

Communications as a Strategic Tool for Affordable Housing Campaigns

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Sustaining General Public Support Through a State Campaign

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By Valerie Denney
President, Valerie Denney Communications

In this document, I outline the eight critical planning areas every communications or marketing plan must address.

Goals

Greater awareness of the need for affordable housing and dispelling fears about it is a primary goal for all the campaigns reviewed. The question all organizers need to ask themselves is what – specifically – will greater awareness lead to and do the resources exist to keep this issue in front of people. “Greater awareness” is a process, and it takes more or less time depending on what you want target audiences to do and the audience’s self-interest and/or resistance to the issue being raised.

Research

In general, the more research you can do, the better, particularly when you are doing outreach to hostile audiences or audiences that don’t reflect organizers’ background and/or demographic make-up. It’s often a mistake to assume you know the words and arguments that will persuade someone who approaches this issue from a different viewpoint unless you have organized or worked extensively with that audience before. Even then research can provide nuanced information that can inform messages and tactics. Research can include many types of activities but generally refers to focus groups, surveys, one-on-one interviews, publications audits and/or reviews of similar campaigns.

The amount of research varied greatly in the campaigns reviewed, with Illinois engaging focus groups, a 1,000-person phone survey and a segmented cluster analysis. Vermont’s phone survey was much smaller, but perhaps appropriate to that state’s size.

Audience

Identifying target audiences, creating urgency for your issue, and then telling audiences what you want them to do are the cornerstones of any effective issue campaign. Although government officials are a primary target for all of the communications campaigns in this particular session, Vermont’s targeted audiences – leadership in towns with housing projects already in the pipeline – provide a good example of a well targeted campaign.

Housing Illinois is a good example of another type of approach in which audience segments likely to be sympathetic are identified and then messages are crafted to reach these audiences only.

Strategy

Communications plans work best when they accompany genuine, on the ground organizing and consist of a wide variety of different types of efforts over a period of time. Vermont, Minnesota and Illinois are all attempting some version of this. However, this approach takes sustained funding, ongoing communications expertise and good organizing skills and follow-through.

While the Florida campaign had a very specific target audience, organizers indicate that their book did not reach all intended audiences. “Single shot” communications frequently encounter this problem. Unanticipated problems derail or weaken the effort and maximum results aren’t achieved.

Message

A fundamental communications tenet is that you must show a direct benefit to the audience whose minds you are hoping to change or influence. Focus groups and a survey conducted by Housing Illinois support this idea. Audiences must be persuaded that affordable housing will benefit them – not be told why it is good for someone else. This research also demonstrates that perceptions about how affordable housing “looks” is critical to support.

In general, effective messages are short, memorable and “ring true.” Of the housing messages offered by the four campaigns, Housing Illinois’ is the most effective.

Vermont: “Housing is the foundation of Vermont’s communities.”

Minnesota: “Homes for all by 2012.” Housing at all income levels is key to sustainability of stable families, healthy communities and statewide economic prosperity

Illinois: “We need the people that need affordable housing.”

Florida: Affordable housing can be attractive and an asset to communities; affordable housing is the law

Communications’ Materials and Vehicles

Most of the campaigns are utilizing similar marketing vehicles: brochures; print, radio & tv ads; posters; videos; and websites. These are the standard communications pieces and are generally the starting point for any communications campaign. “Messengers” are also important. The rule of thumb is that people listen best to people like themselves. Most of the campaigns integrate this idea by using teachers, firefighters, police officers, seniors, cooks, day care workers, and health care attendants in their materials.

Cost

Research and advertising are the most expensive costs in a communications campaign, requiring at least \$250,000, and often much more. Reaching audiences, even without advertising, requires repeated contact, particularly when messages are intended to persuade. High-quality design for brochures and other collateral material is another important expenditure. Methods for distribution should be decided on before materials are created. Remember to get buy-in if you want external organizations to distribute your materials.

Evaluation

Meaningful evaluation is very hard to do when public awareness is the goal. Typically, large organizations with large budgets test public opinion both before and after an information campaign. However, the amount of contact required to register a change can (and usually is) prohibitively expensive. The reality is that changing public opinion can take years and be very expensive to measure. It is easier to measure “output” (how many brochures distributed or meetings held) or “outcomes” (number of media hits or legislation passed), but none of these measures actually tell you about awareness.