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# NOW HEAR THIS

The 9 Laws of Successful Advocacy Communications

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# INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago, the former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Andrew Cuomo, spoke to a group of nonprofits and progressive organizations assembled together on the eve of the 2001 Presidential Inaugural. He said something that struck a particular chord in me: “Compassion and competency equal success.”

Most of the work we do to improve the lives of others and the lives of generations to come is born of our compassion and stubborn hope that, if we just keep at it, we will make a difference. We will protect our natural resources. We will guarantee in practice that everyone has equal protection under the law. We will not let American children die in poverty. We will help the millions in far away places conquer the raging killer, AIDS.

But our persistent hoping and sometimes aimless grinding away, and yes, our compassion, are only good for so much. Ultimately, we are effective only when we are competent — when we buy or develop the right skills for a job, think creatively, focus resources, exploit opportunity and come out of our world long enough to listen to the people in the worlds we want to talk to. The change we seek will elude us forever if we do not bring the right skills and the right strategy to bear on the problems we so desperately wish to solve.

This report, written by Kristen Wolf of FENTON Communications, is about competence — and really, common sense in communications. Communication is not an end. It can be a powerful means to changing hearts and minds and changing votes. We live in the information age and negotiating our time and place in history requires good communications.

The “no nonsense” voices of communications professionals and advocates for social change, who were crucial in helping to develop “Now Hear This,” challenge us to hold fast to our compassion and dedicate ourselves to competence.

— Maggie Williams

Nonprofit organizations are at work on issues of critical social importance.

To succeed, they face the challenge of trying to educate, motivate and mobilize a public that is too often stressed out, overextended, even apathetic. This process has never been easy, but now it is harder than ever. Even interested and well-meaning people are cynical, confused and difficult to reach. Public opinion is not easily moved. People hear more “noise” than ever and they tune out far more than they tune in.

This document is not intended as a blueprint for creating communications campaigns, but offers a way of thinking about campaigns from a strategic marketing and communications perspective.

Good communication cuts through the clutter, it doesn't add to it. It does this by getting the right message, in the right medium, delivered by the right messengers, to the right audience.

People working in the nonprofit world sometimes have trouble adopting a marketing mindset, but in the end, the goal is for people to “buy” our ideas — ideas for a better world. That means we need to find or create willing consumers. And we can't simply hit them over the head. Browbeating is rarely a successful sales technique.

From a marketing perspective, when nonprofits conduct communications campaigns they have assets:

- They have tremendous public trust.
- They have credibility.
- They work on inspiring issues that by their very nature garner attention.
- They have a strong record.

**“Nonprofits are experts on the issues that affect all of us, but are not always experts on the best way to communicate what they know. They have staff who believe, who care, and who are really passionate about what they do. They just need to learn how to harness that enthusiasm.”**

— Candy Cox, DDB

They also face challenges:

- Sometimes they go from being right to being righteous, losing supporters along the way.
- They often want to win the battle and the war in one step, when history tells us this is not the way it works. They have to be committed for the long-term.
- They often build campaigns and initiatives on assumptions — not tested, well-honed strategies
- They sometimes think the issues are too complex for simple, concise messages.

In preparing this report, we searched for common denominators that helped to define the most successful campaigns — as well as the Achilles’ heel of some failures.

**“It’s not only about being righteous, it’s about being righteous and smart.”**

— Bobby Muller, Co-founder,  
International Campaign to Ban Landmines

One conclusion: there are three **must haves** for any successful campaign:

- 1 Clear, measurable goals.
- 2 Extensive knowledge of whom you are trying to reach and what moves them.
- 3 Compelling messages that connect with your target audience.

We all know this, yet too often we move forward on campaigns without using these three criteria as our guide. How do we ensure these three core components are at the center of the campaign?

- 4 Start with systematic planning that is reviewed and then revised.
- 5 Specify for people what to do, how to do it, and why.
- 6 Make the case for why action is needed now.
- 7 Match strategy and tactics to target audiences.
- 8 Budget for success.
- 9 Rely on experts when needed.

What follows is a closer look at these common denominators, along with words of wisdom from some exceptional communicators from the nonprofit sector.

# 1. Clear goals, measurable progress.



The International Campaign to Ban Landmines made their goal simple: Ban them. So far 111 countries have ratified the 1997 treaty banning landmines.

**“People start from the wrong place and have the wrong goal. Ask yourself: what behavior do you want to achieve and by what degree. Is it doable...?”**

— Bill Novelli, AARP

Winning campaigns have clear, measurable goals. Ban landmines. Secure a federal management plan for North Atlantic swordfish (Give Swordfish a Break). Decrease litter on Texas highways (Don't Mess with Texas). Decrease incidents of drunk driving (Don't Drink and Drive). These are clear goals. A communications program can be put in place to support such goals.

We can measure our progress toward achieving these goals. How many countries have signed a treaty to ban landmines? How many chefs have said they won't serve swordfish until a fisheries management plan is in place? How much have we saved in Texas highway maintenance fees because fewer people are throwing trash out the windows of their cars? Are drunk driving related accidents going down?

Many organizations were talking about the problem of landmines, and the toll they were taking on humans,

especially children, around the world. But no one had articulated a plan of action. Bobby Muller, who co-founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, was sitting in his office one night and said, “Why don't we just ban the goddamn things.” He just articulated his goal — so clearly that everyone understood what the International Campaign to Ban Landmines was out to do.

According to Bill Novelli of AARP, picking the wrong goal is one of the mistakes nonprofits repeat the most. “Too often, people create an elegant plan around the wrong premise or the wrong goal.”

