STRATEGIC SERVICES

Pressure vs Persuasion

The overlooked secret to winning your advocacy campaign

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A little over a year ago, a handful of passionate grassroots public health advocates huddled in a meeting room in Birmingham, Alabama. They were gathered to figure out how to protect the workers in the city from deadly tobacco smoke in the workplace. The question on everyone's mind was: After a year's worth of public education campaigning with few results, could they ever overcome the powerful tobacco lobby and its allies? Those around the table shouted out ideas for the next phase of their local anti-smoking campaign, which were then written up on a white board:

- Find compelling statistics to show the local health consequences of cigarettes
- Collect online videos of individuals explaining what the issue means to them
- Draft a series of blog posts explaining why the city council should address this issue
- Make a fact sheet about the scope of the problem to share with, advocates, decision-makers and the media
- Release a report detailing how their ordinance could save the local government money
- Jazz up their website and make it the definitive destination for information on the issue
- Produce a flyer that could be handed out at public events
- Buy radio ads warning people about the dangers of smoking

These weren't bad ideas – but as professional campaign organizers and media strategists, we couldn't help but wonder if they were *good enough* to win.

At M+R, the best part of our job is talking to passionate advocates about their causes and helping them build campaigns that work. Often, our most striking takeaway from these conversations is how focused the nonprofit community is on *persuading* key decision makers, rather than *pressuring* them.

So what's the difference? It's small but mighty. And understanding it could mean winning for your cause instead of spinning in your tracks year after year.

In a perfect world, the side with the most persuasive argument would almost always win. And we'd like to think that most of the time, the cause-oriented nonprofits and nonpartisan causes we work for would come out ahead. Yet, we still see too many nonprofits making the same mistake time and again: Designing campaign plans full of tactics based on persuasion rather than building power through pressure.

The team in Birmingham started off with persuasion in mind. Only when they turned on the pressure switch – having local victims, hospital CEOs, and the heads of the 99 Birmingham neighborhood associations make some noise and contact the city council – were they able to finally win their campaign and get council members to vote 8-0 to make all public places free of tobacco smoke.

No disrespect to President Lincoln, but these days, right alone does not make might. Persuasion is important, but it is rarely going to create sustained change.

The rest of this paper is designed to help teach you how to think through your campaign strategy so you can build power for your side, pressure policymakers, and achieve the change you seek.

Pressure vs Persuasion: What's the Difference?

Let's start by delineating between persuasion tactics and pressure tactics:

- Persuasion tactics are all about winning an argument.
- Pressure tactics are all about winning over your decision makers.

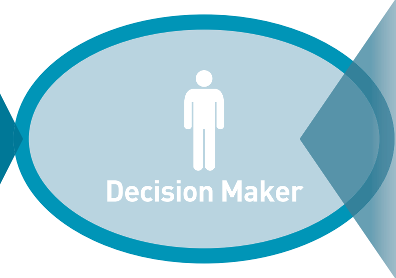
You can find compelling facts and figures. You can package them in new and interesting ways. You can deliver them in a novel and inventive fashion. But at the end of the day, getting someone to agree with you is only half the battle. How many times have we heard that an elected official is truly sympathetic — but there is simply no money, no interest from other members, or not enough support among voters for them to act?

As change agents, our job is to get the decision-maker to "yes" – whether "yes" is simply a vote in favor, becoming a leading champion for the cause, or dropping his or her opposition.

Take a look at the chart below. Your organization may not be a stranger to the ideas in the *pressure* column, but are these activities at the forefront of your campaign plans, or are they outnumbered by the tactics in the *persuasion* column? Are you planning to do at least one pressure tactic for every persuasion effort?

Persuasion Tactics

- Point to a problem and propose a solution
- Draft blog posts
- Produce an online video
- Release a study
- Compile a report
- Conduct research to make new arguments
- Collect stories without a plan to use them
- Conduct a survey
- Create a quiz
- Draft talking points and fact sheets
- Come up with a clever, attention-getting campaign brand
- Create graphics that visualize your arguments
- Hold briefings for policymakers and their staff
- Create infographics that visualize your facts and evidence
- Write emails (that don't ask people to take an action!)



