

Communications as a Strategic Tool for Affordable Housing Campaigns

The NeighborWorks[®] Symposium on Multifamily Excellence

Winning Public Officials' Votes

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1. Define your audience.

Your audience isn't "the Legislature," "the City Council" or "the County Commission." You have three target audiences:

- **Advocates:** Do they need political cover? From whom? What can you do to create a safe zone for your supporters?
- **Opponents:** Don't waste time trying to win them over, but don't ignore them either. [Attempt to limit the spread of](#) their influence.
- **Fence sitters:** What will it take to win their votes? Put most of your time, attention and resources here.

Your key audiences are those who help you hold on to the votes you have, control the votes you don't have and win the votes you need. The challenge is in defining who influences the policy makers you need and how you can influence the influencers.

2. The messages that worked in the past, don't work today.

Issues increasingly are won or lost in a policy maker's district, not in the corridors of government. Money matters in politics, but votes are the ultimate currency. Who elects the policy makers you are targeting? Engage those who make a difference.

3. There is broad public consensus on critical issues. There is deep public division over solutions. Agreement always is a better starting point than disagreement.

If the fight is over solutions, it will be hard to win.

- In a polarized political environment, there is little agreement on solutions. Solutions get cast as big government (higher taxes to pay for welfare) vs. the marketplace (the private sector efficiently providing housing for responsible individuals).

If the focus is on issues where there is broad public consensus, there is room for success:

- Community vitality – Creating a community in which our teachers, nurses and firefighters can buy a home.

- Family – Buying a home should be a realistic goal for our children who are beginning their careers and working hard but who see little hope that, even if they save, they can afford a home.
- Personal security – When so many of us have a good deal of our retirement security tied up in our homes, our community needs a vibrant housing market, one in which people can get a foothold in the housing market and be able to trade up as their families and needs grow.
- Ultimately, it is about me – For many, it's not what I can do for the community, but what the community can do for me. What the community can do for me is protect my wealth (property values) and provide basic services (make it possible for police, teachers, nurses to live nearby).

4. Language matters.

How you talk about the issue is important. Tie your issue to the values of your audiences. Talk about the economic vitality and health of communities and ways that your issue benefits people, e.g., protect property values, attract workers who can fill low-wage jobs, etc.

- Options and choice are more effective than mandates and subsidies.
- This is an issue about individuals, not classes of people.
- Fix what we have before creating new programs.
- A hand up is better than welfare.

Affordable housing as a social justice issue does not move audiences.

5. Grassroots is a three-part process. It's ineffective to do one without the other two.

- *Educate* – Educate your audiences on the issue, the opportunity, the personal benefit. Most people won't get involved unless they have a comfort level with the issue and a personal stake in the outcomes.
- *Call to action* – Create opportunities for people to get involved.
- *Urgency* – Invest time and effort in convincing your advocates that their voices will make a difference.

6. Don't expect government to be the whole solution. Be creative in forging coalitions.

Neither policy makers nor their constituents expect government to be the entire answer. The successful efforts have brought a private-public approach to housing.

7. Sell your successes as aggressively as you sell the need for more action.

Many policy makers look at affordable housing as a bottomless, black hole. The perception is that no matter how much money is invested, the need keeps growing. It's easier to spend money on a road that constituents see and that benefits many.

Talk about your successes. How have the solutions you are proposing translated into more affordable housing stock? And how have the affordable units translated into vital communities and productive individuals?

8. Research

Don't assume you know the most effective messages.
Don't assume you know the most important audiences.

9. Never accept defeat.

“One can't believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven't had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

– Lewis Carroll from *Through the Looking Glass*