HANDOUT

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Creating an Election Communication Strategy

This document provides a step-by-step overview for how social change nonprofits should think about approaching communication strategy in an election year. Access this handout and additional election communication resources, including a recording of the webinar training this handout is based on, at **StrategicCommunicationTools.com**.

1. Identifying Issues to Leverage in Election Season

Election years provide increased opportunity to spotlight the importance of key issues, get reporters to cover them and get elected officials to pay attention. Step 1 of an effective election communication strategy is to identify the right issue with most opportune levers on which to focus your advocacy efforts.

Key Considerations in Determining Advocacy Priorities

- Advocacy efforts during an election year should connect to your ongoing programmatic work.
- You might choose to focus on an issue because it's the right moment for change (even if the issue is not your top priority).
- Nearly every issue can have relevance during an election year.
    - In national and local elections, voters often care most about the economy.
    - Local candidates and incumbents might be more likely to pay attention to hyperlocal demands if the issue is backed by a strong coalition of organizations.
- Questions to consider:
    - Is this the right moment to bring greater visibility to your issue?
        - Is your community familiar with the issue?
        - Can you make a case for why it's more important than other issues?
    - What is taking place in the election or in your community that can help you prioritize a key issue?
        - Is there a ballot measure that you could use as a point of leverage?
        - Is there a discourse around the presidential election that you can tie to local issues?
        - Are there tight races that give you greater leverage over candidates?
        - On which issues is your voice most needed?

2. Building a Strategy

Before jumping into advocacy communication tactics such as reaching out to reporters, it's important to take a step back and build an election communication strategy around the issues you identified from Step 1. A well-crafted strategy will help maximize your advocacy communication efforts and ensure everything you do is aligned with your advocacy goals.

Key Question to Answer: What Is Your Advocacy Goal?

- For example:
    - Educate voters on candidates.
    - Educate voters on a ballot measure.
    - Hold an incumbent accountable.
    - Shift a candidate's platform.

For Each Advocacy Goal, Consider:

- Who are your audiences? What do they care about?
- How can you reach those audiences? Who do they trust?

- What approach is best suited to the type of programmatic work that you do (e.g., are you an organizer or do you provide direct services)?
- What are your organizational strengths and challenges? What resources or relationships can you leverage?
- What is going on in your community right now? Timing-wise, what do you need to know?
- What tactics have been successful in the past?

External Factors that Impact Your Tactics

- Consider the places where your issue will come up and how you can leverage those opportunities for your own advocacy:
  - Ballot measures.
  - Political platforms or track records of local, county and state candidates/representatives.
  - "High-stakes" races (with the potential to flip a legislative body).
  - National elections that impact local issues.
  - Public town halls and debates.

3. Identifying Your Audiences

With your advocacy goals in place, the next question to answer is: "Who do you really need to reach in order to achieve these goals?". Answer this question as specifically as possible to narrow down potential audiences and to help you focus your efforts. Really ask yourself who the essential primary audience is, compared to "nice-to-have" secondary audiences. During an election year, elected officials and candidates as well as their constituents and voting community members are likely to be key audiences.

Best Practices for Engaging with Candidates:

- **REMINDER: If you engage in candidate communication or education, you must make it clear that you are doing it for ALL candidates. Nonprofit groups are subject to IRS rules and CANNOT produce information for any specific campaign or candidate.**
  - **As a best practice, have information on your website available to all candidates from the start of your advocacy efforts.**
  - For additional resources provided by Alliance for Justice on IRS rules and lobbying laws for nonprofits, go to StrategicCommunicationTools.com.
- Be proactive in getting candidates to respond to what you're working on.
  - Raise your issue and opportunities for change in media coverage, town halls and social media discussion.
- Educate candidates and elected leaders.
  - Demonstrate that you have meaningful solutions for them to share as part of their own campaign platform if an issue is important to them or their constituents.
- Demonstrate to candidates that your issue matters to the community.
  - Utilize polls, anecdotes, community meetings and town halls.
- Keep in mind that your election communication is only one step in your overall strategy. The election should serve as a springboard for continuing to hold candidates accountable.
  - Include in your strategy:
    - How will you memorialize candidates' positions and promises?
    - What ongoing relationship will you have with candidates?
    - How will you continue to engage with candidates after the election?

Engaging with the Community:

- Make it easier for community members to understand which policy positions they can support.
  - Use values-based messages so community members can connect to an issue, and also understand why it matters and how to align themselves.

- Demonstrate to people who are invested in improving their community that voting iss only one way to get involved.
    - Facilitate different kinds of engagement: Offer opportunities to volunteer, subscribe or support your issues in other ways.

4. Choosing and Executing Tactics

It is important to choose tactics that are right for the audiences you're hoping to reach and your advocacy goals. Ask yourself: Where do your audiences get their information? What time constraints need to be considered? What resources do you have at your disposal? What relationships can you leverage?

Below is a list of some of the top tried and true tactical approaches you should consider for executing an election communication strategy. This is not an exhaustive list of potential tactics, and you likely won't be able to effectively implement all of them if you have limited time, capacity or resources — that's why it is crucial for organizations to think strategically about the tactics that they can realistically execute well and that will serve their advocacy goals and reach the key audiences they need to reach.

Shaping the Narrative on Your Issue

It is important to frame an issue in a way that your target audiences can understand why they should care and empathize with your position on said issue. Your narrative should appeal to and align with your target audiences' values.

