

Communications as a Strategic Tool for Affordable Housing Campaigns

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Winning a Public Vote for Local Housing Trust Fund Campaign
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Why integrate strategic communications in a housing campaign? Because as you embark on any public campaign – whether to change public opinion or to influence government officials – winning should be the focus of your efforts. A well-crafted strategic communications plan can shape a winning campaign. A strategic communications plan can help you answer the most important question: what do we need to do to win?

The First Step

Before developing a communications strategy, a campaign effort requires a clear, well-defined goal. The three case studies offer good examples:

- The Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio's campaign was to persuade the legislature to create a dedicated source of funds for the Ohio Housing Trust Fund.
- Housing LA's campaign set out to establish a housing trust fund for the city.
- The Housing Development Consortium's (HDC) campaign aimed to pass a property tax to fund affordable housing in Seattle.

Once the goal is established, a strategic communications plan will help set the campaign in motion.

The Plan for the Plan

Every good communications plan, in one way or another, develops strategies within the framework of the 5M's:

Market – who you are trying to reach

Message – what you are saying

Messenger – who is delivering the message

Medium – how you are spreading the message

Materials – print and electronic pieces that carry your message

The Market

To whom are you talking and why? Know your audience. If you're trying to pass something that requires a public vote, you have many audiences. Research, especially polling, can help determine whom to target.

Generally, your audiences fall into these categories:

- People already on your side.
- People who should be on your side. (This is a pragmatic analysis, not a moral one.)
- People who don't want to come anywhere near you.

Almost always, your target audience is enmeshed with other important audiences. Legislators, city council people or other elected officials are influenced by business people, labor organizations, top donors, community leaders and, of course, voters. If the campaign is pursuing a legislative outcome, all these audiences become your targets. The key is developing the best strategic approach to the audience.

Case Study Examples

Each organization reached beyond its usual base of support to broaden its coalition and influence in many of these constituencies.

- The LA group used an election as an effective tool to achieve their goal. Their direct targets were candidates for mayor and city council. Their indirect targets were the people who influenced the candidates, including the press.
- In Seattle, HDC partnered with the Master Builders Association, the Association of Realtors and the Washington State Housing Finance Commission. These partners helped HDC broaden its message so that its target audience – the voting public – would understand what affordable housing looks like, who lives there and why it's needed.
- In addition to targeting business leaders, local political leaders and developers in key legislative districts, the Ohio group understood that a key target market – legislators who had opposed the trust fund in the past – was a group with whom they had few relationships or insights on the best messages to persuade them.

For many housing or human services campaigns, not enough energy is spent influencing the folks who should be on your side but just don't know it yet. To get to these people you need to make your case.

The Message

After defining your target audiences, the key is to identify the messages that will shape their actions. Most people don't think about affordable housing as much or in the same way as you do. Tailored, well-researched messages make the difference. Moving away

from “it’s the right thing to do” (moral; what one ought to do) to “how does this benefit me” (pragmatic; self-interested) is the most important shift to make.

It’s not about what moves you to action. It’s about what moves *them*. Find it out. Understand it. Speak it. Develop messages that speak to the practical values held by your target audience: elected officials want votes, builders want a profit, the politically conservative want accountability, etc. The purpose of the message is to *deliver people*, not information (voters, public officials, opponents).

Finally, once you’ve crafted the most powerful messages, use them. Make sure everyone on your team uses them. Stay on message and don’t get seduced into other explanations, defenses or anecdotes. Stay on message.

Case study examples:

- In Seattle, the messages were not about the moral imperative for housing; instead, the messages helped define the need in real terms – the impact on people who live around those unable to afford a place to live. Thus, the “Housing our Community – Working Together to Build a Better Quality of Life” was a message that resonated with voters.
- In Ohio, the focus was pragmatic and quantitative. The campaign talked about how private investment had been leveraged, who and how many people benefited and how additional dollars would transform both urban and rural communities.

Basic message tips:

- **Be Clear:** Do not use jargon.
- **Be Concise:** Keep it simple and allow your audience to choose the level of detail.
- Your message should be **Connected:** Choose a message based on the interests of your audience, rather than what you think they should know.
- Your message should be **Credible:** be prepared to back it up and choose the right messenger.
- A message that is clear, concise, credible and connected will be **Compelling:** make sure you tell your audience what you want them to do.
- Your message should be **Consistent:** on average, a message must be repeated five to seven times before it sticks.

The Messenger

Most often, the best messenger is the person who looks like the target audience. This is especially true for a campaign aimed at a public vote. People want to take care of others who are like them. And people tend to be sentimental with favored groups: kids, seniors and animals. Exploit this sentiment to your advantage; use them as messengers.

When it comes to influencing public officials, don’t underestimate the power of third-party “validators.” Most officials know where you stand – if you’re an advocate, a

provider or a housing developer, they know what's in it for you. What they want to know is, who else cares? Broaden your coalition so that you have unexpected, powerful messengers from all community sectors.

Case Study Examples

- In LA and Ohio, the campaign provided tours to their target audiences. In LA, the tours included visiting neighborhood slums as well as model affordable housing. In Ohio, the tours demonstrated how successful the fund was at providing solid affordable housing. Both campaigns used the tours to connect to an important messenger – a real face, family and neighborhood.
- In Seattle, the campaign used their messengers – seniors, homeless people and working families with children – as a strategic campaign element. Polling indicated that these messengers would persuade voters.

The Medium/Materials

The medium you choose to deliver your message, whether a TV interview, a newspaper article, an on-line newsletter or a community presentation, should be based on its suitability to your audience and your message.

The press is a powerful medium that can influence the outcome of a campaign. A cheap and effective tool is earned media. Elected officials and their staff pay a lot of attention to op-eds, editorials and letters to the editor. So should you. Get your messages and messengers in the paper's most influential location.

Paid media connects you to the millions of people who are not easily swayed by print media. If you've got the cash or connections, make paid media work for you.

Good materials present your key messages in a way that's accessible to your target audiences. There are lots of options: brochures, newsletters, information packets, web sites. Use as many as you can, but the key is making sure the materials are fully integrated with the campaign's messages and objectives. Consider the following questions:

- Does the piece convey the key messages?
- Is the information geared to the target audience?
- Have you avoided jargon?
- Have you personalize the content by using a quote?

Case Examples

- All the campaigns delivered their messages through the media. In Seattle, earned media was combined with a savvy, well-scripted paid media effort.
- In Ohio and LA, positive press coverage and tours were used to influence key decision makers.