

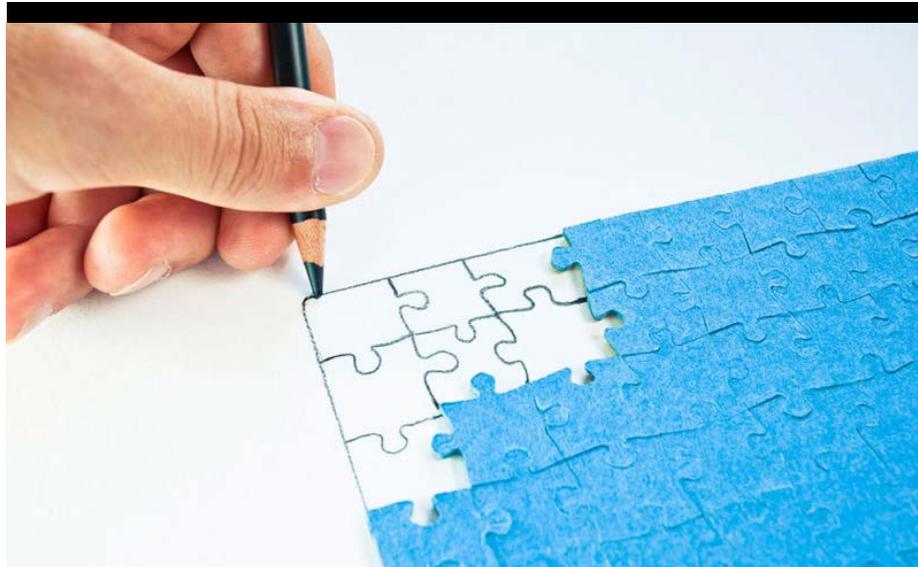
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# WHY ADVOCACY NEEDS TO MOVE BEYOND "AWARENESS"



**BY MARK ATHITAKIS / APR 3, 2017**  
(iStock/Thinkstock)

Associations are rightly enthused when their public-policy actions get some attention, but that attention means little without action. Two scholars have some ideas on how to get there.

Associations that engage in advocacy have often bemoaned their struggle to build awareness around their public-policy initiatives. So it's no surprise when an organization does a victory lap when they get some numbers showing that people are actually paying attention. Clickthroughs! Downloads! Retweets!

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Alas, solving the puzzle of building awareness means you've only solved half a puzzle. Associations need members and the general public to act on that awareness—make a phone call, write a letter, send a contribution. And organizations of all kinds can stumble when it comes to making the leap from awareness to the ask.

In a lengthy call-to-arms in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, "Stop Raising Awareness Already," University of Florida Scholars Ann Christiano and Annie Neimand write about multiple examples of nonprofit advocacy campaigns that have backfired, succeeded in unintentional ways, or simply failed. The Centers for Disease Control got a lot of eyeballs on its "Zombie Preparedness Kit," for instance, but it did little to serve its purpose of getting people to better prepare for disasters. An Australian initiative that used a catchy song to help reduce deaths on train tracks may have done just the opposite. And so on.

The authors argue that most organizations make the mistake of thinking that if people just hear about a problem, they'll automatically know what the right thing to do is—and then, unbidden, do it.

"Abundant research shows that people who are simply given more information are unlikely to change their beliefs or behavior," they write. "To move the needle on the issues we care about the most, research and experience both show that we must define actionable and achievable calls to action that will lead a specific group of people to do something they haven't done before."

*"Education and awareness do not represent influence."*

The SSIR is targeted toward charitable nonprofits, but public-policy consultant Amy Showalter of the Showalter Group sees similar issues in the association world. "Education and awareness, as beloved as they are because the sound helpful and benevolent, do not represent

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influence and thus, behavior change," she says. She also bemoans the lack of research that often accompanies association public-policy campaigns—especially beyond staff and membership.

“Messages are tested once—at the beginning of the campaign, rather than *throughout* the campaign,” she says. “Associations need to determine message acceptance, degrees of behavior change, throughout the campaign. The context changes, and people act in accordance with their environment. Would Donald Trump have been elected in 2008? Context matters.”

Christiano and Neimand prescribe a similarly focused effort on the front end of a campaign, which is built on four parts: “target your audience as narrowly as possible; create compelling messages with clear calls to action; develop a theory of change; and use the right messenger.”

The call-to-action piece is so tough, they argue, not just because it can be hard to get people to pick up a phone or open a wallet, but because they also require persuading that what they’re doing isn’t a behavior change but simply a reflection of values and interests they already have. (Even if they never expressed those values and interests ever before, which is some trick.) “It is particularly important to craft campaign messages, stories, and calls to action that do not threaten how an audience sees itself or its values,” they write. “Research into how your target audience forms opinions and who influences them will

also drive your communication strategy, directing you toward potential partnerships, messages, and stories.”

Which is why Showalter says she wishes some associations would knock it off with the trumpets-blaring announcement of their campaigns, which is equivalent to putting up a sign saying “We’re Going to Ask People to Do Something They Don’t Want to Do.”

“For maximum persuasion and behavior change, why not stop announcing your campaigns?” she asks. “I am intrigued, frustrated, and amused by organizations that announce their campaign. ‘The ABC Association announced today a campaign to spend \$10 million to defeat the latest Supreme Court nominee / onerous legislation / devastating regulation / misbehaving member of Congress. The public knows the tactics, so stop announcing what you are going to do and just go do it.’”

What does your association do to understand stakeholders’ receptiveness to a public-policy message, and how does that drive your campaigns? Share your experiences in the comments.

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Mark Athitakis, a contributing editor for Associations Now, has written on nonprofits, the arts, and leadership for a variety of publications. He is a coauthor of *The Dumbest Moments in Business History* and hopes you never qualify for the sequel. [MORE](#)

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