

DEVELOPING ADVOCACY STRATEGY

Nine Key Questions for Developing an Advocacy Strategy

"If you have an hour to chop a stack of wood, it is worth spending the first half hour sharpening your axe."

One of the most common confusions in the development of advocacy strategy is the difference between "strategy" and "tactics." **Tactics** are specific actions – writing letters, meeting with lawmakers, issuing reports – the building blocks of advocacy. **Strategy** is something larger, an overall map that guides the advocacy effort toward clear objectives. Strategy is a hard-nosed assessment of where you are, where you want to go, and how you can get there. At its heart, effective strategy is rooted in five key questions.

Looking Outward

1. OBJECTIVES: What do you want?

An effective advocacy effort must begin with a clear set of objectives. This can include long-term objectives that may not be attainable immediately and short-term objectives that help build toward those in concrete ways. All of these objectives need to be defined at the start, in a way that can launch an effort, draw people to it, and sustain it over time.

2. AUDIENCES: Who can give it to you?

Who are the people and institutions you need to move? This includes those who have the actual formal *authority* to deliver the goods (i.e. public authorities) and also the other actors who will *influence* their decision making (the media, key constituencies, and others). In both cases, an effective advocacy effort requires a clear sense of who these audiences are and what access or pressure points are available to move them.

3. MESSAGE: What do they need to hear?

Reaching these different audiences requires crafting and framing a set of messages that will be persuasive. Effective advocacy messages generally have two basic components: Why the advocacy objective is the right thing to do on the merits ("Increasing funds for children's health saves lives.") and why it is in the political interest of the authority to do it ("We have a coalition of fifty groups supporting this proposal.").

4. MESSENGERS: Who do they need to hear it from?

The same message has a very different impact depending on who communicates it. Who are the most credible messengers for different audiences? Three kinds of messengers are important: "Experts" whose credibility is largely technical; "Authentic Voices," of the people who can speak from personal experience; and "People with Clout," who come with the kinds of political connections that make authorities want to listen.

5. ACTION: How best to get the message delivered?

There is wide continuum of ways to deliver an advocacy message. Some are "inside strategies" in which persuasion takes place through traditional channels and meetings. Other approaches involve "outside strategies" aimed at changing the context in which those decisions are made, through the formation of coalitions and the application of outside pressure through media work and the like. The mix of these approaches that is right for an advocacy effort depends on what is needed to get the job done and what the groups involved are able to do and comfortable doing.

Looking Inward

6. RESOURCES: What have we got?

An effective advocacy effort takes careful stock of the advocacy resources that are already there to be built on. This includes past advocacy work that is related, alliances already in place, staff and other people's capacity, information and political intelligence. In short, you don't start from scratch, you start from building on what you've got.

7. GAPS: What do we need to develop?

After taking stock of the advocacy resources you have, the next step is to identify the advocacy resources you need that aren't there yet. This means looking at alliances that need to be built, and capacities such as outreach, media, and research which are crucial to any effort.

8. FIRST EFFORTS: How do we begin?

What would be an effective way to begin to move the strategy forward? What are some potential short term goals or projects that would bring the right people together, symbolize the larger work ahead and create something achievable that lays the groundwork for the next step?

9. EVALUATION: How do we tell if it's working?

As with any long journey, the course needs to be checked along the way. Strategy needs to be evaluated revisiting each of the questions above (i.e. are we aiming at the right audiences, are we reaching them, etc.) It is important to be able to make mid-course corrections and to discard those elements of a strategy that don't work once they are actually put into practice.