“A successful campaign, no matter how we define it, has got to begin with very clear, realistic, measurable goals,” says Barbara Beck of the Pew Charitable Trusts. “Campaign goals that are not explicit and realistic are very hard to evaluate. You've got to evaluate so you can see where you've made mistakes. You need to know where the holes are. That's how we move forward.”

Jon Haber of Fleishman-Hillard reminds us that goals need to come before everything else, especially in coalition politics. “Is your goal to have a pure coalition of people you agree with or is your goal to save the trees? If your goal is to save trees, let's figure out how to do that, and it might mean picking up people who are not normally politically on our side, but will help us win.”

**“You can never really say what you've accomplished, or whether you've accomplished anything at all, unless you have very specific and quantifiable goals against which you can measure your effect.”**

— Carl Safina, National Audubon Society

## 2. Audience identification and segmentation.



**"Give Swordfish a Break" successfully reached key gatekeepers in the seafood industry.**

**"Today's social marketplace is increasingly crowded and competitive. Targeting and segmentation are crucial to breaking through and having the edge to persuade."**

**— Celinda Lake, Lake Snell Perry and Associates, Inc.**

There's an old saying in advertising: If you want to sell to fish, don't use skywriting. Fish don't read. People often spend a lot of time figuring out exactly what to say, without a lot of consideration of to whom it should be said.

Don't say you are trying to reach "the general public." While this might be true in a very broad sense, the more pertinent fact is that you need to persuade the small group of people who can actually change things. The trick is to find out who those five, 50 or 5,000 people are.

Consider the "Give Swordfish a Break" campaign. The goal was to get a strong fishery management plan in place. The U.S. Secretary of Commerce, who oversees the National Marine Fisheries Service, is responsible for fishery planning. How does one put pressure on the Secretary? A group could get masses of U.S. consumers

to agree not to eat the fish, but that would take a long time. Action was needed within two years. It takes a lot of money to get to individual consumers one at a time.

Who makes decisions about food for consumers? Chefs, among others. SeaWeb and the Natural Resources Defense Council, the groups behind the "Give Swordfish a Break" campaign, targeted chefs as the second most important audience for their campaign (the Secretary of Commerce being most important). And they didn't need every chef in the country, they needed famous chefs, the trendsetters, the ones who regularly appear in the media. The audience target has been refined from massive to manageable, e.g., from the general public to famous chefs. Now the campaign can create messages, materials and outreach programs to reach this very specific audience. This was much easier, and a far more strategic thing to do, than trying to reach the general public. In the end, "Give Swordfish a Break" had more than 750 chefs not serving swordfish. This captured the attention of the press, and, ultimately, of the Secretary of Commerce.

Once you know who to reach, you need to figure out how to reach them. You must assess their belief system and find common ground. "We have to study our target audiences and find out what we can say that will make them change their behavior," notes AARP's Bill Novelli. In Texas, they had a litter problem. When GSD&M, the ad company hired to develop a campaign to decrease litter on the Texas highways, conducted research to find out who was responsible for the majority of litter, they identified their target audience: Young men 15-24 years old. Once they knew who they needed to reach, they created a theme and position that resonated with this group — being cool and macho. GSD&M made it uncool to litter. Andy Goodman, a communications consultant to foundations and public interest groups, notes that when guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn uttered four magical words "Don't Mess With Texas," within 12 months, litter decreased statewide by an astonishing 29 percent.

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) wanted to reduce teenage pregnancy rates. Their target: Teens. They could have made the mistake that Bill Novelli says nonprofits often make — starting with messages that appeal to them, as opposed to developing messages that actually resonate with the target audience. We may be inclined to tell teens to abstain from sex for moral reasons or that teen pregnancy often leads to poverty, but these messages may not be nearly as effective in preventing teen pregnancy as developing messages that are credible and have an immediate relevance to teens' lives. For example, as CDF did, tell them about the serious negative consequences sex has on a teen's lifestyle, like how they look or what parties they can't go to. This they can believe.

CDF took this approach and disseminated these kinds of messages. The one message that tested best with the teens featured a close-up picture of a pregnant stomach with the words "If You're Embarrassed By a Pimple, Try Explaining This."

CDF staff personally preferred some of the other ad concepts created for this campaign. There was one that said, "It's like being grounded for 18 years." The visual is a young woman holding an infant. But when CDF tested their concepts in front of teens, teens themselves connected most with the "pimple" concept. The target audience is the most important critic of your message and approach. It is essential to go with what is most effective in reaching your key audience, not what most appeals to those within your organization.

Vikki Spruill of SeaWeb thinks we need to pay more attention to the target audiences' beliefs and attitudes. "We think we are the audience. We don't pay enough attention to who the ultimate audience is. We don't assess where they are on a certain issue so that we can be more sophisticated in our messages to them. Nonprofits don't listen to the audience and they don't pay attention to how the audience perceives the

problem. If anything, they are condescending about what the audience doesn't know."

Remember: It is easier to motivate someone around something they already believe than to convince them of something new.

Media wizard Tony Schwartz has written about "responsive chords" — plucking a value in your audience with your issue. Good persuasion, according to Schwartz, doesn't tell people anything new; it reminds them of something they already know. The "Don't Mess With Texas" campaign had nothing to do with litter and everything to do with being a Texan. The goal was to associate the idea (cleaning up litter) with something the target audience (Texans) already believed (being from Texas is special).

Identifying your audience's key values will help you persuade them initially. You will also have an idea where your effort may be vulnerable to messages from your opponents. This will enable you to prevent, preempt or defeat those attacks.

Think strategically about your audience and the best ways to reach them. Only then can you create effective messages.

Whenever you think: "The fact that I am right should be enough," think about the nerd at the frat party, who, around midnight, starts warning people about toxicity levels in beer.



