

Getting them involved: attracting and empowering supporters

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Introduction and Context

Studies show it is increasingly difficult for organisations to gain volunteers to advance their campaigns. When citizens are mobilised to act, either in small ways such as signing online petitions or taking part in offline activities, the campaign must satisfy two important conditions. Firstly, that the outcome of the campaign is one they desire and will have a direct impact upon their lives. Secondly, the outcome of the campaign must be realistic and realisable given the action required. This suggests that campaigns need to start locally, or with small asks, building upon existing interests, social ties and lifeworld experiences and communication aimed at mobilisation must be targeted to individuals most affected by the issue and demonstrate how actions can have some impact; thus volunteering must be marketed carefully.

Drawing on theories relating to communication psychology and behaviourism to analyse data gathered from interviews with people who became involved in the 2010 UK General Election, I offer some pointers for identifying, communicating with and mobilising supporters. The first stage is identification through mapping discussions online; this can range from sophisticated approaches to simple searching. Once individuals or groups who have a natural affinity with the campaign are identified, the next stage is building an emotional attachment between them and the specific campaign. Attachments are built through communication and the creation of a community around the issue. Communication will involve small acts initially. Small asks include joining a community, signing a petition, perhaps small donations; if small asks meet explicit goals, however interim, larger asks can follow.

Rethinking activism

Political participation is viewed as a permanent, ideological, even sacrificial, commitment. Likes, shares and online sign-ups viewed as slacktivism; the illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group. I argue that this dichotomy is inaccurate. Activism can be considered from two perspectives; firstly from the perspective of the individual and their motivations; secondly in terms of behaviour having impacts and so becoming habitual and more embedded within an individuals' norms. Motivations are created through social ties, we act because our close friends do the same, or in terms of having an emotional attachment to a cause or organisation. Individuals express motivation in terms of wanting to belong, having an emotional investment, for example in supporting the objectives of a cancer charity or a political party, wanting to make a difference to the lives of others and also wanting to have a difference made to their lives. That difference is not simply transactional, but feelings of being connected and feeling empowered. A simple expression, the 'LIKE', is a public display of support, something they want others to see and a signal of interest in further involvement. Disappointment often comes when no follow-up connection is made. The LIKE may be an easy action but when the organisation of individual does not acknowledge the 'LIKE' the enthusiasm can turn to apathy. Data suggests that we

should view behaviours associated with clicktivism as one point of a continuum with activities such as leaflet delivery, street campaigning or actions with express commitment on the other. The question is whether someone can be moved along that continuum.

Mobilising your Crowd

Thinking of types of activism as rungs on a ladder, borrowing the concept from marketing, I offer an alternative understanding of how to mobilise supporters. In marketing it is argued that individuals progress from being Prospects who have not yet purchased through phases as Customers trialling a product, Clients who repeat purchase to the top rung, the Advocate who is brand loyal and happy to recommend the brand to others. Let us rethink this for involvement in campaigns.

Figure 1: The Political Loyalty Ladder

Loyalty Status	Communication Strategy
Activists	Empower through connectedness. Build desires for outcomes Make outcomes realisable
Active Advocate	Bring them into the organisation. Create opportunities for them to be activists
Connected	Forums, groups and opportunities for meets.
Passive Advocate	Welcome and test their desire to be connected. Communicate at various levels.
Information Seeker	Engaging and appealing broad messages. Have clear idea of the target audience Hypermedia usage
Prospect	Targeted through Activists and Active Advocates. Personal Appeals using broad messages. Market-oriented brand identity

Simply, Prospects need to be made aware of the cause and what it stands for. Within the modern cluttered media landscape the generation of word of mouth is pivotal. In other words Advocates recruit Prospects to the cause. If we view the first stage as gaining an interest then we can view the second rung as Information Seekers. These may well use the Internet to discover more, if Advocates can be used to draw in Information Seekers they may move up a rung, becoming Passive Advocates. Passive Advocates LIKE, advocating but with minimal effort. Passive Advocates must be contacted, tested out for their desire to be more involved. Liking represents a permission to contact, but requires a

welcome and for information to be sought by both sides; Passive Advocates should be treated like the person you invite on a second date. Passive Advocates may want to be part of the Connected. These want to feel part of a bigger community, be it environmentalists, Liberal Democrats or, perhaps sadly, white supremacists. Connectedness blends online with offline, community building online can be a springboard into offline networking and meeting. The Connected then can become Active Advocates and possibly Activists who will lead locally. The journey, which of course not all will take, is expressed in the figure.

Communication and Mobilisation

Communication is at the heart of mobilisation. Those within an organisation must be encouraged to realise the importance of recruitment and be part of communication. Those who an organisation can identify as potential Active Advocates and Activists must be activated to tell others. They must also identify and connect with Passive Advocates, testing their desire to be Connected. Being connected is all about being communicated with and deepening the connections, building offline elements and fostering deeper commitments. Activism is a community activity: activists work for and within communities. At the heart of activism is the desire to connect to like-minded others and need for belonging. Organisations should thus nurture such feelings through communication in order to connect to their prospects and information seekers when they visit their online sites and quickly engage with any who display a commitment. Entering into a community is a key factor for encouraging feelings of belonging, cementing the motivation and commitment.