

7 things highly successful advocacy and lobbying organizations know

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

In our last column, we shared findings from our [2016 Grassroots Influence Pulse \(GRIP®\)](#) research. Respondents were asked more than 25 questions comparing their current year lobbying activities to the previous year.

As we continue to dig into the results, we're uncovering insights with highly practical application for lobbyists and advocates. Most notably, we spent time asking about the efficacy of outreach tactics—and social media seems to fall short in building meaningful relationships with legislators. Beyond that, how government affairs professionals measure success continues to be, if not

inaccurate, incomplete. Lastly, we also identified the top tactics of advocacy groups and the most admired traits of successful advocacy organizations.

Here are seven insights from our latest analysis:

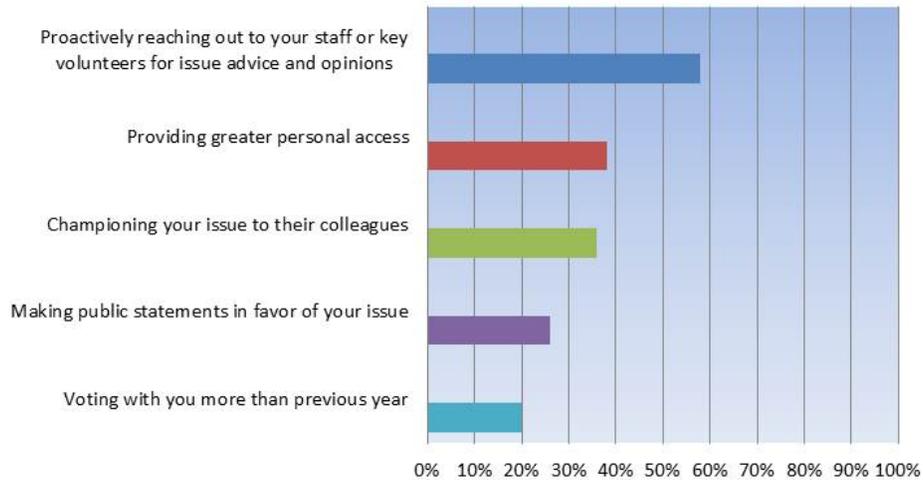
1. Legislators Respond in (Un)expected Ways to Grassroots Tactics

The ultimate grassroots influence result is behavior change of your influence prospect. We need to get their agreement “early and often.” We believe that obtaining that behavior change includes certain helpful legislator behaviors, among them:

- Voting for your organization’s position more than in previous years
- Proactively reaching out to staff or volunteers for issue advice and opinions
- Providing greater personal access / relationship development opportunities
- Championing your issues to legislative colleagues
- Making public statements in favor of your issue

As you can see below, the fourth and fifth most common activities, “making public statements in favor of your issue” and “voting with you more than the previous year” are vital grassroots results that show real progress and provide organizational stakeholder benefits. However, we found that these behaviors are practiced much less than legislators reaching out to staff or volunteers for advice and opinions.

Are your legislators displaying any of the following behaviors more frequently this year than last? Choose any that have occurred more frequently this year.



A legislators' public commitments to your cause are an extremely valuable and a worthy grassroots result. The social psychology research literature reveals that public commitments are much more difficult to renege upon, and making a public commitment actually *increases* one's adherence to a particular belief or philosophy.

We found that 50.6 percent were experiencing fewer public legislator commitments, while 4.3 percent received many more. The majority (79.9 percent) had experienced no difference in the amount of public commitments to their cause. It appears that legislators are still hedging their bets.

Again, they are seeking to reduce public exposure of their activities, which is an acknowledged persuasion tactic. Hillary Clinton said this herself in [a speech to Wall Street firms](#) where she stated that it is necessary to have a "public position and a private position on certain issues."

The bottom line: Legislators want your help and advice, that's good. They are not as generous in publicly supporting your issues, which is less encouraging. It appears many are driving on a one-way street.

Ask yourself: Are we asking legislators for their public support, which, when obtained, can be highly motivational to your stakeholders? Are you exploring ways to motivate elected officials to provide more public statements in your favor?

2. Social Media is Important, But it Produces Limited Results (For Now)

Grassroots professionals are allocating more time to producing grassroots events than in the previous year, followed by more time on social media. Facebook and Twitter use dominates the digital grassroots space. A key finding from the time investment section of our research is that, like our 2014 GRIP ® study, improved legislator relationships does not correlate with spending more time on social media.

Grassroots professionals who are spending more time on email communications are spending less time on face-to-face communication. We found that email use correlates negatively with personal meeting investment. In other words, email is being used by some groups to replace, rather than supplant, effective face to face communications. This isn't a positive trend, because increased time spent on communicating with legislators via email does not correlate with legislative success.

