

Winning Your Push For Change: the TLDR on Directed-Network Campaigns

Non-profit organizations that fight for policy changes are facing more and more challenges when it comes to getting their message heard.

In 2016, authors Tom Liacas and Jason Mogus of NetChange produced Networked Change, a report on the strategies and practices being used most successfully by organizations seeking to create lasting change on the issues they address.

In dissecting 47 advocacy campaigns across 10 years, they found the ones that “punched above their weight” in impact fit a common recipe they call **directed-network campaigning**. They describe this as a “hybrid form of top-down and bottom-up mobilization” which benefitted from the focus and centralized coordination traditionally seen from institutional organizations, while tapping in to the power of a grassroots-type support base by leaving freedom and agency for supporters to engage on their own terms.

Drawing on their networks, directed-network campaigns “generate greater public engagement and achieve rapid scale with relatively few resources at the outset. With an executive structure that establishes strategic direction and carefully manages resources, these campaigns have what it takes to survive in an advocacy landscape now saturated with information and calls to action that compete for our attention.”

In the past five years, campaigns like #Fightfor15, BlackLivesMatter, and Bernie Sanders’ election race have shown that it is possible to run networked people-powered campaigns that are focused and effective, and win systems-busting change.

The authors identify 4 strategic principles common to directed-network campaigns:

- **Building cross-movement network hubs**

Common practice used to be to set up cause-based institutions to create social change, but now network building has emerged as an attractive and efficient way to build power. The authors note that as individuals, “**affinity with causes rather than organizations encourages** people to rally around issues regardless of previous institutional loyalties. It is therefore less important for a single group to own a cause and more important that the cause itself find wider **resonance with allied groups.**”

The SEIU, a labour union in the USA, is the force behind #Fightfor15, the campaign for a \$15 minimum wage. The campaign benefits reach well beyond their paying membership, and they consciously linked with other, larger constituencies, tapping into and drawing power from economic and racial justice movements.

For us, this means framing our cause in a way that it is attractive to diverse, even unlikely allies. The report suggest #hashtags, not brands when planning campaigns, to allow campaigns to be adopted more widely and hence have more power.

- **Opening to grassroots power**

True grassroots participation is now a non-negotiable success factor. It is a sign of popular support which demonstrates power in a pressure campaign. As well, campaigns which give supporters an active role and freedom to customize generate more commitment and enthusiasm while also gaining insights from the collective intelligence of their crowd.

#Fightfor15 was framed in an open and unbranded way, and as such gained people power from groups completely unaffiliated with the labour union, allowing its impact to spread so much further than it would have as a tightly controlled union campaign.

This means letting go of our need to stay “on brand” and allowing the message to be adapted by supporters across their different contexts.

- **Framing a compelling cause**

Potential supporters are inundated with causes, and loyalty to institutions is fading. Storytelling and issue-framing can convert spectators to supporters rapidly. Stories must tap into deep concerns and values shared by the audience and also be framed in a simple, believable way, with a path to victory and a role for the participant.

People interested in economic, social, and racial justice found #Fightfor15 to be a compelling cause that was concrete and attainable enough to throw their support into – attainable yet impactful.

This means we must focus on “action-worthy” problems and solutions. Supporters will not join a fight that is too abstract to grasp, too single-issued to make a difference, or too hopeless to win. Whenever possible, allow those who are directly affected by the issue tell their story themselves.

Stories that feature heroes and villains are particularly effective – but remember to cast your supporter base as the hero with the active role, and your organization as the mentor, not the hero.

- **Running with focus and discipline**

Advocacy campaigns are usually trying to apply pressure to targets that are much better resourced, so it is important to marshal staff, budgets and content wisely. This calls for leadership from seasoned campaigners with a keen sense of timing, relationships and resource management. Testing can also provide insight into what is most effective, if campaigners are willing to test often and change quickly based on results.

Good management of resources includes focusing energy on key moments, and knowing when to organize and when to mobilize.

"A common cause of campaign failure is the exhaustion of resources and social capital by running in a constant state of high urgency, and then being unable to focus a campaign's full power on a target when a tangible opportunity for a win finally appears."

The #Fightfor15 campaign drew media attention when they won milestone victories in 2015, **forcing Walmart and McDonald's to raise minimum wages**, but they had been active in many cities across the U.S. since 2012. It took over 2.5 years of sustained campaigning and organizing to get to a place where this movement was a force to be reckoned with.

This means when pushing for large change, we need to play the long game, be resilient, and be disciplined with our resources.

Through the evolution of technology and culture together, networks are emerging over hierarchies as a new organizational form that is having profound effects on our beliefs about **power. The decline in institutional trust and the rise in the individual's desire to choose, customize, and co-create** has clear implications for any campaign strategy seeking to mobilize people toward a common goal. Add in that there are now more advocacy groups than ever sharing smaller funding bases and that public attention spans continue to drop as more causes compete for mindshare. Directed-network campaigning emerges from this report as a clear and simple model to build on for organizers wishing to give their campaigns the best chances of winning.

This is especially great news for small organizations and scrappy upstarts who might feel they do not have the capacity to take on the change they seek; by leveraging networks that change may well be within your grasp.