

Trying to boost your
grassroots, PAC and
lobbying strategies? Try
psychology

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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.

The ascendance of Donald Trump and the popularity of Bernie Sanders seemingly caught the political experts off guard. Regardless of what happens to their candidacies, everyone agrees that the environment has changed, and what once persuaded and motivated voters no longer works. This shouldn't be surprising.

That is because we forget the immense power of situation and context on behavior. All things being equal, context overrides typical influence tactics. There are lessons from this presidential primary season, primary among them to institute new processes that prevent the "curse of unexamined imitation"

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and adjust to the external context for your grassroots organizing, PAC fundraising and lobbying strategies. First, let's examine how we arrived at this juncture.

The Curse of Unexamined Imitation

Warren Buffett coined the term “institutional imperative” to explain why organizations mindlessly do what their peers do. I call it the “curse of unexamined imitation.”

I have observed that copying other's strategies and tactics is rampant among government relations professionals. How many times have you heard someone say that they are going to a conference to “steal ideas?” (I heard a consultant say that once and immediately felt sorry for his clients, since they ostensibly are paying for new ideas) There's nothing wrong with adapting an approach, but *adopting* is intellectually lazy and ignores the *context* of the influence challenge. Walter Lippmann said it best: “When everyone thinks alike, no one thinks.”

To address this challenge and avoid a starring role in a “Raiders of the Lost Minds” movie, we have to understand the malleability of human attitudes and behavior.

Context = Order of Information

An element of context is the order in which information is presented. We judge options and alternatives according to that order. Permit me to share an example our single readers may find of interest. Researchers asked men to rate the attractiveness of “average” looking women. They were then exposed to images of hyper-attractive models. When the men were asked to again rate

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the beauty of the average women, they rated them as much less attractive than before they saw the hyper-attractive women. The context, in this example, the order of the “information,” changed. Thus their behavior changed.

I was reminded of this during an experience with an organization that was lamenting the results of their PAC fundraising drive. They explained their messages and tactics, which all seemed appropriate for this particular audience. Then they mentioned the context—that the PAC pitch was made 15 minutes prior to a major certification exam. I suspect their PAC prospects’ minds were not quite focused on contributing personal money to a PAC. Contrast that with one of their affiliate organizations who had fundraising success via fun events that involved a combination of gemstones and alcohol. I’ll leave the rest to your imagination, but you get the idea. The context impacted the prospect’s view of the fundraising request.

Here’s how to mitigate falling into the contextual crevasse when formulating your influence campaigns.

Go Academic

In his blog post on the importance of [critical thinking](#), Armi Legge reminds us that we must integrate processes in our planning and strategy execution that provides for the “worst case scenario” and imitates an academic peer review process.

My colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads, had this to say about it: “The academic peer review process is designed to insert criticism and second-guessing into the process of getting an article published. You have to defend your research.

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It works great until all the academics share the same ideology—then, not so much.”

His emphasis on the importance of intellectual diversity in the peer review process is a [concern among academics](#) and has implications for your government relations peer review initiative. Double-blind peer review (where the reviewers’ and authors’ identities aren’t known to each other) was widely viewed as the best way to prevent discrimination.

Thus, if you incorporate a peer-review format into your campaign planning: 1) strive for diversity of background and opinion; 2) resist showing bias to those with the most organizational tenure. As I remind government relations professionals, “20 years experience” doesn’t necessarily translate to valuable insights or experience. Anyone born after 1950 has decades of experience. It’s not unique. What if those 20 years represent bad experience, with scant results or innovations? Don’t fall into the “years and years of experience” trap when evaluating feedback.

Revisit Your Processes

We think we are better (and smarter) than our context. We like to think that we rationally weigh the pros and cons of alternatives, examine the facts, and then pick the best course. We think we are not subject to “the curse of unexamined imitation.” Incorporating new review processes into your persuasion campaign planning will mitigate mistakes from improperly assessing the influence milieu.

To leverage the current context in your favor, ask yourself:

....do you execute the same strategies and tactics year after year?

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.... do you conduct regular research with your influence prospects *during* your campaign so that you catch attitude and contextual changes?

.... is a contextual analysis and / or competitive landscape analysis a part of your influence campaign planning process?

.... have you taken the “canary into the coal mine” with a peer review of your plans?

It is irrelevant what we think is the most compelling or efficacious way to convey important issues to our persuasion prospects. Voters, your PAC prospects and the grassroots you seek to energize all behave according to their situation or context. Smart government relations professionals will embrace this reality and develop practices to monitor and maximize the context in their favor.