. The Context, Action, Trigger, Channel, Audience, Messenger and Programme all need to be got right (see CAMP CAT page) – discuss these and the 'message' will emerge.

Effective campaigns, and effective campaigning organisations need a structure. Composers use concertos or symphonies. Campaigners can use communication strategies. Done badly, these can be dull plans, tick-box exercises and lists of impossible aspirations. Done well they can be fun, inspiring, lyrical and useful. Campaigns should also be exciting - an adventure. Aim to conduct your campaign like opera - a political opera, painted in dramatic polarities⁵.

A communications strategy is about planning and knowing what you communicate, who to, why, what can make it effective: how to use communication instrumentally – as an instrument to make change happen. It needs mechanical inputs such as identifying particular audiences or channels but it also needs to flow from your values, the essence of your organisation and cause, from the heart as well as the head.

Communications strategies can exist at many levels. For campaign groups the three most important are:

- Organisational – ie the whole communication of the organisation

- Campaign – eg a campaign on child labour
- Project – eg around a specific EU Council decision

At a micro-level campaign communication can literally be a conversation. At organizational level it is an indirect ‘conversation’, a relationship built up over years. Your campaign communication may be carefully conceived all on its own but it will arrive as part of a compound mosaic of impressions and information received from many sources. Everything your organisation says or does, be it intended as communication or unintended, and anything said about it, will be added into the mental mix.

Maybe it includes direct engagements such as an encounter with a street money collector or a campaign team or even helping in a campaign activity. What were the people like? How were you treated? Who else was there? It all forms an impression, the result of a lot of fragments.

Impressions that count are mostly the result of events, things that happen: the equivalent of a few ‘snapshots’. We ‘make sense’ of them by filling in the ‘missing gaps’ and explaining fragments by using other information, maybe about the issue in general, or our own life experiences of life. That way we make an overall picture that adds up. Good campaigners can make deliberate use of this habit. An organisational communications strategy attempts to make that impression as effective and positive as possible. There is no complete distinction between organisational or campaign planning or strategy, and communications strategy.

So the steps to change need to determine the campaign strategy and that needs to determine the communications. Here’s a shorthand way⁶ to link communications to a campaign strategy:

Locate decision – locate the action you want to achieve. What decision do you want made, and by whom?

Identify mechanism – What mechanisms will get you the decision? What is the best way to get to the people you wish to influence?

Determine audience – Who do you need to convince/affect to get your mechanism into operation. If you do not reach the target audience, the mechanism will not operate, no matter how good the campaign materials are. Getting the mechanism to operate may require you to influence a different audience from the ultimate target.

Work back to proposition – What is the best way to motivate your audience? Tailor your original arguments/communications that you want to use for your target audience. What angle will your target audience respond best to?

Define activities and materials – knowing the decision you want; the mechanics of that decision; what will motivate your target audience – you can now decide the appropriate materials for the campaign.

This book shares practical lessons learned from successful campaigns and repeated failures, in the hope that it may help campaigns be less frustrating, more rewarding and above all, more effective.

These are mainly ‘thinking tools’: most don’t require any equipment, any qualifications, or even any money. They apply to any topic and from the scale of a one-person one-street project, up to the major campaigns of pressure groups, advocacy organisations involving hundreds of people.

Campaigning is not always a particularly polite or noble business, and some may baulk at the thought of using techniques which in some cases were developed for the darker arts of politics, war or commerce. In fact these days, campaigns are pilfered by government and business far more than the other way around. All I can say is that my sympathy lies with those who ask, 'why should the devil have all the best tunes?'⁷

¹ One of the best is the Amnesty International *Campaign Handbook*

² *The Campaigning Handbook* Mark Lattimer, Directory of Social Change

³ www.frameworksinstitute.org

⁴ Depending on the situation, many other forms of communication may be more important - for example direct communication person to person, direct from an advertisement, from your campaign group via the internet or by email direct to an individual for example.

⁵ 'Dramatic polarities of the most unsubtle kind' - journalist Simon Barnes describing the Brent Spar Campaign

⁶ We used to use this with NGO clients at Media Natura, based on a system introduced to me by John Wyatt - JohnWyatt@wyattandwyatt.com

⁷ The popular version of the story behind this saying is that the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, 'resolved to capture the hits of the day and turn them into choruses of salvation' after a visit to a revivalist meeting in a Worcester theatre in 1883. According to the Salvation Army:

There he enjoyed a song performed by converted sea captain George 'Sailor' Field - 'Bless His Name, He Sets Me Free'. He was surprised to be told afterwards that the tune was that of the popular music-hall song 'Champagne Charlie is My Name'. After reflecting on the impact it had had on the audience, the General turned to Bramwell Booth and said, famously, 'That settles it. Why should the devil have all the best tunes?' What is not so well known, however, is that he was not the first to use that phrase. Rowland Hill, an 18th-century preacher said the same a century earlier when turning 'Rule Britannia' into a sacred song which began, 'When Jesus first at Heaven's command'.

<http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/music/VictHymn.html>