



10 Advocacy: Engaging the Public

Fact Sheet

Advocacy vs. Lobbying, Coalition Building and Public Engagement

- Adapted from Public Policy Related Activities That Are Not Lobbying, published by Charity Lobbying for the Public Interest and Adapted from National School Public Relations Association; Community Mobilization: Strategies to Support Young Children and Their Families; and Public Agenda Online.

What is the difference between advocacy and lobbying?

Although most people use the words interchangeably, there is a distinction between advocacy and lobbying that is helpful to understand. When nonprofit organizations advocate on their own behalf, they seek to affect some aspect of society, whether they appeal to individuals about their behavior, employers about their rules, or the government about its laws. Lobbying refers specifically to advocacy efforts that attempt to influence legislation. This distinction is helpful to keep in mind because it means that laws limiting the lobbying done by nonprofit organizations do not govern other advocacy activities.

What is the difference between grassroots lobbying and direct lobbying?

Grassroots lobbying is appealing to the general public to contact the legislature about an issue. Direct lobbying is contacting government officials or employees directly to influence legislation. If an issue is to be decided through a ballot initiative or referendum, appeals to the public are considered direct lobbying, because the public in this instance acts as the legislature. This is helpful to nonprofits that elect to come under the 1976 law, as they may only devote 25 percent of their total lobbying expenditures to grassroots lobbying.



Coalition Building & Public Engagement: Two Key Concepts for Your Advocacy/Lobbying Efforts

A coalition is a group of interdependent people focused on advancing or opposing a particular issue. A coalition's power lies in its ability to present a united front. It mobilizes allies through grassroots efforts to increase community understanding and support.

A coalition is effective only when its issue has merit and the coalition members are organized, informed, and dedicated to communicating the importance of the effort. Coalition building calls for establishing and developing contacts that work well together.

In order to form a coalition, the public must be informed and engaged on the issue(s). Public engagement is a different way of getting people involved in community decisions that gets beyond traditional forums, such as board meetings, public hearings or advertising campaigns.

Why Conduct a Public Engagement Campaign?

A well-planned public engagement campaign that is a series of strategic activities planned to support your community's vision can produce many benefits, including:

- A greater base of support for your mobilization goals. By recruiting new allies, a campaign can generate financial support, volunteers, and other resources to help achieve goals;
- Access to a mass audience. By working with the media as part of a public engagement campaign, you can tell your story or provide useful information to greater numbers of people than can be reached through other channels; and
- Greater leverage with decision-makers. By creating popular buy-in for an initiative and by generating press coverage, policymakers and others are more likely to join, support, and protect your organization's vision and goals.



Questions About Public Engagement

Q. Why is public engagement needed?

A. In many areas of American public life, participation has been eroding as cynicism and mistrust rise. Too often, public issues where common ground and collective effort are needed to find solutions have instead devolved into shouting, sloganeering and technical and jargon-laden debates among experts and special interests. The result: the public is left out, without a real voice, and consequently has a lesser stake in the system.

Q. How is public engagement different from public relations?

A. In many issues, community leaders decide on a course of action and then attempt to sell it to the public. Rather than entering into a dialogue and helping citizens understand the pros and cons of different policies, leaders attempt to manage the public and market ideas to them. This often makes people feel manipulated and suspicious, and often hinders them from thinking effectively about problems and challenges because it avoids exposing them to the full policy debate. By contrast, public engagement helps people weigh a variety of ideas and listen to each other in an attempt to build common understanding.

Q. How are employees and the public engaged?

A. Extensive outreach to make sure that activities include people who do not hold leadership positions and whose voices are not commonly heard; discussions geared to average citizens instead of just experts; a civil exchange of ideas among participants and tolerance for people with different points of view.