### 3. Clear, simple, concise messages.



The "Don't Mess With Texas" campaign tapped directly into Texans' macho pride to get young Texan males to stop littering.

**"We realized our audience was 15-24 year old males and that 'crying Indians' were not going to appeal to them."**

**— Judy Trabulsi, GSD&M**

Clear goals and measurable steps toward them are supported by simple, concise messages that resonate with target audiences. And that resonance is important. Making an emotional connection that touches a pre-existing belief turns passive support into action.

Messages are designed to achieve goals. A winning message takes into account what will work with the audience to build support. This does not mean restating your goals. It means making your case in a way that will be compelling to your target audiences. According to Billy Shore of Share Our Strength, "Nonprofits suffer from literal sclerosis. They are so literal about everything that they don't translate things into language that people can understand."

"Everybody else in communications makes big bold claims for things that they don't really know. 'The best part of waking up is Folger's in your cup.' Is that really the best part of waking up?"

Some nonprofits would argue this last question for weeks, hold a summit on it, and then decide they couldn't make the claim without more documentation. They would stick to outlining the numerous physical and psychological benefits of caffeine ingestion when trying to get going in the morning, buttressed by data and charts.

One method sells coffee. The other puts people to sleep.

Let's go back to litter in Texas. As we said in section 2, this was a problem. In 1987, \$2 million in tax revenues went to pick up trash, and that cost was escalating 15-20 percent every year. Yet by 1997, trash on Texas highways was down 76 percent.

How did this happen? Andy Goodman asserts that the "Don't Mess With Texas" campaign is a case in point of how important the right message can be. The goal of the anti-litter campaign was to protect the environment and save taxpayer dollars. However, the litterbug population, 15-24 year old men, was indifferent to messages about scenic beauty and oblivious to the costs of cleaning up the roadsides. Clearly restating the goal of the campaign was not going to work.

GSD&M, the agency charged with developing a campaign to decrease litter, did not assume that a) littering is bad, b) everyone knows it, and therefore, c) Texas Department of Transportation simply needs a creative way to tell people to stop littering. GSD&M's research showed the public didn't care about litter. As Andy Goodman notes, "Once GSD&M identified they needed to reach 15-24 year old males, they were able to come up with a compelling message: Don't Mess With Texas. If they would have had Stevie Ray Vaughn saying 'Come on, everybody. Let's put litter in its place!' it's doubtful if anybody would be writing about this campaign. But when Stevie uttered those magical four words, he tapped into something deep in the heart of every Texan: state pride."

The message “Don’t Mess With Texas,” which didn’t sound anything like the goal, “Keep Texas beautiful and save tax dollars” did the trick because it persuaded the target audience to take the action needed in a way they understood and that resonated with them.

Messages need to be “spot on” from the get-go. “Once you’ve defined the playing field, the game is over,” says Jon Haber. “If it’s birds vs. jobs, you’re dead. You lose. If it’s corporate greed versus protecting the forests, that’s good. We should be going after companies that pay off their junk bonds by razing forests. That’s a winning message.”

Another good example comes from Michael Shellenberger of Communication Works. “We are developing a campaign plan to stop the expansion of the San Francisco airport’s runways because it will require paving up to two miles of the Bay and destroying wildlife habitat. The airport is justifying the expansion by promising fewer flight delays. So first we have to go after the airlines for over-scheduling flights — a major reason for the delays — and then we’ll propose alternatives like a better radar system. It may be that we’ll talk about the impact of noise pollution before we talk about habitat destruction. That’s where people are at.”

Shellenberger continues, “A lot of nonprofits want to speak the whole truth to power. Once the whole truth is known then everyone will follow — so the thinking goes. Advocates need to identify wedge issues and specific messages that capture the public’s attention if they are to succeed.”

The point is: Create messages that help you meet your goal.

Chris DeCardy of Environmental Media Services says nonprofit professionals often have a hard time doing this: “There is a great TV episode of The Simpsons where Homer gets Marge a bowling ball for her birthday that

has the name ‘Homer’ engraved on it. This is what environmentalists do all the time. We try to give bowling balls to people who don’t bowl. It wastes time and money. If you know the people you need to reach and know what they like, give it to them. The great thing about the environment is that it’s all around us and means different things to different people. If we weren’t so hung up on winning for ‘our’ reasons, we’d be smarter about listening to everyone else’s reasons and appealing to them.”

Some people still balk at tailoring their messages to their target audience. They want to win campaigns, but they want to win them with arguments that are complex, hard to follow, and highly nuanced. In other words, they want to win based on their own knowledge and beliefs. “Inevitably the messages will be too detailed and not persuasive to the target audience,” says Jon Haber.

No one likes to be preached to or talked at. As Judy Trabulsi says, “A non-preachy message has a better chance of cutting through.” Candy Cox of DDB agrees, “Nonprofits spend a lot of time telling people that they should do things. Most of us do very little simply because we should. Rather the message from consumers is often ‘tell me how I can have everything I want and still feel good about myself.’ ”

Motivating messages need to hit an emotional chord. People are busy. They resist change. In order to get their attention and support for change, you have to connect with people by plugging into their belief system, not trying to rewire it.

In other words, you need to capture hearts first, then minds. Every imaginable gimmick has been employed by commercial marketers to raise what Malcolm Gladwell calls ‘the stickiness factor’, a way to involve the consumer more effectively by linking emotional experience to purchases.



The nonprofit community can be seduced by the complexity of issues, losing their audience in scientific ambiguities. It isn't necessary to be inaccurate or to dumb down issues. But it's essential to engage peoples' passion, whether the issue is the environment, their children's health or social justice. You need to reach people emotionally first, and only then educate them. Hearts first, then minds.

