THE NASAA ADVOCATE

Strategies for Building Arts Support

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E-ADVOCACY: ON-LINE STRATEGIES FOR ARTS ADVOCACY

The growth of the Internet has reinvented civic engagement and democratic participation in the United States. More citizens feel empowered to contact their public officials through on-line advocacy.[1] With the broad reach and the low cost of electronic communications, Internet lobbying—electronic advocacy or e-advocacy—has become a powerful means of persuasion in our halls of government.

In arts advocacy, the ability to share information and disseminate messages to serve our legislative policy agenda has never been greater. Through organizations and in coalitions, arts advocates are exploiting the power of technology for legislative change, using the Internet and e-mail to organize communities, educate constituencies, recruit allies, communicate with elected officials, and win legislative victories.

The characteristics of on-line advocacy as a political communications channel make it a powerfully appealing strategy for engaging citizens in public policy discussions and generating action on legislation.

- It's **readily available and easy** to use. Anyone with an Internet connection can participate in an e-mail campaign with other advocates in the public policy arena.
- It's **fast**. In a single day, an arts advocacy organization can learn about new legislation, send fact sheets and an action alert to its grass-roots members, and generate scores, hundreds, or even thousands of e-mails to Congress before the day is over.
- It's able to **link** advocates at little cost across limitless space based on interests rather than geography.

Essential On-Line Advocacy Tools

The three on-line technologies that advocates depend upon are:

- E-mail – for action alerts to advocates and communications with elected officials.
- Web sites – the on-line focal point for linking to your advocacy information.
- E-newsletters – for outreach and timely information on your important issues.

Integrating On-Line and Off-Line

While the Internet has given citizens the ability to organize and engage quickly and easily, it is important to recognize that e-mails sent to Congress to influence public policy and the development of legislation are most effective when they are part of an integrated legislative strategy. All of the pieces of an on-line campaign—e-mails,

Web sites, and e-newsletters—should work together, and they should integrate with more traditional off-line advocacy strategies, including phone calls from constituents, direct lobbying visits to a legislator's office, meetings with legislators at home, and news coverage in other media.

e-mail

E-mail as an advocacy tool has made it easier and cheaper for grass-roots interests to organize and lobby Congress. As a result, legislators on Capitol Hill annually receive more than 200 million messages in a year from constituents and others—four times more communications than were sent to Congress annually in the 1990s. E-mail messages account for 90 percent of the communications sent to federal legislators.[2]

According to a 2008 report from the Congressional Management Foundation,[3] more people are sending more messages to Congress than ever before.

- Nearly 100 million adults in the United States, almost half of all voting-age Americans (44%), contacted Congress in the preceding five years about a legislative action—up from 18% reported in a similar 2004 survey.
- More than four-fifths of those who communicated with Congress (84%) were alerted to action by a third-party interest group.

Almost three-quarters of congressional offices surveyed say they spend more time on constituent communications than in the past, due to the rise in e-mail messages. A large percentage of these are mass form messages—multiple copies of the same text sent under different constituents' names. For many in public office, the advocates' e-mail blasts sent out today are the equivalent of the preprinted postcards of the 1970s and 1980s—impersonal communications that can be easily disregarded.

Still, congressional offices place a high priority on responding to constituent communications. In fact, Hill staff credit the Internet and e-mail with delivering better-informed, more engaged constituents and more responsive members of Congress. The challenge for the constituent is to catch the attention of Hill staffers on-line—each staffer receiving some 200 e-mails a day—by standing out on a screen full of mass e-mails.

Getting Attention On-line

The guiding principle for contacting Congress or any other representative body is simple:

A personally written e-mail message means more than a mass form message.

A second principle supports the first:

A message from a constituent takes priority over others.

Personalized messages to Congress have more influence on a legislator's decision making than do identical form messages generated by an organization's advocacy Web page. Advocacy campaigns should emphasize sending messages with personal information and constituents' anecdotes. In advocacy, quality trumps quantity.

