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4 tactics for successful grassroots persuasion backed by science

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Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decisionmakers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

Government relations professionals are paid to change minds and behaviors. When we cut through all of the "education" and "advocacy" mantras, the ultimate goal is to have your policies adopted, and that usually requires successful persuasion — converting your audience to your side.

According to the findings of our most recent Grassroots Influence Pulse ® (GRIP) research, most grassroots professionals are devoting more time and money to digital efforts. This medium is excellent for mobilizing and educating the faithful. However, from what I read in social media feeds and

hear among discussions of government relations professionals, there is the hope and/or belief, as evidenced by the online language, that this medium will also convert the uninitiated. There is new research to show what it takes to accomplish interpersonal online persuasion. It has implications for what we ask of our grassroots advocates, because sharing the "do's and don'ts" of legislative communications simply is no longer adequate in our hyper competitive political and legislative influence arena.

Go Ahead, Try and Change My Mind

Thanks to the phenomenal amount of online social interactions, interpersonal persuasion has become observable on an unprecedented scale. Researchers at Cornell University combed the website of Change My View, (CMV) an active community on Reddit. Its mission is to provide a platform where users present their own issue arguments and invite other community members to challenge those opinions. If the user posting the position (the "poster") changes his or her mind, it is publicly acknowledged.

With 211,000 subscribers to pull from, the research is interesting. This amount of activity meant that the researchers could extract a large amount of data, and allowed online persuasion to be studied without typical limitations inherent in psychological laboratory testing. They processed discussions created from January 2013 to August 2015, and saved the final four months for evaluation. The researchers incorporated controls that prevented "low effort" posts, such as those that "include only a single link with no substantial argumentation." Here's what they found, and the implications for grassroots professionals.

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1. Keys to Success – Respond Early and Often

Researchers found that the first two to post challenges to the expressed argument are three times more likely to succeed as the 10th challenge to that same argument. The researchers thought that perhaps this was due to frequent users who "practice" on the site, regardless of the posted topic. To mitigate this, the researchers smartly revised the analysis only for users that were participating for the first time on CMV. Even after controlling for user experience, an earlier entry time is still more favorable.

The bottom line: This is an apt example of the primacy and recency element of influence. We remember and are more persuaded by what we hear first and last in any given influence campaign. Translation: Speed matters. There's never a "right time" to engage online, so have your e-champions ready and equipped with appropriate arguments for your cause.

2. Beliefs Resistant to Conversion

The researchers found that some beliefs in the dataset are still resistant to change. They believe it depends on how strongly the poster holds those positions and how that person *acquired and maintained them.* Beliefs obtained through personal experience, particularly catastrophic, vivid interactions usually result in more strongly held beliefs. Often, the belief is tied to a person's self-concept, a.k.a., "It's all about me."

Also, not surprisingly, those who were resistant to persuasion expressed more decisive words like "anyone", "certain", "nothing" and superlatives and extreme adjectives like "worst" and "best".

The bottom line: Do your advocates know their audience? Are you asking them to spend time trying to persuade someone who is in the jaws of extremely strong beliefs? This can set them up for failure and burnout.

3. Evidence Matters

Although we have all internalized the "It's on the Internet, so it must be true" statement as fable, the researchers found that successful arguments consistently used more online links pointing to additional evidence that supports their position.

The bottom line: Are you equipping your supporters with credible (unbiased) evidence for your position?

Examples

I believe it's important for persuasive grassroots advocates to understand the difference between an example and a story; they are *not* the same. Successful online persuaders tend to use more words like "for example", "for instance", etc. These words can lead to narrative, but the research does not indicate whether an example was then cited or a true story was conveyed.

The bottom line: Can your advocates answer the "Give me an example?" question when engaging in issue discussions?

4. And Now, for the Bad News. . .

The researchers found that even in this forum where people are expressly charged with being open minded, in the majority of the cases, people actually did not change their minds.

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The bottom line: When you request grassroots advocates to engage online, be realistic with what you hope to achieve. Is your strategy to educate and mobilize? Or have you told them that they can change people's minds online? As we found from this research, it's extremely hard to accomplish.

To have any hope of securing online converts, following this formula is the best way to accomplish it. For maximum persuasion, however, it's all about location, location, location. Face to face communication is the prime persuasion real estate. The great communicators are not afraid to communicate face to face.