The bottom line: Grassroots events and social media engagement are priorities for grassroots professionals, but social media engagement, for now, does not predict improvement in legislator relationships.

Ask yourself: If improved legislator relationships are important to your organization, are you advancing strategies to make that happen?

3. Hate to Break it to You...But The Size of Your Database Does Not Predict Success

Respondents were asked whether legislators were voting with them more frequently. Of those who responded affirmatively, we found an association with these independent variables:

- Positive messages to legislators
- More time investment in face-to-face communications
- More time investment in grassroots events

What doesn't predict legislative success? It's practically an article of faith in the grassroots profession that a large database = large influence. We found that the size of an organization's grassroots database (the average database size was just over 23,000) did not predict legislative success. For now, it appears that the common "we represent over ten trillion stakeholders" doesn't increase the odds of legislative success. (And, we all know of enacted laws that benefit seemingly small interests, right?) It doesn't matter how many names are in the database, what matters is what the *people* in the data base are actually *doing*.

We also found that the amount of time spent communicating on social media was not correlated with legislative success.

The bottom line: A large database and lots of staff time spent on social media does not equal legislative success.

Ask yourself: Where does your time go? Are you focused on the behaviors that translate to achieving your priority legislative outcomes, or on activities that you think you "should" be doing?

4. You're Probably Defining Success Wrong

We believe it is extremely important to ascertain what grassroots professional deem as "success." Therefore, we wanted to find out how the term is defined, because that translates to what degree grassroots is valued in the organizational culture.

This was an open ended question, so we categorized the responses according to whether the response was a completed activity or an influence result.

We have good news and bad news. "Activity" (a.k.a. doing stuff) is still used to define success, with 54.6 percent describing it by the number of activities

undertaken. Forty-one percent (41 percent) stated that achievement, such as changed perceptions, behaviors, and thus, influence, represents success.

ACTIVITY 54.6 percent

Mobilized members

Hosting facility tours

Legislator meetings

GOTV

Relationships

Response rate

RESULTS 45.3 percent

Votes

Converts

External brand improvement

Improved latitudes of acceptance

The bottom line: There's nothing wrong with the activities above as internal benchmarks, *but they are not the result of your work.* Touting them as results isn't the kind of deep work that gets you more budget money and organizational stature.

Ask yourself: How can you start talking differently about your work so that it showcases the results, and hence value, of your contributions?

5. There are no Naturals—Advocacy Success is Highly Teachable

We asked our research participants if they conduct grassroots stakeholder training.

Twenty-one percent (21 percent) of the respondents spent “multiple” days training grassroots advocates. On the dark side, 27.5 percent spent *an hour or less* teaching advocates how to interact, communicate with and influence legislators. I'll leave you to surmise what that portends for those groups.

Of note there was an association between in-person classroom training and improved legislator relationships, which makes sense, as well-designed training should imbue the grassroots advocates with the confidence and skills to better work with lawmakers.

Of those who conduct training:

- 81.8 percent utilize classroom training

- 55.8 percent use webinars
- 27.2 percent choose online self-guided learning

The bottom line: There is an association between in-person classroom training and improved legislator relationships.

Ask yourself: If better legislator relationships are important to you, are you teaching your stakeholders how to develop those relationships?

6. Engagement Tactics Don't Vary as Much as You'd Think

What grassroots techniques are organizations using to influence regulators? This was an open ended question, with “advocate engagement” and “face to face staff and regulator meetings” being used in equal amounts. The most – utilized advocate engagement tactics were advocate meetings with regulators and advocate emails and letters to regulators.

Advocate Engagement

Staff Meetings with Regulators

Written Comments

Staff and Advocate Joint Meetings with Regulators

Developing Regulator Relationships

Coalition Membership

7. These are the Traits of the Most Admired Grassroots Organizations

The most frequently mentioned admired organizations were the AARP, the National Rifle Association, the National Association of REALTORS®, The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Medical Association. The USCC and the AMA are new to the list.

We asked an open-ended follow up question to find out why they are worthy of admiration, and categorized those characteristics as follows:

Strong Following (36 percent): Implying discipline, good followership, big numbers, well mobilized, good turn-out. Focus here is on the followers.

Effective Craft (24 percent): A good blend of outreach activities, creative, good educators, frequently in touch, effective influencers. Focus is on the organization.

Deep Resources (28 percent): Power, money, reach, formidable. Focus is on wealth and intimidation.

Noisy Engagement (6 percent): Implies passionate and loud, able to get attention, aggressive, moralistic. Focus is on “being seen and heard.”