Online Advocacy from Start to Finish

Capitol Impact
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CHAPTER 1 – WHY YOU SHOULD BUILD AN ADVOCACY NETWORK

A successful grassroots campaign starts with a well-informed, enthusiastic base of supporters. So how can grassroots advocacy managers gather a group of powerful advocates that will answer their calls to action? Consider building a grassroots network of advocates.

START WITH YOUR BASE

A grassroots network is an online environment where potential advocates can indicate they are interested in joining your cause. Whether you work for a university and the alumni are stepping forward or you are advocating for a particular issue and supporters are finding you on the internet, the fact is that people out there are willing to help. The key to gathering these interested individuals is to make it easy to find you and easy to join your cause. New advocates should be able to sign up on your website by entering their email address. Entice new sign ups by offering information about your cause like weekly newsletters, updates on important legislation, or tools to help them find their elected officials.

Once your advocates join your network, it is time to learn something about them. Here is some information you should consider collecting on all of your advocates in your network:

CONTACT INFORMATION

Simple data like the advocate's name, address, email, and other basic information will be incredibly useful to you when creating an advocacy network. Having your advocate's email addresses ensures that you will be able to engage your network with informational updates or calls to action, with blast emails. With the advocate's home address you can assign them to their legislative district using geo-coding techniques so you can look at your database and see how many supporters you have in each elected official's district (*See Chapter 4 to learn more about Geo-coding*). This is a valuable tool, especially when you are speaking with legislators. Walking into a meeting with a list of supporters that live in a legislator's district can give you the upper-hand when trying to advocate for your issues.

LEVEL OF COMMITMENT

When advocates join your network you need to find out what they are willing to do for your organization. Some people that sign up will have no interest in sending emails or making phone calls on your behalf. Others will be eager to make calls, send emails, testify at committee hearings and generally perform anything to support an issue that your organization has... Learning the distinction from the moment an advocate signs up will give you a better understanding of the level of action that you can expect from individuals. If your network has 1000 people in it and 200 people have stated that they are not willing to participate in grassroots campaigns, then when your call to action goes out you have a better idea of who will really be participating.

POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Having advocates tell you who they know in your state or at federal level is potentially the most valuable data you can get from an advocate. Politics is a business of relationships, and who you know can be more important to a grassroots campaign than how many people you have participating. One advocate that has a personal relationship with an elected official can have as much of an impact on them as ten random constituents. When your advocates sign up for your grassroots network, consider capturing some information on who they know at the capitol. Elected officials are citizens of their districts, so they are bound to have neighbors, friends, and associates that live in their district that may support your cause. Perhaps one of your supporters lives next door to an elected official or has social contact with him/her once a week. If you never collect political relationship information then you may be missing out on the best way to extend your reach into the capitol (*See Chapter 3 to learn more about collecting political relationships*).

When you have collected all this information you end up with a segmented database that is a powerful tool you can use to improve your voice at the capitol. You will have the ability to look at an elected official and see who lives in their district, who knows them, and who is willing to step forward and contact them on your behalf. With data like this your next grassroots campaign can be targeted better and more effective.

We have already discussed how to use the **Push Method** to get people to join your advocacy network, so let's take a minute and illustrate the **Pull Method**.

Have you ever heard the term "inbound marketing"? **Inbound marketing** is a marketing strategy based on making your product or business easy to find on the internet and using your website to draw people in by producing content that they value, and converting them from casual visitors to customers. Now, you may ask yourself, "What does this have to do with Grassroots Advocacy?" As we discussed previously, your organization already has an established base of potential advocates. Inbound Marketing can help to not only convert bystanders into advocates, but it can help you grow your base by pulling in new advocates from the internet.

Here's how:

MAKE YOUR NETWORK EASY TO FIND

It is impossible for your audience to become part of your advocacy network if they don't know that it exists. The first step in the Inbound Marketing Process is simple: make your audience aware of your network. This doesn't take a large amount of work or a huge advertising budget. Simply make sure your Advocacy Network is easy to find by putting links to it on your main website and on all of your emails and news stories. You would be surprised how much something simple as a link on your main page or at the end of an email can help advertise your network. A portion of your established audience that already receives updates is likely to be willing to step forward to join your advocacy network, they just have to know how.

