
Chapter 6:

DEVELOPING AN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

If your nonprofit has spent time determining a policy agenda, it is time to develop an action plan for engagement. The development and implementation of an engagement strategy is often when the work becomes publicly visible. Choosing to make your policy priorities visible is a significant step for your nonprofit and should be approached in a coordinated and strategic manner. This chapter focuses on tackling the shorter-term objectives through various tactics, which all work towards achieving longer-term advocacy goals.

Focus on Your Goals and Choose Your Tactics

The more time you spend setting your policy agenda (see chapter 5) and goals, the easier it will be to determine which tactics to pursue as you develop your engagement strategy. Figuring out this strategy will require you to review and assess which tactics are available to you and would be most useful in moving your policy agenda forward. These might include face-to-face meetings with Cabinet Ministers, City Council Members, or organized campaigns around an issue — each has its benefits and considerations. See the table at the end of this chapter for a snapshot of tactics you may consider using as part of your engagement strategy.

Bring People Along With You

As part of your strategy development, be sure to investigate what other advocacy efforts are happening in the community. Consider how other efforts might support, hinder, or cause you to adopt a more collaborative approach to your strategy. You might find that your policy agenda intersects with the work of other groups, or that it could be strengthened through a network approach. For instance, if a nonprofit immigrant serving agency was interested in fighting against discriminatory policies or practices in the workplace, they might choose to connect and share resources with an organization that recently published a report on strategies to address discrimination.

You might also consider that another group has the ability to speak better to certain issues and you could benefit from drawing on their strengths. Formal and informal networks can play out in different ways, from organizing a policy development working group, to carrying out joint projects, such as events or submissions to government. Keep in mind that networks tend to be held together by transparency and commitment to common values, as opposed to rigid adherence to specific group interests and objectives.

Know the Landscape

It will be important to stay connected to news outlets, and community interests to keep tabs on when important information becomes available, as well as regularly checking government websites and when government officials plan to engage with the public. Create a timeline and plot out the initiatives that you would like to undertake and the important community discussions you will plug into. While it is important to be organized and have a solid engagement strategy, it is even more important to spend effort monitoring, learning, and adjusting your plan as you go. In the context of an uncertain political environment, policy advocacy planning should be flexible and responsive.

Craft Your Communications

Whatever tactic or combination of tactics you decide to pursue, it will always be important to focus on the content. Is the message you are sharing in your communications inspiring and effective? Here are a few questions to ask and tips to help guide the way as you engage with political candidates and your intended audience:

Is your content objective, fact-based, well-reasoned, and non-partisan?

TIP: Share local data and statistics about your nonprofit, or the broad nonprofit sector – you may surprise people with your findings.³²

Have you engaged your audience (communities, candidates, decision-makers, etc.) in different ways?

TIP: Your message often needs to be heard multiple times through different avenues before it is remembered.

Have you used storytelling in your communications?

TIP: People are more likely to remember information told as a story, with characters, a beginning, middle, and end, a plot, conflict, and resolution.

Have you used visuals and descriptive language in your communications to help create a picture of the solution you're proposing?

TIP: Research shows that readers understand and are more likely to remember material when it is expressed in language that allows them to form visual images or that connects to the senses.³³ For example, the simple use of the word “sweet” draws a stronger response than “kind” and the same for “bitter” compared to “mean.”³⁴



Are your calls to action clear and specific?

TIP: Be clear on how the proposed solution will help your target audience solve the problem, and how they can play a role in the solution, to make the call to action more effective. For example, instead of asking people to end climate change, encourage people to reduce gas emissions by carpooling, riding a bike or walking.

Are your recommendations to government or political candidates/parties clear and specific?

TIP: The more specifics you provide, the closer you will bring the decision-maker to deciding. For example, instead of asking for a nonprofit strategy, CCVO has specifically suggested the creation of a [Premier's Advisory Council](#)³⁵ on the Nonprofit Sector that reports directly to the Premier and Executive Council, an approach that will ensure clear lines of accountability.

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ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TOOLBOX

TACTIC	OPPORTUNITY	CONSIDERATIONS
Convening conversations	Nonprofits are well-positioned to convene conversations and increase public understanding of issues.	It can be challenging to stay focused when there are multiple stakeholders with different interests involved in discussions. Inclusion is important and so is staying true to your goals.
Participate in local events and encourage discussion on your issue	Many of community events provide opportunities for questions from those in attendance - have your question prepared in case you have a chance to ask about your issue.	Be respectful of the organizer and make sure your issue is related to the topics at hand.
Collaborate when necessary	Working with other nonprofits or with the for-profit sector can be helpful in gaining support from the government. Assessing what other organizations have to say about issues of importance to your nonprofit, and sharing that information can be very valuable to people who care about the issues that your nonprofit works on.	Reach out to partner organizations for a strategy session on your policy ask.
Sharing resources and background materials with governing party and official opposition	This is a great way to educate your MLA or the opposition party about your issues, your constituency, or your community. Government's rely on you to educate them about your issues.	You may share research and your policy priorities with your MLA, cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, or public servants, and ensure that the same information is available to all individuals that need to be informed.
Attending face-to-face meetings with your MLA, cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, or public servants	These meetings can be helpful and can bring attention to your issue. It will also help with getting answers to questions and further advise, and evaluate your policy asks.	Make sure to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare talking points, issue, briefs, fact sheets, etc. • Keep it brief and use plain language • Anticipate their questions • Send thank you letters, including contact information for further questions, and follow-up with summary notes, actions items, etc.
Public awareness campaigns	Sharing stories and background materials through traditional and social media is a great way to increase understanding and awareness with public stakeholder groups and the community.	You may oppose or support a policy, but keep your communication nonpartisan by making sure it is not connected to a single candidate or political party.