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Considerations at the Intersection

Community Organizing and Strategic Communications

In our work with hundreds of community groups across the country, we at the SPIN Project have begun to observe a common set of questions emerging for organizers embarking on and evaluating communications efforts. These are vital strategic questions with serious political implications, and the goal of this piece is to identify these strategic choices so they are made consciously and deliberately. Communications is often a vehicle for surfacing some of the toughest choices in organizing campaigns, and we hope to lay out those considerations here to enable front-end deliberation and planning.

At the SPIN Project, our goal is to assist community organizing groups in using all the tools available to help get to the win. We believe that communications can help you achieve concrete changes that improve people's lives. We believe the time is now for grassroots groups to boldly engage the press to communicate our values and frame our issues. Strategic, aggressive,

planned and proactive public relations can make a difference in reframing debate and achieving our political, social and cultural goals.

We believe that a well designed, gracefully executed communications effort can till the soil to create ideal conditions for organizing success. Strategic communications can plant ideas in the minds of constituents and potential allies. If the issue has been covered well in the paper or the 6 o'clock news, organizers are much more likely to find success at the door. The reverse also holds true, ideally resulting in a complimentary relationship between communications and traditional organizing. Communications can also shape the organizing environment by altering the political dialog among decision-makers. If a journalist comes knocking on your target's door with specific questions about the issue, it can shape the context and terms of the debate.

In our experience, the following questions regularly arise for longtime community organizers beginning to utilize communications tools to support their organizing goals. This list is by no means exhaustive and we invite feedback to help us better address these considerations.

Please send feedback to info@spinproject.org.

And/Or

Are communications and organizing separate tasks? Can a communications strategy ever exist without an organizing strategy, and vice-versa?

In the twenty-first century, communications and organizing are inextricably intertwined. Organizers have known for a long time that one of their main tasks is to engineer strategic choices about who says what to whom and when. Communicators face essentially the same task. In a way, the main difference between communicators and organizers lies in the tools they use. Organizers specialize in one-on-one interactions, while communicators tend to focus on one-to-many interactions. While communicators can create economies of scale as they move the message toward mass audiences, nothing can replace the quality of the interaction created by the organizer. Organizers can address the hunger for community and belonging – which is in part created by what people see and hear in the media, and the sheer volume of information coming at them in the digital age. A good offensive needs to employ both methods – high volume communications to shape the campaign environment and high touch interactions to help develop deep personal commitments to our issues.

Strategy Development

Or, Which comes first, the organizing plan or the communication strategy?

Many community organizers are concerned that communications will hijack their organizing. They fear that appealing to mainstream media will necessarily water down their messages. They worry that integrating communications into their goals will lead to a campaign aimed at the media rather than the people. It doesn't have to be that way. In a well-thought-out community organizing process, both

communications and organizing must always serve your basic strategic goals.

The organizing should drive the strategy, but communications should always have a place at the planning and decision-making table to help guide the strategic choices of the effort. True, messages may differ according to audience. It's often not effective to talk to the news media the same way you talk to your base, and vice-versa. This is just another case of knowing what to say to whom, and when. When designing strategy, the practice of communications brings organizers some distinct advantages. First, communications can sometimes drive much speedier change than traditional organizing. We're not suggesting that everyone rely on communications as the "magic bullet" of social change, but there are times where a well-placed Op Ed or TV evening news story can affect your target more quickly than a community mobilization. But of course these speedy strikes must be driven by the broader strategy and rooted in your organizing goals.

The second advantage of communications is that it can help organizers sharpen their abilities to preach beyond the choir. In base-driven organizing we focus on what's good for us and our community – and we primarily speak to our community. The practice of strategic communications demands that we communicate to decision-makers or the people who influence them—and these are often people outside our base. Communication can broaden our outlook, break us out of that base-focused point of view and force us to link our issues to other constituencies and communities. Mainstream communications is a tool to link the interests of the base to the interests of those beyond the base.

Campaign Messengers

Communicators and organizers constantly wrestle with the question, Who is the face and voice of the campaign? For communicators, this question becomes, Who should be the spokesperson?