PUBLISH INFORMATIVE CONTENT

The second step in the inbound marketing strategy is to publish valuable content for your audience to keep them engaged on the issues and drive traffic to the advocacy website. Many grassroots advocacy managers already publish content in the form of a weekly update from the Capitol or a monthly newsletter to their advocates, so it is just a matter of putting this content up on your advocacy website. Additionally, the more content you publish on your site, the easier it is for people to find your website using search engines like Google or Yahoo. Remember that you are trying to keep people interested, so update your website with news from the capitol year round. Your updates about specific legislation can keep advocates informed on what the issues are, and news about your organization keeps them seeing the entire picture of how legislation affects them. The more valuable information you publish, the more you position yourself as a thought-leader on an issue, turning your advocacy site into a go-to resource for those that are interested in your issues.

CONVERT VISITORS TO ADVOCATES

Now that you are publishing content and generating visitors to your website, you need to convert these casual visitors into informed advocates. Your updates draw people into your website when they are looking for the latest news on your issues, and when they are on your website you have the opportunity to recruit them into your advocacy network. The easiest way to do this is by making the process of joining the advocacy network easy. If a potential advocate has to jump through hoops to join your network then they are less likely to do so. The most effective way of converting visitors into advocates is to design your pages to "funnel" traffic down to your call to action (in this case, joining your advocacy network). This can be done by simply adding a join button to the bottom of all your news stories. Each update should have a call to action at the end; even if it is something as simple as "If you'd like to learn more about what you can do to help, join our advocacy network." You have an opportunity to reach people when they read your articles; make sure to use it!

CHAPTER 3 - USE YOUR SUPPORTER'S RELATIONSHIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR ADVOCACY EFFORTS

As we discussed before, an organization that participates in grassroots advocacy efforts often has a large base of supporters that they utilize to influence the agenda at the capitol. Typically, the advocates answer calls-to-action by making phone calls, signing petitions, sending emails, etc. An organization with even a small group of active, interested, and engaged advocates can have a huge impact on the legislature. However, large numbers and loud voices are not always appropriate for some advocacy campaigns. So what can an advocacy manager do to better utilize their advocacy network without exhausting their supporters? One method we have found is incredibly effective is utilizing your advocate's key political relationships.

Many organizations engaged in advocacy at the state level have members that are close to their local legislators. You may not even be aware that your advocacy network is full of legislator's neighbors, friends, family, or other types of relationships. Being able to track these types of relationships and utilizing them with a grassroots advocacy system gives you access to a whole new strategy to reach legislators. A few phone calls from a legislator's social, professional, and personal contacts that support your position can have a bigger impact than hundreds of emails from random constituents because they are more likely to make an impact the legislator. Now not only are you effectively getting your message across, you are able to improve your voice at the capitol by leveraging legislators' connections to your organization.

So how can you track these relationships? With Grassroots Advocacy Technology you should be able to send out a request to all your supporters to update their relationships with legislators in your system. Your advocates should be able to log in and find the legislators that they know at the capitol. The advocates then can describe the type of relationship they have, whether it is a casual relationship like "We go to the same church" or a close personal relationship like "We were roommates in college and I was the best-man at his wedding". Obviously personal close relationships are more valuable to you as an advocacy manager than casual relationships, but having advocates with any type of relationship to a legislator are more valuable than people who simply live and vote in a person's district.

Once your advocates have indicated that they know someone at the capitol you need to know how they are willing to help you reach them. Another feature of a Grassroots Advocacy system is the ability to ask advocates to fill out a form that expresses their level of commitment. Are they willing to write an email but not necessarily willing to make a phone call? You need to know so that when you issue a call-to action you know how you want to approach your advocates.

Understanding your advocates' level of commitment and utilizing their key political relationships can greatly increase the effectiveness of your advocacy efforts.