Messages also need to distinguish you from the opposition. "Nonprofits are often too soft," says Jon Haber. "They tend to see the world as good versus evil. The problem is that reporters, elected officials and others see the world as light gray versus dark grey. The key therefore is to use your messaging as a way to distinguish yourself from the opposition — and to do so in a factual, non-inflammatory way and in a manner that your audience will understand and accept."

"Nonprofits forget that Americans experience sophisticated, high-quality messaging all the time," says Candy Cox of DDB. "They're used to it and they expect it. If you create something that isn't high quality, it's not likely to grab people's attention. It may be a perfectly good message, but if people aren't listening, it will do nothing to advance a cause."

**"People start from the wrong premise: 'if the public only knew the truth, they'd do the right thing.'"**

**— Alan Metrick, Natural Resources Defense Council**

## 4. Planning.



The less money you have, the more you need to plan.

**“The laziest thing people do is go right to tactics.”**

**— Jon Haber, Fleishman-Hillard**

We all know it pays to plan before executing a big campaign. But let’s define “good” planning.

1. Spend time and money planning. Plan for the best-case and worst-case scenarios. Look at the issue from every angle. Understand the problem backwards and forwards. Review potential solutions. Who are your allies in pushing a specific solution? Who are your enemies?

It does cost money to plan, but thorough planning means clearer goals, more concise messages, the right target audiences and a road map leading to success.

2. Think strategy before moving to tactics. Jon Haber of Fleishman-Hillard says “the laziest thing people do is go right to tactics.” A press breakfast is a tactic. You have to start with what you are trying to get done, who can get it done for you, what you have to tell them and who has to tell them to persuade them.

3. Pursue communications activities that move you closer to your goal. As you put together the elements of your marketing/communications campaign, ask yourself with each strategic and tactical choice: does this move me closer to my stated goal? If not, don’t do it.
4. Find your niche. There are a lot of campaigns out there; how is yours adding to the landscape? Assess what others are doing. Review who is doing what in research, advocacy and legislative efforts; identify gaps and duplication. Figure out what you can do that adds value.
5. Base every campaign on research — not assumptions. For example: When the federal government launched its “Just Say No” campaign, no one did the simple research to learn that teens trusted their peers more than anyone else. One of the last people they would listen to was Nancy Reagan, and certainly not Nancy Reagan telling them what they should do. TheTruth.com didn’t make the same mistake to get teens to say no to tobacco. They wanted to develop a campaign that resonated with kids, so they asked them. In the end, they decided to let kids do the whole thing. The moral: Test your ideas before going forward.
6. Pre-test. Nonprofits often have limited budgets, making it critical that every communications dollar be spent wisely. This can lead nonprofits to “skip” pretesting. Unfortunately this increases the chances that the goal, messages or target audiences are wrong; and instead of finding out early when you can still change strategies and tactics, you only find out after spending \$95,000 on a full-page ad in *The New York Times*.  
  
Pre-testing actually saves time and money. Pre-tests need not be prohibitively expensive. If you can’t afford focus groups and a national poll, simply take

your messages directly out to your audience. Troll a shopping mall and show people creative materials with your draft messages. Ask them for feedback. They will give you a reality check.

7. Be flexible. According to SeaWeb's Vikki Spruill, "Communications is 90 percent opportunistic." Long-term campaigns encounter obstacles and moments of serendipity. Your campaign needs to be adaptable enough to overcome hurdles and leverage opportunities as they occur. If the environment changes, rethink your plan.
8. Keep planning. Like a book, campaigns have a beginning, middle and end. Plan for everything. Most energy and resources are usually spent on the launch. The middle is often when creative thinking is needed most to make sure the campaign doesn't sputter out. And the end is the legacy. Too often we declare victory and leave the field before the game is over. Have a strategy to ensure that the public education effort was viewed as important and lasting, and that the work we initiated moves forward. Preserving the legacy of the campaign often involves partners.

This isn't an ego thing; it's rear guard protection. Take, for example, guns. Anti-gun advocates have made enormous strides to get stringent gun safety laws in place, but many go unenforced. The pro-gun activists say these laws are a failure. If gun control advocates don't set the record straight, the criticism is adopted by the media and then by politicians. It becomes accepted wisdom. An exit strategy is just as important as a launch.

9. Review and revise. When your campaign gets funded, there is good news and bad news. The good news is, you have money. The bad news is, you often are given money to do a very specific campaign in a very specific way. This creates a disincentive to

review strategies and plans. Yet, when you wrote that budget at midnight for a five-city television buy, you may have had too many cups of coffee. Or those messages you developed at an internal staff meeting were actually a flop with the soccer moms at the mall ...you know, the ones we have to motivate to create social change. Sometimes a slight modification is in order; other times, a complete overhaul is needed. Either way, build expectations with funders and partners that provide for changes once you're underway. And it is important to ask ourselves every day: is this working? Are we moving closer to our goal? If the answer is not a resounding "Yes!" go back to the drawing board.

In the end, funders want successful campaigns. The only way to ensure success is to continually review and revise based on new developments, not the first draft of the communications plan.

10. Secure funding that fits your needs. When the President of the United States suddenly makes your issue "the issue of the week," be in a position to leverage this. Get funding that is flexible enough to give you leeway to deal with huge unforeseen obstacles and leverage unimaginable opportunities. After ingenuity, money is the most important ingredient for successful rapid-response communications. Build flexibility into your grant requests. Make deals where money will come sooner if you hit certain goals early.
11. Measure success. Everyone involved with your campaign will want to know: "How are you doing?" This means funders, mobilized constituents, even your family. Have benchmarks in place to answer this question. Send out frequent reports. Tell interested parties how you are achieving your goals every week. These are your stakeholders; just like in a business, you want to show that you are meeting and exceeding expectations.