Pressure Tactics

- Write letters or make phone calls to decision makers
- Host visibility events like rallies and marches that demonstrate your influence and power
- Organize a sign-on letter of community leaders or coalitions
- Organize a petition-drive and deliver signatures in person
- Publish print ads (such as sign-on letters) that demonstrate broad community support
- Send constituents to visit policymakers and their staff
- Organize a call-in day for coalition partners
- Leaflet outside the district office of key decision makers
- Generate earned media in the outlets your decision maker reads (news stories, op-eds, editorials, letters-to-the-editor)
- Place op-eds by influential individuals in major newspapers or online outlets
- Pop-the-question at town halls

Again, we're not against persuading policymakers – and you better have a persuasive argument if you want to enlist supporters and allies to help you pressure lawmakers! – but you simply cannot put all of your eggs in the persuasion basket and forsake pressure tactics. Work on your ratio – so that for every persuasion effort you build in three to four pressure tactics to compliment it. Have you seen the opposition lately? Willing and able to spend millions on campaign contributions, primetime ad buys, and high-powered lobbyists, opponents of good-guy advocacy campaigns are dangerously adept at using pressure to get their way. They mastered the *pressure vs. persuasion* strategy long ago.

We hate to say it, but as long as your opponent is applying more pressure in the right places than you are, your campaign will not win. To put pressure tactics back in the driver's seat, we recommend you approach your campaign with this process in mind:

1. Identify a specific decision maker.
2. Determine who influences that decision maker: Is there a particular media outlet they care about? A coalition of groups they trust? A handful of prominent elected officials or donors they listen to? Or perhaps simply their voting constituents (or customers, in a corporate campaign!)?
3. Organize and mobilize these influencers, enlisting them in your cause and building power – whether that's the power of constituents lined up to help, a coalition, or relationships with key members of the media.
4. Exercise your newly built power by engaging these influencers in pressure tactics like the ones outlined above.

OK, that's enough theory for now. Wondering what pressure tactics look like in action? Here's one classic example from back in the day:

M+R worked with the Save Darfur Coalition since its inception to engage a base of more than one million Americans in responding to the tragedy in Darfur. In 2007, when the campaign set out to seek authorization for a U.N. peacekeeping force, there was a significant challenge: China. Save Darfur needed China to allow a vote on peacekeeping operations at the U.N. Security Council.

At the time China was deeply invested in the oil sector in Sudan; the revenue from oil finances the heavily armed central government. While U.S. companies were (by then) barred from trade with Sudan, U.S. investors were not barred from investing in many of the companies that do business in Sudan. One of those investors was Warren Buffett and Berkshire Hathaway. Mr. Buffett had just formed a philanthropic partnership with Bill Gates, which caught our eye. The campaign decided to use Buffett as leverage with the Chinese and Sudan.

After Mr. Buffett declined a polite, direct request (in a thoughtful personal response, it should be noted!) to sell his holdings in the Chinese oil company PetroChina, the campaign's attention turned to the annual Berkshire shareholders meeting at the Omaha, Nebraska convention center. Save Darfur purchased every diorama possible at the Omaha airport and every outdoor billboard on the route to downtown Omaha. Twenty Sudanese refugees handed out leaflets in front of the convention center and the coalition held a press conference for the business media covering the shareholders meeting.

Any shareholder can request time to speak at the Berkshire meeting, and we arranged for the President of the National Council of Churches to speak. During this conversation, Bill Gates – in attendance as a partner and co-investor – acknowledged that his foundation had recently divested from Sudan-related stock. Message delivered.

Within a month, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Mr. Buffett had sold his stake in Petro-China – although he denied that the move was related to Save Darfur's campaign (we beg to differ).