- Considerations:
    - Define the narrative around your issue, or someone else will.
    - Using storytelling is the most effective way to quickly convey the problem.
    - You cannot build a narrative all at once.
- Suggestions:
    - Tie your message into existing campaign discourse.
    - Tell a clear, simple story about why your issue is a problem, who is at fault, and what could and should happen to create change.
    - Plan ahead and begin laying the groundwork to create your narrative well in advance of your advocacy communication campaign if possible. This allows you more time to collect and develop the narrative assets you need for effective advocacy such as the right messaging/framing on your issue, impact stories and communication materials.

Engaging the Media

News media can be an important gatekeeper for reaching your target audiences, and thus, can be an extremely effective messenger for your narrative to those audiences. However, you do not have control over exactly how they tell your story, so it is crucial to identify the right reporters/outlets to tell your story, understand what they care about, build relationships with them and frame your pitch to them in the right way to maximize your chances of success.

- Considerations:
    - A number of reporters are temporarily assigned to the political beat throughout the year.
    - Reporters can be subject to a rigorous set of assignments regarding what to cover.
    - Reporters receive an even greater volume of pitches.
    - There is increasingly limited space for publishing opinion pieces.
- Suggestions:
    - Build rapport with reporters.
        - Communicate with reporters continuously and outside of the election year so you have credibility.
        - Reach out to reporters to educate them on the issues they are covering.
        - Track candidates and where they stand on issues; note discrepancies.
        - Suggest questions for reporters to ask candidates.
    - Begin positioning yourself as a voice of record on public affairs programs.

- When you are struggling to break through, ask the following:
    - Should you consider co-authoring pieces with someone with a higher profile?
    - Are the reporters you are reaching out to otherwise engaged?
        - Identify reporters outside of the political beat who cover issues.
    - Is your angle or perspective unusual or unique enough?
        - Reporters are less likely to seek general "pundits" on an issue and will favor a unique perspective.
        - Reporters are often looking for the human side of issues to include in their coverage of denser policy issues. Create a story bank of impacted people that you can connect reporters to during the election.
    - Is the timing wrong?
        - Assume that all attention will be drawn toward "scandals" and pitch your story again at a better time.
        - Some candidates (in large races) designate weeks to different issues in the lead up to elections.

Joining the Social Media Conversation

Social media platforms can be effective at getting your message out far and wide, and can also be an effective way to engage with communities and highlight broad support on an issue.

- Considerations:
    - There is a proliferation of misinformation on social channels, as well as bots and trolls, especially with the rise of AI and other tools.
    - Algorithms can keep your message stuck in your "echo chamber" and keep you from engaging with other audiences.
    - Substantive conversations will be buried under more salacious news.
- Suggestions:
    - Beware of sharing false information; verify information from multiple sources before sharing.
    - Allocate a small budget to boost critical content during peak moments to break out of your bubble.
    - Users are being inundated with information; reduce your messages to infographics or short videos so they can be absorbed.

Building a Coalition

There is power in coalitions. Coalitions can be made up of multiple organizations that collectively have broader reach, support and cachet than any individual organization. Having a coalition of trusted and respected organizations united and standing behind an issue can be hugely impactful in the eyes of your target audiences.

- Considerations:
    - A diverse coalition helps demonstrate that your issue can bring together a number of stakeholders and that your collective approach has been thoroughly vetted.
- Suggestions:
    - Effective coalitions require planning and effort. Establish your coalition well-before the election cycle.
        - Identify partners who share similar goals.
        - Establish a cadence of communication.
        - Begin public outreach in advance so the coalition can be viewed as a trusted resource by voters and candidates.
    - Use your coalition to issue model policies so voters know what you think is a necessary approach to issues.
    - Jointly release nonpartisan voter guides.

Speaking Out During Public Events

Public events often have a built in audience that you can leverage to get your message out. They can sometimes be public spectacles and a good opportunity to draw attention to your issue. Oftentimes, milestone advocacy opportunities are tied to events such as public hearings or candidate debates.

- Considerations:
    - Town halls, debates and public events throughout the election season provide key moments to demonstrate how the community feels about your issue.
- Suggestions:
    - Set a calendar — keep track of town halls, hearings and public debates.
    - Activate your team and your supporters to use storytelling during events to show that your issue matters to the community.
    - Deploy supporters to events strategically to ensure a large showing of interest.
    - Extend meeting invitations to all candidates to share where the community stands and educate them about what needs to change.

Mobilizing Your Community

There are a multitude of ways to activate community members in support of your advocacy goals — it's not just limited to asking them to vote. Engaged community members can be especially effective ambassadors for your advocacy to other community members, to whom they are more likely to be seen as trusted messengers, and can greatly amplify your efforts.

- Considerations:
    - Community members are more likely to be politically engaged and paying attention.
    - Beyond taking a specific action (voting), they will be looking for further ways to engage.
    - They will be more likely to pay attention to who is creating change in their community.
- Suggestions:
    - Take advantage of this moment — increase calls-to-action to your community:
        - Put a greater effort into communicating with your supporters.
        - Amp up fundraising.
        - Provide meaningful ways to engage volunteers.
        - Make clear how your organization will carry on with your work after the election.

Driving Interest with Polling

Polling can be a powerful tactic to demonstrate to elected officials and candidates through data that an issue is important and that they should have a stance on it. Polling results can also be helpful in shaping your own advocacy approach by gaining a deeper understanding of where community members stand on an issue.

- Considerations:
    - Community polling ("Here is what residents in this area say about this issue") is a critical way to demonstrate that your issue matters.
- Suggestions:
    - Polling can be done formally and informally; it can be supplemented with storytelling to increase its impact.
    - Pitch the results of your polls to the news media to get coverage.
    - Publicly call on candidates and policymakers to provide answers to the community and acknowledge the results of your polling.
    - Provide clear solutions that candidates can consider adopting.