"There's confusion about outputs and outcomes. People are not evaluating outcomes and not changing their resources in order to affect outcomes. They are instead measuring campaigning by outputs, but this doesn't actually deliver the results," says Chris Rose, a former Greenpeace campaign director.

**"Hope, as in 'here's hoping it works,' is not a sound communications strategy."**

**— Maggie Williams**

**"It is necessary, but not sufficient, to know what you want to say. You also have to know how your audience hears your words and responds to your images. So you survey how different audiences understand your message when you use different approaches. After you discover the most convincing way of stating your message, you can safely spend serious money actually delivering the message."**

**— Denis Hayes, Bullitt Foundation**

## 5. Specify what people should do.



People were told to race for the cure and they did. The Sudden Infant Death campaign told parents to put their babies on their backs.

**"Your dry cleaner closes at seven. The earth will eventually fall into the sun. We panic about the first, but the second will be forgotten before you finish this page."**

**— Peter Loge, The Justice Project**

You've done your planning right, created messages that work for your target audience and you have their attention. Now what? They have the facts; they know something needs to be done. They are willing to help. Now is NOT the time to give vague instructions: "Stop Global Warming." "Save Our Oceans." "Justice For All." People have no idea how to do this.

**"People aren't mind-readers; don't ask them to be."**

**— Maggie Williams**

But "Race for the Cure"? That's doable. If you can run or walk, if you don't mind asking friends and acquaintances for money, you will help conquer breast cancer. It's just

like "Don't drink and drive." Short, sweet and easy to understand.

To decide what you want people to do, you need to determine several things, among them:

1. Are you asking for a one-time behavior change or a long-term commitment to a new way of life?
2. Are you talking to a willing audience or a skeptical one?

The campaign to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome had to get out one important message: put sleeping babies on their backs. The audience (concerned parents) was very willing to do whatever was necessary to prevent crib death.

Similarly, the Ask campaign run by PAX had one simple suggestion for parents: Before sending your child to play, ask neighbors or friends whether they have a gun in their home, and if so, whether it is stored properly. Again, a willing audience and a simple "ask."

Recycling, however is a more complex "ask." People have to separate their trash, put out recycling on different days and follow instructions about what can and can't be recycled. Cities have to provide curbside pick up. In this case, the "ask" was still simple and concise: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." The target audience was less willing to consider these behavioral changes than the parents for the SIDS campaign or the gun control campaign.

Before designing a campaign, ask yourself: How many things do you want the audience to do, which is most important, and what comes first? Bill Novelli advises people to start with what you want to achieve. Then define the steps to get there.

Our world is really complex and we often feel as though we have little control over it. Consider this from Peter Loge of The Justice Project, "Your dry-cleaner closes at

seven. The earth will eventually fall into the sun. We panic about the first, and the second will be forgotten before you finish this page. This is true for several reasons: If you don't pick up the dry cleaning, you'll run out of clothes; picking up the dry cleaning is doable — stopping the "earth's collapse" is not. There is a timeliness issue with the dry cleaning — by seven today. A specific consequence of failure — wearing your old "Van Halen" tour t-shirt to a client meeting. There's a reward — a pressed and lightly starched shirt. And your action will solve the problem — drive down the block, write a check, get clothes. Effective campaigns work the same way."

Another example: At an Eddie Bauer store, there's a sign asking you to give a dollar to plant a tree. The sign doesn't say, "The global environment is being threatened, so do something — here's hoping it works!" By making a specific request in response to a specific problem and providing a specific solution, Eddie Bauer is successful. Don't make people guess or jump over hurdles. Give them bite-size doable tasks that, when finished, help you build the support necessary to achieve your objective.



## 6. Make the case: action needed now.



Larry Bohlen bought 10 kinds of taco shells and tested for presence of bio-engineered corn. Positive results put Larry and the issue center stage.

**"For so many issues, we use the campaign to force the issue, force a dialogue for a debate that otherwise wouldn't occur."**

**— Vikki Spruill, SeaWeb**

There is a lot of noise out there. Forget about competing against eBay and Amazon.com. There is also a lot of "social issue noise" out there. An overload of noise leads to fatigue; people simply want to tune out.

You may think: "But this issue of homelessness is really important." And it is. But people have been homeless for a long time. People have been starving for a long time. Lands are polluted, nations are ravaged and human atrocities occur every day. Why is today the day to look at your issue? What is special?

Effective campaigns are built on decision points, real or manufactured. Maybe legislation is possible now or an international conference is addressing the issue soon or some event has made your issue timely. Tell people why now.

Vikki Spruill insists that if there aren't milestones, you

have to create your own. "For so many issues, we use the campaign to force the issue, force a dialogue for a debate that otherwise wouldn't occur."

Friends of the Earth wanted to capture the public's attention about bioengineered corn. Although not approved for human consumption, there was concern it could find its way into food. FOE kept saying this COULD happen. They wanted to dramatize the fact that current government regulations are utterly inadequate. They had no hook, since the FDA had no plans to alter its position about bioengineered corn being used in food.

That is, not until Friends of the Earth's Health and Environment Director Larry Bohlen visited a half-dozen supermarkets, bought 10 kinds of taco shells and sent them to a testing lab in Iowa. Sure enough, two of the samples contained bioengineered corn that had been approved only for animal feed. The story hit the headlines and stayed there for weeks. Now Bohlen had the public's attention. He could have waited for someone else to force the issue, but with a lot of ingenuity and a little cash, he was able to get his message heard.

