



YOUNG
EUROPEAN
FEDERALISTS

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE CAMPAIGNING



“If you campaign you engage
in political warfare”

INTRODUCTION

If you campaign you engage in political warfare. Your goal is to change a specific status, which others defend. To be successful you will need to know the terrain, the means to overcome the defence, who is on your side and you need to put all this into plan. You might dislike this military metaphor but it is a fitting one. Be aware: a political campaign needs to stir up conflict. If your organisation is afraid of arguments then forget about campaigning. Otherwise continue to read. The article starts with a discussion on what a campaign is – and what not. In the second part it explains practical aspects of campaigning. The third part focuses on the challenges to campaign across borders.

WHAT IS CAMPAIGNING?

A campaign is a series of actions that aim to achieve one goal. Campaigning is not educating. This is a very important point which many youth NGOs get wrong. When you educate you raise awareness for a problem, you spread your knowledge about it to make people understand its different aspects. Therewith you help them to reflect upon the issue and enable them to establish an individual opinion. In contrast, a campaign wants not only to raise awareness, but make people worry enough to take action. To put it in a picture: to save lives, car drivers do not need to understand those physical forces in play when their vehicle hits a bridge pier. They just need to fasten their damn seat-belts. Thus, a traffic safety organisation should better not air a TV commercial starring a physics professor but instead show the smashed heads of a crashed family. First basic lesson: Make people worry, do not educate them.

Your organisation has a mission and probably a manifesto too – these are not the starting points for your campaign. A campaign can have one objective and one objective only. This objective should be to change one specific status that your organisation is dissatisfied with. An example: Greenpeace's aim is to save whales but the organisation cannot achieve this aim at once. Therefore, Greenpeace confronts whalers when the issue seems to fall off the public's agenda. Therewith it raises awareness and contributes to the global prohibition of whaling. Second lesson: A single campaign cannot achieve your organisation's great cause, only a little piece of it.



Finally, be aware that your organisation is a club of fanatics.

No matter what your cause is: you and your fellow members are much more into it than the average young person. Take diehard football fans as an example. For them football means their life. For non-football fans these people are from another planet. The same holds true for your organisation. However, campaigning requires engaging people external to your organisation. Third and final lesson: If your actions only inspire your members then you are not campaigning but self-entertaining.

STRATEGY: IDENTIFYING A SUITABLE OBJECTIVE AND THE MEANS TO ACHIEVE IT



OBJECTIVE

A strategy is a plan that defines the objective and identifies the means to achieve it with the fewest resources possible. Let us start with the first question: what is the objective? It seems like an easy one but actually it is the most difficult and most decisive point you need to think about. Everything depends on it: the choice of means, messages and channels, as well as your target audience to name but a few aspects. The objective of your campaign has to fulfil two conditions: First, it needs to be relevant for your cause, as well as for other people to take interest in – be it potential activists, journalists or decision makers. Second, it needs to be achievable. If you chose an objective out of your league or you chose to fight a lost battle you will frustrate your activists and supporters. You will experience that breaking down your aim into an objective that fulfils these conditions is a tough job. Nevertheless, it is worth taking the time for this decision.

MEANS

Every measure has to contribute to your objective! Before you decide on any action ask yourself whether this is the case. Otherwise you will waste your resources. While identifying the means necessary to achieve your objective think backwards starting from the hypothetically fulfilled objective itself: which decision-making body would when and where agree on the change you aim for? Then ask yourself how could you influence this decision-making body. Probably by convincing a majority of its members. How do you do that? A starting point would be to win an influential member for your cause. Thus, think about the measures as a chain of actions which fulfil sub-objectives necessary to achieve the campaign objective.

TARGET GROUP

Identifying the sub-objectives is related to the next important aspect: your campaign's target group (or groups). The more precisely you define and analyse the latter the more effective your measures will be. That is because only if you know your audience you can find the trigger that motivates them to take action. For example: in a democracy the decision-makers are elected. These people are very sensitive to public pressure. Hence, your main target group might be politicians of a city council. However, instead of trying to convince them directly you could first call a journalist's attention to the problem and with her/his article in your pocket try to make allies with other civil society groups. Together you might be powerful enough to pressure some politicians to comment on your ideas. This reaction will cause further reporting by journalists. Eventually you might be able to sufficiently raise public awareness and win the public opinion for your cause to put enough pressure on the politicians to follow your proposal.

MESSAGE

After having defined the objective, identified the measures and analysed the target audience, you can start thinking about the campaign's message. Take the Barack Obama campaign of 2008 as an example. His message was that with Bush the USA had developed into the wrong direction. Only with him the country would find its way back on the right track. His team wrapped up this message into the slogan „Change we can believe in“. Keep in mind that your campaign can only have one message. You will have one very clear version of this message for internal use. Then you adjust the message to find appropriate slogans for each target group. In doing so you must abide the golden rule „The bait should catch the fish not the fisherman“. If you need the masses on your side then find a slogan that appeals to them – not necessarily to you. Pause for a moment and digest this: Most likely you have an academic background and your friends do too.



