

Democracy Hubs

So you're frustrated by politics and you want to do something?

Here's how...

A step-by-step guide to making a difference in five parts



Part 3 – Designing a Communications Programme

Drawing up your plan

What are your objectives? Be as specific as you can: words are important. The more clearly you can see what you are trying to achieve, the easier it will be to see the way to do it.

Example: To prevent the destruction of Beechcombe Wood.

What do you need to do to achieve it?

See it almost visually as a series of steps.



How do we get from here to there? Break it down into chunks small enough that you can envisage it. That really helps. Each step needs to be as achievable and manageable, one by one, and each leading on to the next.

But it's easier and more effective to begin at the other end and work backwards.

Ensure a majority at the May planning committee to vote against the scheme

Identify members of the planning committee and their likely voting on this issue

Focus on those likely to vote for the plan, their past voting records, their constituencies and how their neighbours are likely to react

Identify existing community groups in those councillors' backyards, their make-up and what their priorities are

Look for contacts with other community groups and how they feel about the scheme

...and so on.

What are your key messages?

You need to be clear about your key messages, the ones you need your target audiences to hear, understand and identify with. These messages are the watermark that runs through your whole strategy. Using our example:

- *Beechcombe Wood is one of the few remaining habitats for the three-toed toad, and its potential destruction may invite major conservation groups to become involved*
- *The wood is popular with local people for dog walking and recreation. Its destruction would represent a considerable loss of amenity and would incur anger among local people*
- *There are government plans to introduce a new bill within six months which may contradict the intentions of this scheme*
- *The intended housing scheme would offer few benefits to local people and only represent a money-making scheme for an outside developer*

Who do you need to influence?

Who are the people you need to hear your messages, understand them and be persuaded by them? You've already identified many of them. Do draw up a list of key stakeholders.

To them, you can add the 'influencers' –

- journalists,
- other politicians like MPs who may not be directly involved in the decision making,
- professional bodies with an axe to grind,
- local groups with interest in the general issues,
- local celebrities and so on.

What are the problems?

This is where you have to be objective again. You've agreed your key messages and identified those you need to influence in order to win them over. Now what are the problems in perception that will prevent those audiences from accepting your messages?

- It might be seen as contrary to their own interests or those they represent.
- There might be good reasons why some of those audiences wouldn't know about or understand your concerns.

Be honest about what you have to confront and how you're going to get around the problem.

What is your strategy?

Strategy is sometimes a difficult concept to understand. It's the broad approach used to achieve your objectives, not the day-to-day actions – news stories, lobbying councillors, holding meetings. It best reflects the objectives

you're trying to attain and the people you'll need to influence along the way. It's being aware of what's happening around you, to make sure your strategy is timely and is part of the *zeitgeist*. A good strategy can make things happen because it fits into your public's awareness and expectations. A bad strategy or no strategy at all means you just watch them happen.

So it's the position you choose for yourself. In public relations they sometimes use the phrase 'a first class ticket', meaning to present your plan to make it look classy and up-market, rather than pile 'em high, sell 'em cheap. The latter might work too, depending on the project, but would be hopeless for selling luxury yachts or Cartier watches. You have to choose the way you want to be seen and understood by your audiences.

What is the strategy of XR Rebellion, for instance? Notwithstanding whether their often destructive tactics are justified – they may well be – but is their strategy really to piss off most of the public, which is what tends to happen? If it is, then the strategy may be working wonderfully, only it's not clear how it achieves its objectives. If it's not, then the strategy needs re-examining.

When you're invited onto a discussion programme on your local radio station, how will you be introduced? Do you want to be seen as revolutionaries? Concerned citizens? Eco-warriors? Any of these might suit, but you have to decide who you are and who your audiences are? Again that takes discipline.

Think how differently the HS2 protestors would be seen (and treated by the security teams) if they all looked like barristers or chief executives. It would help if you were sure that the persona of your group can achieve your objectives. To make sure that everything you do fits into that identity and that all the tactics lead from and represent the strategy.

Draw up your programme!

Use your strengths

Don't forget one crucial point in your favour – often overlooked and rarely utilized. He's the politician, you're the voter: you outrank him. He loses his job if you and people like you vote him out. He's only complacent because he doesn't think you will. Prove him wrong.

Look to your other strengths too. What are you good at? If your cause can half fill a village hall, you already have a number of people who will have their own skills – in IT, writing, organizing, knowing the right

people. Empower them, that's the way you'll get a dynamic organization. Look at all the different skills and approaches you'll need to carry out your chosen activities and set up little sub-groups of two or three – more if you have enough people – to concentrate on their own area of expertise.

People often don't realize what political skills they have. Take using the web, for instance. Recently the plan for an Ipswich bypass was overthrown. It started with the backing of county and all district councils and had a budget of hundreds of millions of pounds. But it would have driven through a particularly pretty part of Suffolk and the citizens weren't having it.

How did they act - they overwhelmed the local authorities. The protest group had several sub-groups, including one for online research, which alone had 22 members! Imagine, 22! The county council, at best had one and a half blokes working on this. Every time their team published something it was then analyzed, pulled apart, criticized, rejected, and mocked in the local press. Is this a good look for a public body?

Create a Team

So consider what special skills you'll need and look at your resources, especially people. What teams can you put together

Research & Technical

Got a retired physics teacher or an undergraduate doing science? Excellent. Get them pulling apart the basic scientific assumptions of the plan. They probably will be assumptions too, and nobody will have expected the public to scrutinize them. Don't forget; the task is to throw up doubts, question technical decisions, cause decisions to be referred back. In other words, you want to smother them in questions and challenges and then question every response. You are looking to create log-jams. Your aim is for somebody eventually throwing up his hands and wondering if all this is worth the candle.

Other Areas

Apply the same principle to the other areas and skills sets you need to cover off, and you're in business. The main areas that you need to research and develop are:-

- Communications
- IT
- Liaison with the news media (press officer)
- Diplomacy – ensuring assertion, not aggression
- Writing – the pen is mighty
- Graphics – to professionalise and 'brand' all your outreach materials
- Printing and delivery