Drama helps. "Nonprofits are incredibly literal. They don't make the translation from the difference between the what and the so what. The nonprofits tell you what they've done. Fed this many people. Built this many trucks. They don't get to the 'so what.' The need to legitimately dramatize what I think is the real power of what we do. We change people's lives. There are millions of people watching which ad exec will survive on Survivor, as opposed to which kids are going to survive in Anacostia next week. That's the really dramatic story," says Billy Shore.

The public wants to know what to do, how to do it and why now. Answer the question by highlighting one of the upcoming decision points.

Brainstorm possible developments that might push your issue into the spotlight. Check the legislative calendar. Look for state action. Think of related lawsuits, anniversaries, and big announcements. If there aren't any, think like Larry Bohlen and get creative.

**"Nonprofits often don't understand the difference between the 'What' and the 'So What.' "**

**— Billy Shore, Share Our Strength**

## 7. Match strategy and tactics to your target audience.



Your audience listens to those they trust. Teens didn't trust Nancy Reagan, but kids do trust their peers.

**"I get discouraged when I hear that part of the strategy calls for 'the cover of the New York Times Magazine.' You need to focus not just on your headlines, but what the impact is going to be."**

**— Barbara Beck, Pew Charitable Trusts**

You've thought about the goal, the audiences and the message. You've done your planning and pre-testing. Now you will pick how to reach your audience: What strategies and tactics will you employ?

Your first instinct: Earned media. It's cheap. Your staff calls reporters. The articles will help you change the world. Hold a press conference and all will be well.

If only this were true. Too often, we go for the "tried and true" rather than think about who we are trying to reach and how best to do it. Maybe it's a letter. Perhaps chalking the sidewalk in front of their house. Think of all the ways to reach the people you need, then decide which best fits your resources and goals. It may be earned media. It may be a bullhorn.

"There is a sort of 'Rule of Three' that applies to getting someone to act on a cause you believe in," says Chris DeCardy of Environmental Media Services. "If they hear about it once, they may ignore it. If they hear about it from another source, they may stop and think. If they hear about it one more time, they may actually do something. Our goal should be to figure out as many ways as possible to reach our target audience."

"They should read about us in the paper, see us on TV, hear about us from a neighbor and a friend at a soccer match, have their kid mention us from school, read about us on the Internet, get a postcard about us in the mail, see us in skywriting and so on. There are a million ways to reach the 'Rule of Three' but it takes discipline to think of them and to make sure each avenue really does connect to our target person. If older Americans don't watch music videos, then an endorsement by a band on BET is useless."

"A mistake we make is finding one thing that works really well and simply applying it all over the place. In a basketball game, if you find a play that works, you stick with it until the defense stops you. In our work, the rules of the game are rarely the same twice. And if you focus on just one way of reaching people — 'I know, let's send an editorial board mailing' — you limit your chance to get your message in front of the same person from many different directions. You fail at the 'Rule of Three'."

David Fenton, Chairman of FENTON Communications, agrees: "A major goal of any communication campaign must be to achieve frequent repetition of a message in a short period of time. People only learn by repetition — campaigns should be planned and structured to achieve it. A one-shot news event is usually of only limited value, but when backed by other newsworthy events (legal, Congressional, direct action, celebrity involvement, etc.), and direct contact with the public (through advertising, the Internet, and grassroots action), much more power is achieved for your goal. Also, politicians respond to a

story in direct proportion to how often it repeats — a one day story has limited political clout, a two day story much more. By the third day committees are being formed and announcements prepared.”

“Paradoxically, while people learn from repetition, the culture of the media is structured against it. It takes careful creative planning to overcome the media’s reticence to report anything that isn’t ‘new.’”

To break through the noise and get your target’s attention: Think differently, try something new. If you have limited resources, this is even more important. The Natural Resources Defense Counsel (NRDC) wanted to get the Giant Sequoias of California designated a national monument. They could have taken out a *New York Times* ad to get the Clinton Administration’s attention. Instead they decided to motivate influential Californians who were most likely to support their efforts to send letters, emails and faxes to Clinton urging him to act.

Their chosen tactic (with Underground Advertising’s help): Buy the biggest billboard in the U.S. to save the largest trees on earth. They hung vertical banners on a building on a major corner of Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles with attention-getting taglines: “Nobody says let’s go to California and see the largest stumps on earth.” They also went for a Hollywood appeal — “Around here when you make it big, everyone wants to take you down.” The effort generated tremendous local media attention and lots of website traffic. In August, Clinton declared the Sequoias a national monument.

Think different. There is so much fog out there already that doing the same old stuff often won’t cut it.

“It’s about calculated risk,” says Chris DeCardy: “Wall Street understands smart risks and diversifying tactics. In an investment portfolio, you mix stocks with high risk and return with those of lower risk and return. You know

the high flyers may not hit, but when they do you get a big reward. Too often, we act without thinking through the risks. If we do think them through, we shy away from those that may fail. A lot of foundations have guidelines that reinforce this cautious approach. The problem is that if we avoid risks — even smart risks — every time, we miss the big opportunities. Failing shouldn’t be seen as a negative, as long as the effort was well thought out.”

There are many strategies and tactics you can consider when deciding the best way to get messages to your target audience. Below are a few to consider:

### **Picking messengers**

When researching the messages your audience will find persuasive, you also need to know who your audience trusts. “The American public listens to people, not organizations,” says Denis Hayes of the Bullitt Foundation.