For effective advocacy communication on-line to Congress, the experts in on-line political advocacy endorse the "3-30-3-30" rule—and congressional staffers agreed.[4] Because your legislators and their staff are hard-pressed for time to read through the e-mail messages they receive, it's important to look for creative ways to grab their attention.

3 seconds: Compose a subject line that captures the attention of the legislative staffer. Identify the interest your message holds for the recipient. Make your subject line relevant by naming your state or community along with the issue. Rather than "Fund the NEA," try "Federal Arts Funds in Oregon." You have three seconds to convince the staffer to read your message, or go on to another e-mail in the queue. Be specific rather than generic.

30 seconds: Write a simple overview of your issue, with some background, possibly a personal anecdote about the issue's affect on your state, and your position on the issue or specific piece of legislation. If possible, keep your message to three or four brief paragraphs. Don't forget to provide contact information so that a congressional office can get in touch directly, by e-mail or phone, for additional information or clarification.

3 minutes: Attach, when appropriate, a one-page issue brief giving your position on the legislation, talking points and background information in more detail than the 30-second text message. As an example, see the NASAA issue briefs covering the legislative policy issues we address each year during the course of the congressional legislative session.

30 minutes: Link to a white paper publication, if available, to provide fully developed briefing material and complete information on the issue so the congressional staffer can dig into the policy you present. Include links to additional resources, if necessary, to complete the picture. NASAA's policy briefs addressing a variety of issues provide the depth of information useful to legislative staff.

When you are not urging a vote on a specific piece of legislation, look for opportunities to keep in touch with your legislators and their staff. Offer yourself as a resource for information on policy issues. Contact your senator or representative when there is a chance to thank your legislator. Remember that communication is about building a relationship.

web sites

Your Web site is your most important on-line asset for building and informing an audience of advocates. It's your focal point for activating advocates who will respond to your e-mail messages. It's the bookshelf, the newsstand, and the podium for distributing information that

makes the case for public support of the arts. Often, it's the first impression potential advocates will have of you, where you showcase your accomplishments and tell your story.

Once on your Web site, people need to find what they want—easily. Good organization is the key. Think about how someone, unfamiliar with your organization, would navigate your site to find your advocacy information. Make "Advocacy" visible on your Web site with clear labeling. Don't force people to go hunting. If you have good advocacy information, don't hide it behind "Resources" or "Other Services." The more steps you put between the topical label on your Web site and the information people are looking for, the more people you will lose along the way. The fewer clicks, the better.

Visitors will come to your advocacy page because they are interested in being involved. Consider posting a standing action alert that lets you catch the attention of your advocates when they are motivated. Put up some sample talking points under the heading, "Tell Your Legislator How Your Arts Agency Funding Serves Your Community."

Design your Web site to be an information resource. Post documents you want advocates (and legislative staff) to see. Provide a short introduction to an issue, with the opportunity to read more through links to related reports, fact sheets, supportive letters and other documents. Present information in layers to let visitors gather as much as they need.

Like the rest of us, congressional staffers are often going to start out on a search engine

A Word about Congressional Web Sites

The Internet has become the primary source for learning about and communicating with Congress. According to a 2008 survey, 92 percent of Internet users who contacted members of Congress had visited a legislator's Web site.[5]

Generally, a legislator's Web site is the portal through which constituents can easily send messages to their senators and representatives. Using a legislator's Web site for communications can give some assurance that messages will be acknowledged. In these sites' efforts to control the number of e-mails received, constituents are asked to provide contact information along with their message; some congressional offices will disregard an address from somewhere other than the legislator's home state or congressional district. Again, the individual contact—the communication from constituent to legislator—is what counts and is preferred.