One critical feature that a Grassroots System should have is the ability to assign people to their legislative districts based on their home address. Supporters vote where they live, and when they vote they are a constituent of a legislator. Knowing which district your supporters live in gives you the ability to look at a legislator and instantly know how many of your advocates are constituents in their district. Having this information allows you to better engage your elected officials because you can illustrate to them how strong the support for your organization is within their district.

Legislative districts are determined in each state every ten years using the decennial census data. District lines are drawn according to demographic data based on race statistics of the population. The process utilizes a geography measurement called a census block. A census block is bounded by streets and resembles a city block. In turn, it is part of a group of blocks, which are part of a census tract, which is part of a county. The district drawing process can therefore neatly fit into counties or cities depending on how the elected officials drawing the lines decide they want the lines drawn. When the redistricting process is done, each state produces map and files illustrating the legislative district boundaries. One of the files they create is called the Block Equivalency File and it shows all the census blocks that make up each district within each state.

The challenge in relating your supporters to their legislative districts is how accurately determine an address' census block. This process is called geographic encoding or "geo-coding". The geo-coding process takes an address and matches it to the master file of all street addresses and their associated census blocks. The census bureau has such a file that they use to conduct the census and several private companies also maintain this data for address verification purposes.

So what happens if instead of geocoding, your grassroots system uses ZIP codes on the address of your supporters to match up people to their legislators? Does postal geography fit into the scheme for creating legislative districts? Unfortunately, the answer here is no. Using ZIP codes to match to legislative district can result in inaccurate information because zip codes define mailing geography and have nothing do to with census geography. Zip codes are drawn to help the postal service deliver mail efficiently. So ZIP code geographic areas can cross legislative district boundaries. If you have an address where the ZIP crosses two districts, you don't have an easy way to determine which district the address should be assigned to. Even 9 digit ZIP codes have this problem. While these ZIP codes go down to the street segment level, covering a handful of addresses along a street, they may still span two or more legislative boundaries because they are not defined with legislative districts in mind.

Below we see a map of Georgia. The large colored areas indicate the legislative districts, while the smaller areas represent ZIP Code geography. As you can see in the cut-away, some ZIP codes span multiple legislative districts. If you have an advocate that lives in that ZIP code there is no way for you to know which district they actually live in.
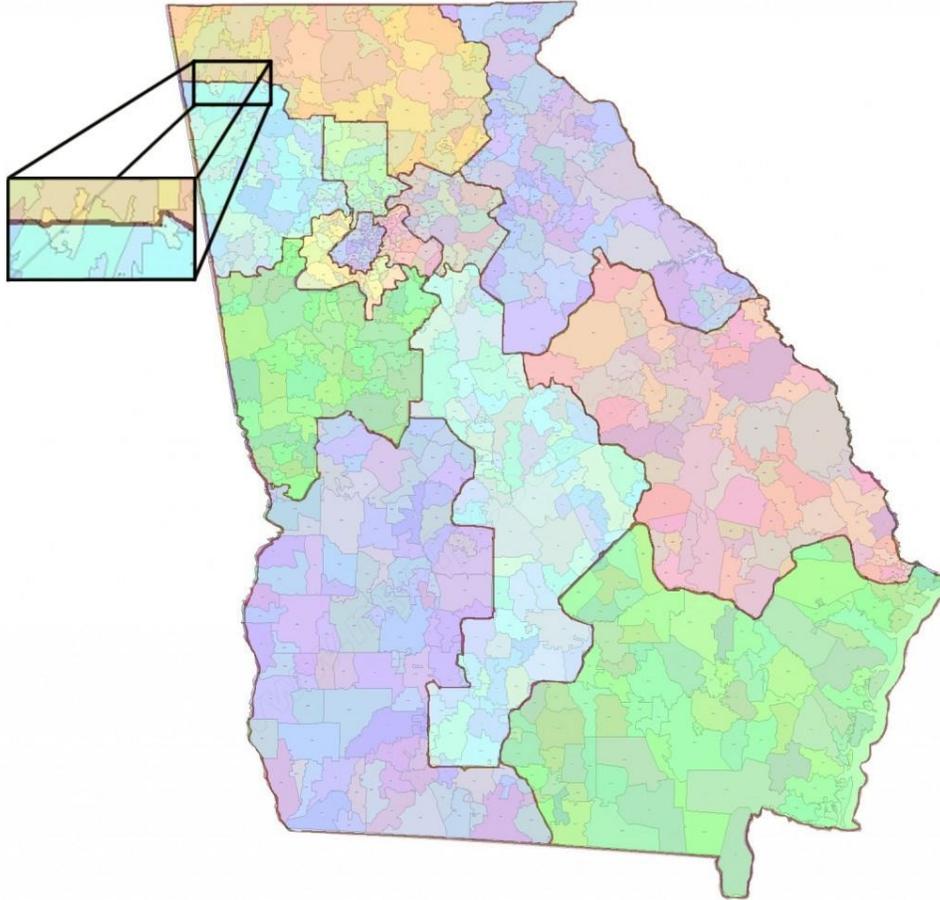
How does your Grassroots System assign your supporters to their districts? If you are using ZIP codes instead of census block data you probably do have inaccurate assignments!