Hayes also says in many cases, lack of an effective messenger is the big hole in a campaign. “If you ask people to name a consumer advocate, they say Nader. If you say, ‘name a feminist leader,’ they say Steinem. If you say, ‘name a civil rights leader,’ they say Jackson. But ask them to name an environmental leader... Not having a well-known spokesperson limits the effectiveness of our communications. You have to have somebody who takes command of the issue.”

Find the *best* spokespeople to raise the profile of your issue. If you want to bring an issue into the mainstream, use mainstream spokespeople. “When AIDS was an issue defined by perceived extremists,” Hayes says, “marketers and advertisers had a tough time getting behind it. When it became a cultural issue to everyone, when entertainers and the media got involved and spoke out, all of a sudden companies, foundations, everyone started jumping on the bandwagon to support AIDS related charities.”

Messengers can also be used strategically to thwart the opposition. The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids used children as spokespeople. Kids were compelling on this issue; they were also a tough target for the tobacco companies to attack. In many ways, CFTFK inoculated its messages from attack by having kids say the messages. The same messages coming from adult advocates, lawyers, etc., likely would not have had the same impact.

### **Considering both “earned” and “paid” media**

Whether to advertise or rely on “earned media” is often a question. Both are important vehicles to consider when disseminating messages. Earned media is often cheaper, but harder to control. Your message can take a real beating when it goes through a reporter, editor or producer. Also, “earning” the coverage is sometimes impossible; your issue just isn’t getting the attention it needs. When considering earned media, always think about the downside. What can go wrong? Once the media has characterized you, it is difficult to recover. The front-page article that denounces you as “on the fringe” has more impact than the correction several days later on the inside. Advertising can be quite costly, but you get exactly what you pay for. You get to say what you want, but you still need to think about the audience reading it. Will they read a text-laden ad? Do they care if many allied groups are signed on? Coalitions often are challenged to produce effective ads while still meeting the needs of the coalition. Remember the audience. If it isn’t the heads of the coalition you are trying to persuade, then using them as your focus group is a mistake. Have someone outside, who doesn’t know the internal politics, write the ad for the intended audience.

### **Getting interactive**

People receive information differently in the age of the Internet. The first place many people look is the web. It’s a new and different beast. To communicate effectively with target audiences, we have to know how to reach them online. Be familiar with tactics like viral marketing.

The interactive component is key. Consumers expect tailored, easy to read, eye-catching information in this format. It’s not as simple as digitizing a brochure.

### **Using experiential approaches**

Sometimes our issues become stagnant. It happens. The stream is still polluted, racism is still a problem, but there’s nothing new. Consider an experiential approach. The Virginia Cooperative Extension put this idea into practice with great success. Low-income people face all sorts of obstacles in daily life — a reality that the higher-income majority may realize but never experience. This organization puts on a realistic welfare simulation program, designed to give participants an idea of what the typical low-income family experiences. What was initiated as a one-time program has now been implemented 60 times throughout the state with a total of more than 3,000 participants. Past participants, drawn from churches, health and social services departments and volunteer groups, report higher awareness of poverty issues and an increased interest in lending a hand in their communities.

### **Branding**

Branding — associating a cause or goal with an organization or person and imbedding that combined image into the public’s brain — is today’s hot communications buzzword. Is it right for your organization or cause? As a strategy, branding should undergo the same scrutiny as any other strategy or tactic because branding, like everything else, is not a communications panacea. There are several types of branding to consider.

Organizational branding. There are good institutional reasons to brand an organization: To reach membership goals, increase credibility among policymakers and simplify messaging, among others. Organizational branding usually takes tremendous resources. Only do organizational branding if it clearly will contribute to the

organization's objectives. Greenpeace uses its brand to draw attention to issues it deems important. Companies worry when they hear "Greenpeace is on site." It works for Greenpeace, but it may not work with your organization.

Issue branding. There is also issue branding, where an organization or coalition frames a specific issue. In the early 90s several groups decided to "brand" breast cancer. They wanted to set it apart from other cancers and make it the disease of the decade. They did it 1) to raise awareness about the prevalence of the disease to improve prevention — get mammograms, do monthly breast exams, 2) to raise its profile and generate new funds for research, and 3) to make the point that this disease affects everyone — countless women and their families. The raised profile benefited many groups and helped to achieve their goals.

Behavior/lifestyle branding. TheTruth.com, a campaign developed by Crispin, Porter and Bogusky, aimed to convince kids to stay away from tobacco. Faced with the fact that the coolness of smoking is a higher priority than health risks, CP&B focused less on teen mortality and more on the fact that teens were victims of manipulation and duplicity by a callous older generation. Teens, upon hearing that tobacco and advertising industries were colluding to cavalierly take teens' money and abuse their bodies in return for billions in profit, got mad. This anger provided the key to a new brand: "The Truth." The campaign effectively unveiled a new (and evil) oppressor and made the rejection of cigarettes a hip way to strike back.

**"There is a downside to creating advertising by coalition or committee. Group gropes invariably result in muffled, mediocre messages."**

**— Art Silverman, FENTON Communications**



## 8. Budget for success.



Budget realistically, fundraise vigorously, and don't start a campaign you can't afford to see through to a successful finish.

**"Unrealistic goals that try to change entrenched attitudes are really difficult if you are not going to throw a boatload of money at it. You have to have a lot of resources."**

**— Barbara Peck, Pew Charitable Trusts**

Money may not be the root of all evil, but a shortage of money is nearly always a recipe for failure. Budget realistically, fundraise vigorously and don't start a campaign you can't afford to see through to a successful finish.

Spend part of your resources on planning and testing. If you don't plan right, you will waste money on untested assumptions. R&D is rarely a waste of money. It is smart to plan for ways to best use your resources.

