
Chapter 7:

DEVELOPING AN ELECTION ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

If your nonprofit has spent time determining a policy agenda, it's time to develop an action plan for engagement. The development and implementation of an engagement strategy is often when the work becomes publicly visible. Choosing to make your policy priorities visible is a significant step for your nonprofit and should be approached in a coordinated and strategic manner. This chapter focuses on tackling the shorter-term objectives through various tactics, which all work toward achieving longer-term advocacy goals.

Focus on Your Goals and Choose Your Tactics

The more time you spend setting your policy agenda (see chapter 6) and goals, the easier it will be to determine which tactics to pursue as you develop your engagement strategy. Figuring out this strategy will require you to review and assess which tactics are available to you and would be most useful in moving your policy agenda forward. These might include face-to-face meetings with political candidates or organized campaigns around an issue – each has its benefits and considerations. See the table at the end of this chapter for a snapshot of tactics you may consider using as part of your engagement strategy.

Bring People Along With You

As part of your strategy development, be sure to investigate what other advocacy efforts are happening in the community. Consider how other efforts might support, hinder, or cause you to adopt a more collaborative approach to your strategy. You might find that your policy agenda intersects with the work of other groups, or that it could be strengthened through a network approach. For instance, if a nonprofit immigrant serving agency was interested in fighting against discriminatory policies or practices in the workplace, they might choose to connect and share resources with an organization that recently published a report on strategies to address discrimination.

You might also consider that another group has the ability to speak better to certain issues and you could benefit from drawing on their strengths. Formal and informal networks can play out in different ways, from organizing a policy development working group, to carrying out joint projects, such as events or submissions to government. Keep in mind that networks tend to be held together by transparency and commitment to common values, as opposed to rigid adherence to specific group interests and objectives.

Know the Landscape

The provincial budget could be released before Alberta's next provincial general election, to be held before May 31, 2019. It will be important to stay connected to news outlets, political party websites, and community interests to keep tabs on when important information becomes available, and when political candidates plan to engage with the public. Create a timeline and plot out the initiatives that you would like to undertake and the important community discussions you will plug into. Start your planning early and focus on the four weeks leading up to the election (voting takes place on the 28th day after the date of the writ). While it is important to be organized and to have a solid engagement strategy, it is even more important to spend effort monitoring, learning, and adjusting your plan as you go. In the context of an uncertain political environment – such as what Alberta is currently in – policy advocacy planning should be flexible and responsive.

Craft Your Communications

Whatever tactic or combination of tactics you decide to pursue, it will always be important to focus on the content. Is the message you are sharing in your communications inspiring and effective? Here are a few questions to ask and tips to help guide the way as you engage with political candidates and your intended audience:

Is your content objective, fact-based, well-reasoned, and non-partisan?

TIP: Share local data and statistics about your nonprofit, or the broad nonprofit sector – you may surprise people with your findings.²⁴

Have you engaged your audience (communities, candidates, decision-makers, etc.) in different ways?

TIP: Your message often needs to be heard multiple times through different avenues before it is remembered.

Have you used storytelling in your communications?

TIP: People are more likely to remember information told as a story, with characters, a beginning, middle, and end, a plot, conflict, and resolution.

Have you used visuals and descriptive language in your communications to help create a picture of the solution you're proposing?

TIP: Research shows that readers understand and are more likely to remember material when it is expressed in language that allows them to form visual images or that connects to the senses.²⁵ For example, the simple use of the word "sweet" draws a stronger response than "kind" and the same for "bitter" compared to "mean."²⁶

Are your calls to action clear and specific?

TIP: Be clear on how the proposed solution will help your target audience solve the problem, and how they can play a role in the solution, to make the call to action more effective. For example, instead of asking people to end climate change, encourage people to reduce gas emissions by carpooling, riding a bike or walking.

Are your recommendations to government or political candidates/parties clear and specific?

TIP: The more specifics you provide, the closer you will bring the decision-maker to deciding. For example, instead of asking for a nonprofit strategy, CCVO has specifically suggested the creation of a [Premier's Advisory Council](#)²⁷ on the Nonprofit Sector that reports directly to the Premier and Executive Council, an approach that will ensure clear lines of accountability.

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ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TOOLBOX

TACTIC	OPPORTUNITY	CONSIDERATIONS
Hosting an all-candidates forum	Nonprofits are well-positioned to sponsor forums and increase public understanding of the election process and candidates who are running.	Candidates are usually more willing to attend when: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> they have clear positions on issues they expect a large audience there is guarantee of neutrality
Attend candidate forums hosted by others	Many of these forums provide opportunities for questions from those in attendance - have your question prepared in case you have a chance to ask about your issue.	Be respectful of the organizer and make sure your issue is related to the topics at hand.
Platform analysis	Reviewing party platforms, assessing what they have to say about issues of importance to your nonprofit, and sharing that information can be very valuable to people who care about the issues that your nonprofit works on.	Political parties may choose to share party platforms at different times and in different formats - check the CCVO website as we follow these developments.
Sharing resources and background materials with candidates	This is a great way to educate candidates about your issues, your constituency, or your community. Candidates rely on you to educate them about your issues.	You may share research and your policy priorities with candidates, and ensure that the same information is available to all candidates.
Attending meetings with individual candidates	These meetings can be helpful when a candidate's opinion is different from yours - to let the candidate know that there is an alternative and organized viewpoint.	Make sure to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare talking points, issue, briefs, fact sheets, etc. Keep it brief and use plain language Anticipate their questions Send thank you letters, including contact information for further questions, and follow-up with summary notes, actions items, etc.
Public awareness campaigns	Sharing stories and background materials through traditional and social media is a great way to increase understanding and awareness with public stakeholder groups and the community.	You may oppose or support a policy, but keep your communication nonpartisan by making sure it is not connected to a single candidate or political party.
Get out the vote	Nonprofits have played, and continue to play, an essential role in the weeks leading up to elections. Traditionally marginalized groups (younger, diverse, low income) are often supported by nonprofits through access to information about how to vote and transportation to polling stations, among other supports.	When political candidates recognize the voting power of the nonprofit sector, they are more likely to listen to our issues and concerns. This is our opportunity to engage new voters and show power in numbers. Check the CCVO website for resources on voter engagement.

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