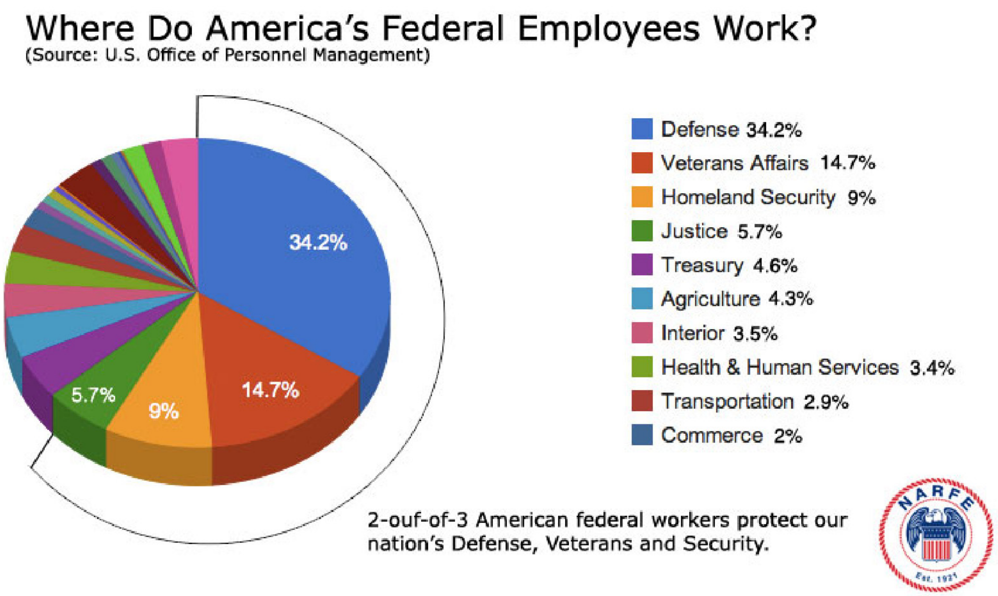
More importantly, in the spring of 2007, while the U.S. held the rotating chair of the U.N. Security Council, rather than opposing a resolution to authorize the largest peacekeeping force in the world to Darfur, the Chinese abstained. The China hurdle had been cleared. Nobody "saved Darfur," but the relative stability this resolution helped create in the region paved the way for an historic vote for independence in South Sudan. Although the struggle goes on to this day to bring peace to the region, our Omaha campaign remains a model of success in the human rights community.

How to Apply Pressure + Persuasion

Despite what you've read so far, we don't hold a grudge against persuasion tactics. We use them every day, helping our clients tell stories that bring an issue to life, present a compelling argument through a new report, package data through clever or interesting visuals, and more.

Persuasion tactics are an important awareness-building and educational component of any campaign. Consider this example of one of our favorite persuasion tactics in action: the infographic. Last December, as federal workers were taking blow after blow with pay freezes and threats to their retirement, the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE, the nation's largest representative of active and retired federal workers) wanted to highlight the overlooked fact that two-thirds of America's federal employees work for the Departments of Defense, Veterans, Homeland Security and Justice—the very departments that anti-federal worker politicians claimed to support!

We quickly created this simple infographic to bring that persuasive stat to light:



The message of the infographic was clear and meaningful, but to give it power, we needed to get it in the right hands. We waited until the time was right. When Senator McCain introduced a bill that would offset the Pentagon budget with the salaries of federal employees, we pitched the pie chart to *The Washington Post*, which published it later that afternoon. The next day, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sandy Levin asked NARFE for a copy of the infographic so his office could review how Sen. McCain's proposal would impair U.S. defenses. Levin had taken up our cause.

By timing our release and focusing our limited resources at a press outlet we knew would deliver our message to the right influencers, we made the most of a small investment. We started out with persuasion, and ended up with pressure.

But no matter how eye-popping the infographic, how thorough the report, or how touching the personal stories are that we tell to elected officials, these persuasion tactics alone do not make a great campaign. It's important to note that this infographic was one piece of a multi-year NARFE effort to organize their supporters to directly pressure Congress.

All Together Now!

