

Change Happens: Digital Advocacy Mobilizes Members in a Connected World

By Tim Shaw

Technology has long been shaping the way that non-profits and associations reach and engage their members. Remember when you set up your first website - how that changed the way people search for and receive information? And social media is providing an entirely new set of (constantly changing) tools that allow you to reach and communicate with your members.

It's no surprise that technology is also changing the way that non-profits organize and motivate advocates to support their cause. The Internet and all of the tools that come with it are providing what can be an effective and relatively low-cost way to reach members and stakeholders and inspire them to mobilize for change.

Enter Digital Advocacy.

Digital advocacy is the approach of using digital, online tools to enable the creation of a community of people around a shared cause, issue or concern; providing tools and tactics as well as media-appropriate content; and inspiring individuals to take action in order to influence change in favor of that group.

Not too far off from a traditional advocacy approach, but digital advocacy brings with it a few new terms and rules that are important for success.

The Slacktivist

A slacktivist is someone that supports a cause or issue in a way that has little or no impact other than to make him or her 'feel good'. Social media is full of these people. They are the ones that will 'Like' a Facebook page; follow your brand, issue or cause on Twitter; sign an online petition; or change their display picture, but don't seem to participate much further than that.

These people can be discouraging and are easy to dismiss. But they are actually an important part of your digital advocacy work. Slacktivists have already indicated an interest in your cause, and are actually more likely to participate in meaningful ways. They help extend your reach online and will help spread the word about your cause or issue throughout their social networks.

A Simple Formula

Inform

Information can be powerful and generally creates comfort around the goal being pursued. The information does need to contain good content. Too often there are posts or releases that are "lots of smoke but little heat". Inform your audience with the right content for the medium so that they carry and represent your message. Respecting their

engagement by providing timely, relevant and meaningful information will help you engage your audience as champions.

Involve

Actively engage your stakeholders where they are most comfortable, whether in a meeting room or chat room, and give them the opportunity to get involved with your issue or cause. Digital advocacy demands a feedback loop that is often overlooked in the more traditional approaches. Do pay attention to the 'placeholders' as well – even if their post seems irrelevant your considerate response lives on in the digital world and is needed to offset any irreverent contributions.

Inspire

Digital advocacy programs need to be designed to inspire your ambassadors to take action. It is not about convincing or campaigning in the traditional media sense; it is about showing them their place and their significance within the project.

The tools that we have at our disposal through social media are incredibly powerful, but they do take commitment and a well thought out strategy to use effectively. If you're looking at getting on board with digital advocacy, remember to be relevant, authentic, passionate and transparent. And of course always tell great stories.

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