

Mobilising grass roots support

Introduction

Organisations that want to influence public policy often believe that they need, in some way, to mobilise the 'grass roots' in order to demonstrate to policy makers that not only is the issue important but also that it is supported by a large number of people – and more people means more credibility. This is not always true – and can sometimes be counter-productive – but there are certainly occasions when 'people power' can be a valuable asset to your campaign. Lobbying is just another form of marketing – communicating a clear and compelling message that drives people to action. It may be that mobilising grass roots support should be part of the mix. This factsheet is intended to help you think about ways in which you can mobilise your members in a way that will make your campaign more effective.

What is grass roots mobilisation?

Mobilisation describes the means by which an organisation urges its members or supporters to lobby Ministers, Parliamentarians and other policy makers and policy influencers and encourage them to support or oppose a policy proposal. BMOs may first seek to promote their policy preferences internally and then use the organisation's members to communicate with politicians and policy makers.

Grass roots campaigns tend to relate to large, national public issues which impact on many people; the resolution of more technical and detailed issues may be better suited to direct and private advocacy. BMOs need to think carefully whether to engage in a grass roots campaign; if they do, they should not be undertaken simply as ends in themselves, but rather as a way of supplementing and reinforcing more traditional 'insider' lobbying strategies.

Success with grass roots mobilisation

Successful mobilisation of members can bring two advantages to a lobby campaign – weight of opinion and credibility. Always remember that quality is more important than quantity. Politicians know that there are few issues on which substantial numbers of voters will spontaneously make their views known; most grass roots campaigns are seen by politicians as the result of an organisation mobilising its members. So it is important that it is the individual voter's genuine view and how the proposed policy might relate to their own situation that is communicated.

A grass roots campaign should be targeted at a limited number of crucial decision makers. On any issue, there will be some policy makers who already hold strong opinions and a grass roots campaign aimed at these people is either unnecessary or counter-productive. So target those who might be swayed. This will mean that research is required to come to a view regarding the specific people to target. If you have been engaged in public private dialogue, it is likely that you will already know who holds what views and the likelihood of changing them.

A grass roots campaign in which an organisation asks its members to write to their political representatives may serve to demonstrate the weight of opinion, but be less effective in actually influencing public policy than a more focused campaign. Well organised groups send out 'Action Alerts' informing members of issues and of events; they briefly spell out the organisation's arguments and its position and ask

the members to communicate that view to local politicians. If there is a major event coming up, such as a bill being debated in Parliament, there is merit in staggering efforts so that some members lobby policy makers today, some tomorrow and some the day after etc. That provides the sense that their contact is spontaneous, but also means that politicians are likely to keep on talking about the issue.

A popular method of grass roots lobbying in the US and UK is bringing people to the legislature to meet their local politicians. This can also ensure that Parliamentarians understand specific sectors – if there is not already a back bench Parliamentary Committee, consider offering to host the secretariat in order to launch one.

The media can be both helpful and unhelpful. If an issue is already in the public domain, then consider using the media but if it is not yet public, you may want to hold you fire so as not to embarrass the very people whose minds you are hoping to change. You could issue a press release, but you could also start a letter writing campaign or you could seek to place a ‘think piece’ or maybe even encourage the editor to write an editorial about the specific issue and its implications.

Ask your members who they already know in Government. Many are likely to know someone who works at the relevant Ministry; some may know an MP or even a Minister. Use these contacts – at least to open doors. It is not a replacement for good research and a compelling case, but any shortcuts to the opportunity to make your case should be exploited.

A summary of tactics

This list is not intended to be comprehensive, but may give you a few ideas for ways in which you can involve your grass roots:

- Lobbying: usually lobbying is undertaken by the board or staff of the organisation, but there is no reason to exclude the members. Ensure that they have a briefing note outlining the arguments and your position.
- Letter writing: has already been mentioned. Don't use pre-printed letters or postcards, which have little effect; rather, give members the key arguments and let them write their own letters, ideally reflecting their own situation.
- Petitions: can demonstrate weight of opinion, but only if you get enough people to sign; can give people other than members a chance to make their views known, but there needs to be evidence that the people signing really did sign.
- Rallies and Marches: these need considerable organisational ability and effort as they never occur spontaneously. Again, they can demonstrate massive support, but if only a few people turn up, then they will send the opposite message.
- Internet: you should have a website devoted to your campaign, not least because this is a powerful way of communicating with your supporters
Public meetings: are a good way to encourage the discussion of ideas and to promote exposure to a diversity of opinions.
- Direct Action: such as lying down in the path of the bulldozer or going on strike or staging an occupation. This approach often attracts media attention but is confrontational and will probably involve some risk. Direct action is often counter-productive.
- Non-participation: can be a powerful advocacy tool and includes activities such as the boycott, not voting, not paying tax (or not paying the proportion of tax that goes towards the thing to which you are objecting).

Acknowledgement

This fact sheet draws on material from McGrath, C. (2004), *Grass roots lobbying: Marketing politics and policy beyond the beltway*, delivered at a conference on 'Elections on the Horizon: Marketing Politics to the Electorate in the USA and UK', British Library. (see sherpa.bl.uk/1/01/PMMcgrath.pdf)

Further reading

See www.worldcoalition.org/modules/wfdownloads/visit.php?cid=34&lid=66 for an example of a broad based coalition and a grass roots mobilisation kit.