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Be heard.

EVALUATE FOR IMPACT

A Simple Checklist for Planning & Evaluating Strategic Communications

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the greatest misconception about communications for social advocacy groups is the belief that those activities cannot be systematically evaluated.

When it comes to programs, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a well understood and universally practiced activity. M&E program specialists abound and no serious grant recipient would submit a funding proposal that did not include M&E—along with a budget request to carry it out. Yet when it comes to significant investments in advocacy communications to support and promote programs, M&E is too often just an afterthought—or never addressed at all! I believe there are several reasons for this:

- An assumption that in every case the single most important activity of advocacy communications is the generation of news stories and evaluating the results requires nothing more than a summary of those reports.
- The pervasive myth that advocacy communications involves too many intangibles and therefore results cannot be quantified.
- The conclusion that advocacy communications is too elusive and imprecise involves too many players and is too complex to evaluate and therefore, resources should not be allocated to measure the outcomes of such efforts.

At a time when social advocacy groups face growing demands to measure the outcomes of their efforts to achieve positive change, evaluating communications—nearly always a vital component of those efforts—should be a priority. Looked at another way, the choice NOT to systematically evaluate advocacy communications is a decision to forego:

- Gauging results during implementation and if necessary, adjusting activities to better ensure success
- Documenting lessons-learned
- Establishing best practices

A SIMPLE EVALUATION PROCESS

The challenges involved in evaluating communications can make it complex, but in most cases it does not have to be. At Advocacy Communications International, Inc. (ACII), we view defining, planning and evaluating advocacy communications as parallel steps for achieving success. Using this approach, we transformed our definition of good advocacy communications into a 10-point checklist for planning and/or evaluating such initiatives.

Using our criteria (see next page), how would you rate your own efforts?

BIGGER IMPACT PLANING & EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Core Decisions:	<p>1. Objective Do your communications objectives mirror the organization or program goals? Are they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly defined and tangible? • Represent a definitive plan of action? • Measurable?
Context:	<p>2. External Factors Do your communications reflect a thorough understanding of the environment you are working within? Do your strategies and tactics reflect the facts, opposition and public debate (perceptions and misperceptions) among your target audiences?</p>
Strategic Choices:	<p>3. Target Audiences Have you correctly identified the groups and sub-groups that represent the individuals being called upon to take specific actions? Is it possible your audience targeting may be too broad and your key messages and calls to action too general to produce meaningful impact?</p> <p>4. Audience Values and Core Concerns Do your strategies reflect a validated (rather than assumptive) understanding of the values and concerns of your target audiences? Can you prove your messages and activities will succeed in compelling your target audiences to move toward the program goal and take desired actions?</p> <p>5. Messengers/Spokespersons Are you utilizing spokespersons to deliver your messages that you know (have validated) are perceived as credible and engaging to your target audiences?</p> <p>6. Sustainability Raising awareness, changing opinions, communicating a call to action and achieving lasting change in connection with an issue typically takes time. Have or will your efforts established and/or added to a foundation of ongoing communications activities that can be sustained over several years?</p>
Tactics:	<p>7. Are your tactics in line with the organization or program objectives your communications activities are designed to help achieve?</p> <p>8. Can you verify via benchmarks and other outcomes that your communications produced <u>tangible/measurable outcomes</u> toward achieving the objectives?</p> <p>9. Do your tactics reflect your strategic approach?</p>
Evaluation	<p>10. Measures of Impact During the initial communications planning process, have you outlined a methodology for evaluating your communications that includes measures of impact? For example, have you set benchmarks that you could measure to determine if you accomplished your objectives (such as changed target audience opinions and completed calls to action)? Can you articulate lessons-learned and identify best practices?</p>