Many organizers fear that a PR-based approach to social action will result in prominent roles for spokespersons who do not represent the base or, if they are from the base, who speak in a way that is not authentic to the base. In a good communications effort, spokespersons are selected from the base and from

other strategic populations. They may not all always speak the language of the base (though they often will), but they always serve its interests.

These are tough questions for many campaigns. But we know that the difficult questions are often the most worthwhile – and we think one of the most difficult and worthwhile questions in organizing is “What are the best strategies to identify and select spokespeople in a way that both builds leadership and moves the issue politically?”

Generally, we recommend that you at least train spokespeople from each of the following categories – though there may be other important voices for your campaign:

Organizational leadership – You need someone who can be the official voice of the organization. Sometimes that’s the Executive Director or the board chair. No matter who takes the role, you need to have someone who is authorized to speak for the organization.

Your base – Sometimes it’s disastrous to have a talking head Executive Director on camera; an impassioned unpaid activist speaking from their own experience with the issue has far more potential to make for a compelling interview. In fact, some organizations have a policy that staff members never speak on the record to the press, and save that job for members. Training your base in spokesperson skills enhances their understanding of the strategy, develops their leadership skills and ultimately builds power for those who often do not have it.

Allies – Spokespeople need not be campaign leaders or even members of the organization. In fact, it’s often better if they come from outside the organization. Think creatively about the voices who ring true with your targets, and who can bring a new angle to the issue. Sometimes you need to borrow credibility from your friends in the early stages of the campaign. Identify and leverage the trusted sources in your community – doctors, small business leaders, seniors and others who can open your issue up to new audiences.

The Base and Beyond

How do you balance the messages that work with the base and the messages that will move audiences beyond our base?

A central tenet of communications is, “tailor your message to your target audience.” A central tenet of organizing is, “speak to people where they’re at.” These are essentially same principle, yet the divide over messaging can become one of the toughest questions in campaign planning. Out of respect for the base, organizers often want to use only messages that resonate with them. Yes, it is vital that we remain true to the analysis and voice of our constituents. But base driven messaging can sometimes result in messages that only work with the base, and the truth is that the people with the power to grant our demands will often be put off –and certainly not moved to action – by the messages that resonate with the base.

As we craft messages that are driven by the analysis and voice of the base, it is vital that we constantly evaluate our work from the perspective of the target and the broader audiences we are trying to move to action. So the planning question must evolve from “What do we want to say?” to “How can we say what we have to say in a way that people can hear?” Ultimately, we believe that the way to respect one’s base is to build power and win real and concrete change – and we believe that messages that work at the base and beyond are one of the most powerful tools organizers have to help achieve those wins.

Capacity

How do we successfully implement communications given our limited capacity and the demands on our resources? How much capacity is required to effectively communicate beyond the base? And why invest those resources in communications instead of putting them into base organizing?

If your organization doesn’t focus significant resources on communications, you may be missing out on an important strategic opportunity. Hiring communications talent can make the organizer’s job easier (by planting ideas on the ground and helping to shape the public opinion context for the work) and therefore help the organization to be more effective.

At the SPIN Project, we recommend that organizations invest in a communications staff position, money for communications materials, media databases and

other communications expenses. If you think you don't have the resources to do this, then consider converting an existing staff position to a communications position. Or use some of your resources to write a communications-specific grant. Contact your funders to see if they fund communications. Be creative about how you include communications in program funding requests. Many foundations expect communications to be written into your budget, and some even use it as an evaluation criteria for proposals. In fact, we overheard one foundation officer suggest that if a program did not devote 30% of its resources to communications, that it was not a viable change strategy in the media age.

The critical question is this: Would you make more progress if you had the communications capacity to support the organizing work? Ultimately, we don't believe that this is an either/or investment – rather that investing in communications makes the organizing more effective, as it builds power and credibility for the organization and its work.

Reframing Your Issue and Base

How much of our political and organizational capital should we devote to shape the way the media talks about our base and issue?