CHAPTER 5 - TWO GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS THAT WILL HAVE A BIG IMPACT ON LEGISLATORS

Now that you have your network set up, your database segmented, and your advocates engaged, it is time to start utilizing them. Your next step is to run a grassroots campaign.

When asked to run a campaign in support of an issue, an advocacy manager must determine what type of campaign to run. While most people may think that all campaigns are the same, grassroots organizers know that some campaigns are more effective than others for specific issues. What type of campaign is right for the job, and how can advocacy technology help? We've already discussed three keys to a successful campaign, but there are many types of campaigns that each requires a different tactic. Here are two types of grassroots campaigns that advocacy managers should know about.

TARGETED CAMPAIGNS

Targeted campaigns are those where the message is from a specific set of grassroots supporters directed at a specific set of legislators. This type of campaign is often run when a bill is in committee and advocacy managers want committee members to vote to either keep the bill in committee or pass it out. A targeted campaign can also be used when a bill is coming up for a full chamber vote and you know which members do not support your position. In this situation it may be best to focus your energy on those people only, and use the supporters that can reach those members. Your grassroots system should allow you to create a universe of legislators to be the target of your lobbying efforts. This universe should be able to be one, ten, one hundred, or even more legislators of your choosing. Additionally, your system should allow you to choose supporters based on their relationship to the legislator, their voting district, or by some other grouping that you create in your system. In a targeted campaign, you are targeting the receiver of a message with a specific sender of the message, and your advocacy system should enable you to create those two universes and enable them to communicate.

CONSTITUENT CAMPAIGNS

Constituent campaigns are designed to impact legislators by utilizing the people that live in their districts as the conveyors of the message. You are mobilizing the people in your organization to contact their elected officials to send them your message. With this type of campaign, your advocacy system should be to match your supporters to their legislators automatically, by their address (their home address is where they vote and their work address is where they are affected by legislation in many cases). When you select a specific legislator to target with a constituent campaign, your system should be able to automatically select all of your supporters that are connected to that legislator to participate in the campaign. This makes it easy for the advocacy manager to quickly involve the people that can vote for targeted legislators.

The types of campaign you choose will determine how narrow or broad you campaign needs to be. If you want to canvas your state and impact a broad range of legislators with a significant number of supporters, a constituent campaign may be the best vehicle. On the other hand, if you want to reach a select few legislators and "get inside their heads," then you would probably be better served with a targeted campaign to reach them using people that know them. Does your advocacy system allow you to run different types of campaigns? If not, it may be time to look for one that will.

About Capitol Impact

Capitol Impact is a Georgia based firm with a decade and a half of experience providing advocacy and legislation management tools on a state-by-state level. We understand how the Internet can be used to provide easy to use environments that help our clients communicate, publish information, and manage advocacy information and activities.

Capitol Impact offers web-based software suites that help monitor both state and federal legislation as well as assist in organizing grassroots lobbying databases and executing advocacy campaigns at the state as well as national level.

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