Unless you have unlimited resources, you can't do it all, all of the time. So it's vital that you be selective about how and when you use which pressure and persuasion tactics. Sometimes one smart move will do the trick, but more often it takes highly coordinated and layered tactics to get the job done.

When balancing your campaign budget, be mindful of the tendency to lean on persuasion tactics — it can often cost less and take less time to produce a snappy persuasive factsheet than mobilize people to take meaningful action. But when running a campaign, you get out what you put in.

It's also worth remembering that no two organizations are created equal. Play to your strengths. If your group boasts a nationwide supporter base, put those folks to work with grassroots actions. If you're lucky enough to have strong connections to influential grasstop leaders, organize those individuals to speak out on your behalf.

There are a million possibilities – a fact that is intended to excite, not intimidate you. Here are the questions to ask yourself as you're planning your next campaign:

1. Which priority decision maker(s) has the ability to say yes to what we want and whose support will help us win the campaign? Be selective!

2. How can we build pressure on the key decision makers we need to impact? Don't settle for trying to persuade them.

3. Who are the right influencers, and how do we reach them? Know who your decision-makers listen to.

4. Which pressure tactics fit our strengths as an organization? Design your plan around your assets.

5. Which tactics and strategies will have the best "bang for our buck"? Prioritize!

6. How do we sequence these tactics to build power and put it to use? Timing is everything – have a plan.

7. How do we make sure we have room to add additional tactics if we are not successful with the first round, or the second, or the third? Think about building and deploying power over the long-term.

Don't be daunted! Just remember to focus your energies on pressuring key decision makers, not just *persuading* them, and your campaign's success is much more possible. Think integrated campaigns where all the key components add up to more power … and more success.

We're rooting for you.

About M+R Strategic Services

M+R is dedicated to helping our clients advance their missions in order to bring about positive change. We do this by helping organizations and campaigns we believe in develop smart and effective strategies, hone their messages, mobilize their members, build grassroots support, raise money, and communicate effectively with the media, the public and decision-makers, both online and offline. We have offices across the country – in fact, the concept of pressure vs. persuasion was shaped by CB Pearson, who heads M+R's Montana office.

If you'd like more guidance and support from M+R about how to plan and carry out your campaign, please contact Aaron Eske at aeske@mrss.com and visit www.mrss.com to learn more about us.

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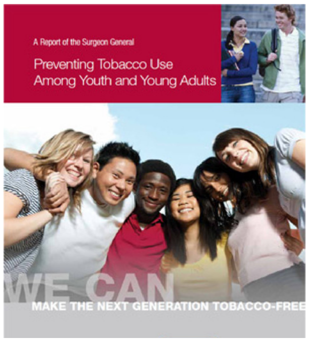
Can't get enough?

Here are a few more small-but-mighty examples of how to use pressure from recent campaigns:

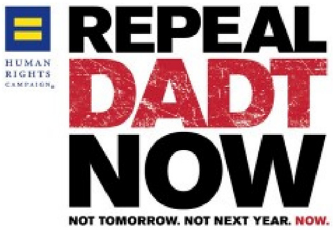
USAgainstAlzheimer's **pop-the-question strategy** in early primary states last fall successfully pressured three leading GOP candidates to release online videos about what they would do as president to stop the disease.

Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety's **storm of online action** is pressuring Enterprise Rent-A-Car to stand down on its opposition to important new consumer-safety legislation.

The American Lung Association's **influence-with-influencers approach** brought together hospitals, professors and families to pressure on-the-fence U.S. Senators to preserve clean air by demonstrating a united health community.



The Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids' **classic grassroots pressure tactics** of hosting events, meeting one-on-one with decision makers, and submitting editorials to hometown papers resulted in the FDA finally getting authority to regulate tobacco products as well as the Surgeon General releasing a new report on preventing youth tobacco use.



The Human Rights Campaign's **compelling email strategy** generated 625,000 letters to Members of Congress calling for an end the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy and pressured congressional leadership to stop avoiding the issue and bring it up for the successful vote.