Part of an organizer's work is to reshape people's very identities: to help them rethink their relationship to power in society and to help them redefine their voice and their role in their communities. And of course we know that what our constituents see and hear in the media also plays a huge role in the construction of identity. We tell one story, but the news tells our communities something very different about themselves and the issues they face.

Modern organizers can and must employ communications to elevate the status of their base and the understanding of their issue in the media. Part of the vital work of building power for those who do not have it is to redefine the way these issues and constituencies are covered in the press. If community advocates aren't vigilant in addressing how the media frames race and poverty, who will be?

That said, reframing is an enormous undertaking and no organization will accomplish it alone. It should, however, be an ongoing task on which community

organizers cooperate across issues and then integrate into all communications work. This is a case where slow but deliberate progress is utterly necessary.

Race and Class

Which do you lead with?

The media climate has been largely hostile to low-income and people of color communities. Organizers must find ways to lead with a racial justice message that includes a role for allies and progressives who can speak to policies that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, because ultimately racial justice is necessary if we are to achieve economic equality in America. And vice versa. It's a case of both/and – because if economic justice is your primary goal, it's not going to happen with people of color suffering from disproportionate levels of poverty, hunger and unemployment.

Of course this is a question that ties directly to messaging. Your base may have a very clear racial analysis on the issue, but your target may or may not be ready to hear that analysis. Here are some sad but true facts about Americans' views on race, with thanks to Frank Gilliam at the UCLA Center for Communications and Community:

- ▶ Race and discrimination are viewed as old debates that have been solved; it is neither legal nor acceptable to discriminate based on race.
- ▶ When skin color does matter, it is more likely to be seen as providing an advantage to minorities, i.e. preferences in hiring or college admission, federal dollars to minority schools, contracting set-asides.
- ▶ If there are disparities between blacks and whites, it is not due to skin color. Instead it is viewed as being related to poverty, family, community, or values.

If that's where folks are, that may be where we have to start. Organizers reading this article want to speak the truth lived every day by their constituents, want to speak from the heart of their own experience, want to share their analysis of society. And we want to win. Over the long haul it may mean that we have to balance and alternate between those competing desires, while purposefully opening up a space to discuss how

institutionalized racism harms all of us, and the ways in which everyone benefits from a more equitable society.

Legitimacy

How will we maintain legitimacy in the eyes of our base when working with mainstream media? Shouldn't we focus on the ethnic and community media that our base uses and trusts?

The answer — as it often is — is both/and. Speak to your base via outlets they consider legitimate. Address your other targets via the media they trust, often mainstream or trade media.

Our communities cannot afford to be further marginalized — we have a responsibility to keep the issues important to our communities in front of the mainstream media. Involve your base in media work and remember that ultimately a strategic media hit will only serve to further legitimize your work to your base and the broader community.

Coalitions

How can a coalition communicate in a unified way? Will more moderate coalition allies water down our message? Are coalitions just superficial alliances to build power, or can they build deeper political partnerships as well?

As all organizers know, coalitions are essential to real change, but their politics can be tricky. This dilemma extends to communications. Many organizers are wary that communicating with a coalition will necessarily weaken their message. This does not have to be the case.

There are many available strategies in coalition communications. Certainly one is to develop a unified, common-ground message agreed upon by everyone in the coalition. But let's face it, messages created by everyone often please no one.

Another strategy might be for different members of a coalition to communicate a similar core message, but in ways that feel authentic to them. Often it is useful for a coalition to contain member organizations that politically align far to the left, because those less moderate groups can freely voice concerns that more moderate groups may not be able to speak to. If eve-

ryone has a role to play in a coalition and they can play that role comfortably and authentically, the coalition can lead to deeper alliances.

Conclusion

We hope these questions will spark a conversation in your organizations and coalitions, and we hope our suggestions will help you wrestle with the creative tensions inherent in social change work. And most of all, we hope that as organizers, you come to view strategic communications as a complement to, and a vital part of, your work. We look forward to continuing this discussion with you, and to serving as a resource for you in your work.

A shorter version of this article originally appeared in the Summer 2005 issue of Social Policy, a publication of The American Institute for Social Justice and the ACORN Institute.