You are in command of an extensive vocabulary and speak at least one other language. No matter where you come from: as such you are the minority! If you break the bait-fisherman-rule you run the risk to formulate a message and a slogan that your audience does not understand. Take the big German drugstore chain "Douglas" as an example. Some years ago its slogan was „Come in and find out“. If literally translated into German this slogan has the meaning "Enter and find your way out." – and this is what many Germans understood. What a marketing failure.

RESOURCES

The resources available to you limit the extent of the campaign. Be aware that a proper campaign will consume many working hours and, depending on your choice of channels, money too. As a youth organisation your resources are limited. Hence, check your scarce resources and consider that many of your ideas will be out of your league. You are neither a big company, with a million for ad budget, nor Greenpeace either. In fact, there is a high chance that your organisation is struggling to recruit enough volunteers to fulfil the basic tasks. A campaign should never consume so many resources that the survival of your organisation is set at risk.



CHANNELS

Which are the channels best suited to reach your audience? For most classic advertisements you do not have the money. However, internet actions, flyer, street actions and a call to the local newspaper are for free or relatively cheap. The press is often a desirable channel. To attract the journalists' attention you need to deliver a noteworthy story. Most likely this is not your board's last resolution. That is because journalists are event driven. Hence, you need to create an event. One week beforehand you send out a press announcement to the relevant journalists, then you perform your action, take pictures of it and release a press release. Especially journalists in small towns are thankful for anything special that happens. Based on that first contact you might build a relationship with the journalists and by this way reach a broader audience in the long term. Nevertheless, depending on your objective, other channels might be equally important or even more suitable.

TIMING AND CONTEXT

Keep an eye on the public agenda. If you plan your action on a day with many other events your efforts might pass unnoticed. The same holds true if your action does not fit the context. If you want to influence the meeting of a board then you need to do the action before the board comes together. However, the chosen date should not be too much in advance as then the topic might still be off-radar for the public. Additionally, also the agenda of your activists matters. If these are students, then take into account that you will not be able to mobilise many of them during exam weeks.

DON'T FORGET THE FUN

Your activists do not only want to change the world for the better, they also want to have fun. This holds especially true for new activists. Therefore, use the ladder of engagement principle: give every activist some responsibility but start low. The more experienced she or he gets, the bigger the tasks become. Volunteering might begin with a Facebook like and end with managing the next campaign.



CAMPAIGNING ACROSS BORDERS

Campaigning across borders is a challenge. As a campaign coordinator you will face a very heterogeneous landscape: the political systems differ, the target groups do too and might be moved by different triggers. Some channels work in one country but not in another and what is high on the public agenda in state A might be off the radar in state B. The key therefore is to leave a great deal of autonomy to the individual sections. They know best how to manoeuvre in their respective terrain.

This requires however, that every section sticks to the common message and other defined campaign parameters. Otherwise you risk that instead of one campaign your sections conduct many different ones. To achieve this minimum uniformity the campaign coordinator first needs to invest in raising awareness within the own organisation. Anticipate that this takes time, and requires even more communication. Just as with any activist you should give your member sections the feeling that their voice is heard and their ideas taken into account. To start raising awareness you might start the process with an article in your member magazine. Explain what the problem is and ask for comments. If the responses are predominantly positive during the following discussion you might issue the idea of a common action. Be aware that if you cannot convince your member sections then forget about a transnational campaign.

WHY BOTHER CAMPAIGNING?

Campaigning is no easy business, it is political warfare. And in many cases you will lose. Despite this campaigning is worth a try for political youth NGOs. A campaign

- sharpens your argument
- makes you focus on communications
- attracts attention to your cause and your organisation
- makes members become activists
- recruits new members
- and hopefully changes whatever you campaign for!

Literature recommendations

- **The Victory Lab: The secret science of winning campaigns by Sasha Issenberg**
Introduces you to the modern history of US presidential election campaigns – the most professional campaigns of the world. Will make you think that when it comes to campaigning we Europeans live in a developing country.
- **How to win campaigns: communications for change by Chris Rose**
Former Greenpeace head campaigner Chris Rose shares his knowledge – and it is a lot. Expect detailed and heavy stuff.

CLOSING WORDS

Your activists do not only want to change the world for the better, they also want to have fun. This holds especially true for new activists. Therefore, use the ladder of engagement principle: give every activist some responsibility but start low. The more experienced she or he gets, the bigger the tasks become. Volunteering might begin with a Facebook like and end with managing the next campaign.



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