

## » Grassroots: the power of organized communities

Madrid » 06 » 2017

“Nothing about us without us”. It was this motto, used by South African activists fighting for the rights of the disabled, which captured the essence of the principle behind every grassroots campaign: the right of communities to join together and influence the issues that affect them on a daily basis.

To quote the old saying “stronger together” seems such a quick way to explain something so complex to anticipate, organize, analyze and quantify. Grassroots campaigns have played an increasingly important role in recent years, capturing political and media attention usually reserved for more traditional lobbying. Aware of their potential, companies like Uber have combined communication, publicity and lobbying through the collective strength of their users. In 2016, while someone ordered an Uber in New York, they could also place a request directly to the city’s mayor to regulate the company’s services through what was called “the Blasio’s Uber”<sup>1</sup>.

Grassroots organizers create the right conditions for citizens interested in advocating for a project to have the tools to meet, join, organize and influence decision-

making. These campaigns, a practice frequently used in the Anglo-Saxon world, are now on the rise through political campaigns and NGOs. It is helpful, therefore, to know how these campaigns are created in order to identify when a grassroots campaign can play in our favor and increase the visibility of our project’s social license.

### HOW TO INSPIRE PEOPLE TO ACTION

Although social movements are nothing new, the theory behind grassroots organizing started, like so many other practices related to the management of influence, in the United States, with two researchers from Harvard University, Marshall Ganz and Ruth Wageman. They observed how volunteering programs were organized top-down and by individual objectives, with no room for interaction, initiative or leadership. Volunteers would leave the organization as a result of this solitary and demotivating process, frustrated by a lack of major successes and not feeling involved in the project. The model developed by Ganz and Wageman proposes that team members create relationships, take on a leadership roles being inspired by and leveraging outside experiences, as a motivating and driving force for change.

The 2008 Obama campaign first experimented with the Ganz-Wageman system during the primaries in Iowa and South Carolina, organizing, empowering, and mobilizing Obama’s supporters through common goals. He won in both states, while he lost in states like New Hampshire, where he ran a more traditional marketing campaign.

<sup>1</sup> Images from Blasio’s Uber : <https://techcrunch.com/2015/07/16/uber-launches-de-blasios-uber-feature-in-nyc-with-25-minute-wait-times/>



During its second term, he promoted Organizing for Action<sup>2</sup> as a tool to promote Grassroots campaigns that reinforced his legislative priorities.

If we combine the phases of a grassroots campaign with the sequence of community motivation, we can see that the goal of a campaign is: to move citizens away from a lack of knowledge and organization, to the satisfaction of a victory, no matter how small. It is about inspiring people until action is taken.

“It is about  
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### PHASES OF A GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN

- 1. Planning.** In this phase, communities are unorganized, divided and lack the tools to take action.  
  
It is the way a campaign is explained, and how it can be won, that engages people in the process. For this reason, a thorough knowledge of the communities is needed, to understand what motivates them.
- 2. Recruitment.** It is at this stage that our project reaches the community and begins to generate interest, through messages with a strong emotional component and through activities that foster interaction between communities.
- 3. Organization.** At this stage we see how the unorganized starts to become organized. Frequent communication with the community, finding out what they think, listening to what they say and acting on that information is essential. Team work systems are established, training opportunities are offered, and work is conceptualized as the development of a community, rather than as a traditional list of associates and volunteers.
- 4. Take action.** It is at this stage when action is taken; communities have tools, training, they understand the objective and can work independently, and as leaders<sup>3</sup>.
- 5. Celebration and evaluation.** The celebratory stage, even of small victories, is necessary in order

for communities to feel involved in the project and satisfied with results that can be fed back into the community.

### GRASSROOTS AS LOBBYING

There is a growing number of active political stakeholders, influencers and interest groups. Since many have access to decision makers, the media and networks, it comes as no surprise that messages are diluted, lost and forgotten. Consequently, the mobilization of third parties is a common practice in lobbying

in order to increase a project's representation and legitimacy, bringing certain issues to the forefront of the political and media agenda.

Traditionally, alliances have been developed along the lines of industrial association by corporate or institutional members who have not managed to mobilize their supporters or, if they have, it has been under a unidirectional communication system in which they work via stagnant and hierarchical groups.

Grassroots campaigns are also a form of third-party mobilization, but are based on an open organizational model by which activists assume responsibility, information is shared and absolute control is relinquished in exchange for collaboration.

Leadership means creating the right conditions so that communities interested in advocating for the same project have the tools to meet, unite, organize and act. Once such conditions are created, leadership is shared with the activists, fostering the collective power of community members to bring about progressive change.

The goal of a grassroots campaign should be concise, clear, shared by all members and measurable in the long run. We cannot approach it as a temporary initiative, because it implies a deep social change with a strong motivational component.

The Irish eolic energy association, Wind Energy, developed a campaign to impulse the use of eolic energy

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<sup>2</sup> Video from Obama's campaign Organizing for Action- are you?: <https://www.ofa.us/about-ofa/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://extranewsfeed.com/grassroots-diplomacy-how-to-make-dissent-stick-faeaa80451bb>

provided by the wind available in the country that, despite its many natural resources, imports over 85 percent of its energy.

Just like in any traditional campaign, they built rational messages based on employment, safety or cleanliness of this type of energy. Despite all these factors, its virality was achieved through a highly emotional video<sup>4</sup>.

It was Roosevelt who would end meetings by saying “You have convinced me. Now go out and make me do it”. It is true that social mobilization can raise certain

issues in the political and media's agenda, but its technical and social implications mean that we must be aware of when a grassroots campaign fits into an influence management project and when it does not.

It is all about developing projects that place confidence in the collective power of the members of the community, in their life experiences, wisdom, competence and judgment to bring about a progressive [changeindenergy.ie/](http://changeindenergy.ie/)



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