Candy Cox of DDB says, "A planning budget needs to be inversely proportional to the budget for the campaign. Small budgets often tempt project managers to reduce or even eliminate planning, unintentionally placing the success of the effort at risk. A small budget requires laser-like targeting and strategy and cannot afford anything else."

The campaign takes off beyond anyone's wildest dreams. The response from the target audience is overwhelming. Problem is, there's no budget for wild success, just regular success. If possible, make deals with a funder to have a "reserve" of money to kick in if things go better than expected — more people want to get involved and the opportunities are greater than anticipated. When opportunity knocks, it is not the time to be writing fundraising proposals.

Keep an open line of communication. Generally, funders know that everything will not go 100 percent as planned. Keep them in the loop. Usually, they would rather know the "real deal" and hear about changing circumstances than keep the project on a track that leads to defeat.

Success often means more money. Plan for it. Success brings opportunities that weren't possible at the start of the campaign.

Benchmark. If you are spending money to create impact, show what that impact is.

Tap corporate partners, when possible; they bring a lot to the table. Billy Shore of Share our Strength found this out when he joined forces with American Express for the "Charge Against Hunger." Over three years, Amex spent close to \$40 million branding this annual Share Our Strength event. Amex got glory; SOS got \$40 million worth of exposure.

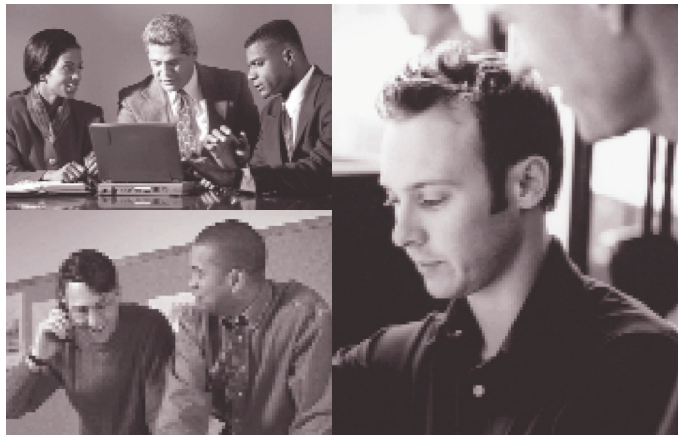
Work with allies to enhance efforts and leverage resources. If one group has a great report that supports another organization's goal, combine resources to disseminate it. It is more cost-efficient to use existing research and spend pooled resources promoting it, than it is to fund new, duplicative research, just so the information is proprietary. The Justice Project found out that Professor James Liebman of Columbia University's School of Law had a report coming out about the error rate in death penalty trials. This research would help

The Justice Project's efforts to pass federal legislation to reduce mistakes in capital trials that lead to innocent people wrongly sentenced to die. They agreed to fund the dissemination of this report and spent significant resources promoting a report that didn't have their name on it. Liebman got the exposure and The Justice Project raised their profile as a valuable resource to the media, moving their cause forward.

**"A planning budget needs to be inversely proportional to the budget for the campaign... A small budget requires laser-like targeting and strategy and cannot afford anything else."**

**— Candy Cox, DDB**

## 9. Bring in the experts.



Rely on people who have the core competency to do communications really well.

**“When you are working on really important issues, use all the firepower you can get your hands on.”**

**— Ken Cook, Environmental Working Group**

Some people reflexively think they have to do everything themselves rather than relying on people who have the core competency to do communications really well.

The nonprofit world brainwashes people to believe they don't have access to these kinds of resources. Billy Shore gave this example: “An unnamed university brought together 12-14 brain scientists to spend a morning presenting research on cognition, nutrition and early childhood development. These were the smartest people you've ever heard. Then they spent the afternoon talking about how to communicate their research results, but they don't know anything about that. They know how to do brain research. Their conversation about communications was at the level of ‘let's have a bake sale.’ It's a real problem.”

Effective communications is a key component of a successful social change campaign. It has value just like fundraising, grassroots organizing, and lobbying. If you want to communicate effectively with target audiences, hire strong communications counsel either in-house or out-of-house.

This doesn't necessarily mean hiring a firm with a big retainer. Find a board member, a friend, somebody that looks at issues from a marketing and communications perspective and get their advice. Ken Cook of the Environmental Working Group notes, “I find people who eat, live and breathe communications to be valuable and useful. It provokes me to consider methods not always readily apparent on first blush.”

“Americans in France are convinced that if they simply say it LOUDER and s-l-o-w-e-r they will get directions to EuroDisney. It doesn't work,” says Peter Loge of The Justice Project. “Policy experts make the same mistake—details about Medicare Part B don't make sense at any volume. Smart tourists hire experts—guides—to translate for them. Smart nonprofits do the same. They bring in communications experts to bridge the gap between policy details and public motivation.”

## Conclusion

The key to creating and implementing successful advocacy communications efforts is to honor the process. Make sure you account for all nine components when contemplating communications activities to support your goals. Use the checklist below.

If we go through this rigorous process, campaigns will be stronger and we will meet the common goal of running incredibly successful social change campaigns.

Our issues not only deserve this kind of attention and thoroughness, they demand it.

- Create clear goals
- Target audiences
- Utilize concise messages that resonate
- Develop good planning skills
- Tell people what to do
- Make a case for why action is needed now
- Match strategies and tactics with audience
- Budget for success
- Rely on experts when needed

## About FENTON Communications

For more than 25 years, FENTON Communications has partnered with nonprofit clients to make social change. We work to protect the environment, improve public health and advance human rights and social justice. This guide is one in a series that we've produced to help build the strategic communications capacity of the nonprofit sector. To download a free copy of this and other FENTON guides, visit [www.fenton.com](http://www.fenton.com).

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