Congressional Web sites provide information about the legislator, such as bills the senator or representative has sponsored, press releases, and the legislator's votes on a variety of issues. Not all are equally informative. The overall quality of congressional Web sites "continues to be disappointing," as rated by the Congressional Management Foundation in its 2007 evaluation of all House and Senate Web sites.[6] Of the 618 congressional Web sites, 104 earned an A, and 40 percent of sites scored a grade of D or F.

to research an issue. You want them to find you. Having relevant content on your site about your state's arts issues, programs and services makes you easier to find, establishes you as a resource, and helps to build a relationship with the legislators you need to know.

e-newsletters

Your e-newsletter, distributed electronically to your organization's or agency's e-mail list, is a critical tool in an integrated e-advocacy strategy for building relationships with advocates and maintaining interest in the arts as public policy. Use your e-newsletter to keep in touch—instantly—with hundreds or thousands of arts supporters and advocates in your state, and to recruit activists to your issues. With an offer on your Web site to receive your e-newsletter, you can turn a Web site visitor into an e-mail contact.

An e-newsletter is a powerful educational tool offering timely information on issues important to the arts in your state. Through e-news, you can provide current policy information, advocacy tips, news of relevant trends, and research-based facts about the arts in your state.

Use your e-newsletter to cover a specific arts policy theme important to your state, such as the impact of the arts on the economy of your state's communities, how the arts improve learning in schools, the healing power of the arts for an aging population, and ways in which the arts promote tourism or revitalize depressed communities. An e-newsletter can provide information valuable to advocates in grasping and communicating the importance of the arts to a specific public policy concern.

What about a Blog?

Consider a blog as an op-ed column to express your own views on the arts and politics in your state and the nation. As a frequently updated outlet for musings and observations on the arts and public policy, a blog on your Web site gives arts advocacy the personal voice of the author—or multiple authors.

A 2006 study of the importance of blogs in politics, and for Congress in particular, concluded that blogs play "an increasingly powerful role in framing ideas and issues for legislators and leaders directly."[7] In surveying congressional offices, the researcher found that blogs are seen to affect politics—and are recognized by legislators—because they focus attention on issues, reframe policy discussions, and function as watchdogs of the mainstream media.

a final word

The Internet and e-mails have strengthened the ranks of advocates, expanding the ability of more constituents to participate with their legislators in policy discussions. Still, merely sending an e-mail message to a legislator is not enough to achieve the full impact arts advocates need and deserve. Reaching congressional lawmakers and their staffs requires a mix of communications. An integrated advocacy campaign carries more weight when diverse strategies work together.

On-line advocacy advisers insist that all pieces of an on-line campaign—e-mails, Web sites, and e-newsletters—work together. Just as important, they agree that on-line advocacy should integrate with off-line advocacy.[8] The impact of sending e-mails to Congress is strengthened by calls from constituents, personal visits to a legislator's office, meetings with legislators at events, editorials in the legislator's district newspaper, and direct lobbying visits.

In the world of e-advocacy, the electronic message becomes the foundation for building relationships and credibility. Even a staunch defender of the power of e-advocacy like Ben Scott, policy director of the public-interest group Free Press, recognizes the persuasive strength of individual communication. He told *The Washington Post*, "Ultimately power is transacted on a personal level, and ultimately people make decisions based on conversations with people that they trust."[9]

notes

[1] Brad Fitch and Kathy Goldschmidt, *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill Is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Management Foundation, 2005), www.cmfweb.org.

[2] Fitch and Goldschmidt, *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill Is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*.

[3] Kathy Goldschmidt and Leslie Ochrieter, *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Management Foundation, 2008), www.cmfweb.org.

[4] Colin Delany, *Communicating with Congress: The 3-30-3-30 Rule*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Management Foundation, 2006), www.epolitics.com/2006/07/24/communicating-with-congress-the-3-30-3-30-rule/.

[5] Goldschmidt and Ochrieter, op. cit.

[6] Collin Burden, *2007 Gold Mouse Report: Lessons from the Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Management Foundation, 2007), www.cmfweb.org.

[7] T. Neil Sroka, *Understanding the Political Influence of Blogs: A Study of the Growing Importance of the Blogosphere in the U.S. Congress* (Washington. D.C.: The George Washington University Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, 2006), __r.

[8] Colin Delany, *Online Politics 101: The Tools and Tactics of Online Political Advocacy*, Version 1.5, www.epolitics.com, 2008.

[9] "Net Neutrality's Quiet Crusader," *The Washington Post*, 28 March 2008, p. D1.