Community Organizing

Community Tree Planting at Odessa Chase

Community Organizing: Overview

Creating a coalition of community members who are passionate about our issue and committed to our campaign is one of the most valuable and effective means you have of influencing policy makers. When people truly care about an issue (hopefully because we've inspired them to), they are more likely to do the work necessary to run a grassroots campaign. It takes a lot of volunteer hours to generate enough contact with people in the community to make our grassroots campaign successful. This section will help us understand the basic steps of grass roots organizing, which is mainly about motivating people:

Step1 – Recruit volunteers.

Step 2 – Train volunteers and engage them in outreach activities.

Step 3 – Hold outreach events and meetings.

Step 4 – Build relationships and coalitions.

Dave Carter

Wildflower in SNCC

Recruiting Volunteers

Our campaign needs active members and volunteers to win. Finding members and volunteers who will help further our cause is not an easy task, but a necessary one. When we see how much more work the SNCCA will accomplish, the influence of volunteer efforts can make on others with their passion and energy, and how much more effective our campaigns are, each of us will see that it s worth the effort.

Identify Jobs and Volunteer Needs

Before we start recruiting and accepting volunteers, it's important to identify what we want them to help us accomplish. Here are some things we can do to manage our volunteers effectively and get the most out of their efforts:

1. **List the specific jobs** that we need completed in order to meet our goals.

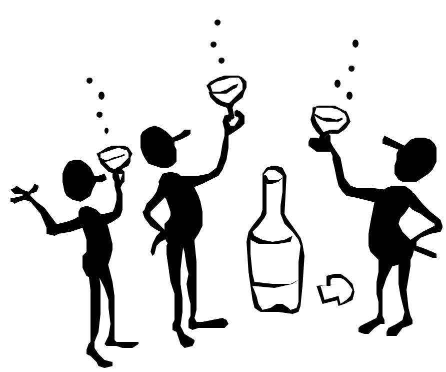
2. **Assign meaningful tasks.** A volunteer can do almost any task that needs to be done. Don't hesitate to give him/her an "important" job to do. Although there will always be grunt work to do, make sure all of our volunteers get assigned some meaningful and rewarding tasks as well.

3. **Be flexible**. Most volunteers have a full work schedule, family, and other pressing activities outside of volunteering, which means that we need to have a flexible schedule.

4. **Write job descriptions**. This is important because it provides a guide for the volunteers. It keeps them on track and hopefully answers questions they may have when SNCCA leaders are not there.

Make Sure Volunteers are Satisfied

Don't take volunteers for granted—they want something in exchange for their time commitment. They are, after all, taking time out from work, friends, hobbies, etc., to help us. If they feel they are getting something out of the experience, then they are more likely to stay on for a while. For example, your volunteers may feel fulfilled simply by helping the community by supporting a cause they believe in; sometimes they just want to work with like-minded people who have interesting lives and are passionate about their endeavors. Take the time to find out what it is that motivates members & volunteers and makes them feel satisfied.



Potential Tasks for SNCCA Volunteers

Events

- **Staff an outreach table at an event.**
- **Hand out leaflets about key issues at public meetings.**
- **Attend community meetings to gather and distribute information.**

Media Work

- **Draft letters to the editor for activists to sign and submit.**
- **Research news sources and clip articles on issues important to SNCC.**
- **Create visuals and materials for media events.**

Administrative Work

- **Enter new names into a database.**
- **Call through lists to recruit volunteers for projects or to get people out to important meetings.**
- **Arrange meetings with decision-makers.**
- **Update files.**

The Phonebank: Calling for Clout

Collective phone-calling (called a phone bank) is a very effective way to inspire community action and attract people to meetings and events. They are also easy to organize. Collective phone calls can generate comment letters, votes, money, and/or more volunteers. Phone banks can be done in a common area if multiple phones or cell phones are used. This often works because it groups people together with a common purpose and the same goals, creating an atmosphere of excitement and accomplishment. Phone banks can also be run by individuals at home each of whom has a calling list.

Why do a phonebank?

- **Generate community action.** Phonebanks can reach a large number of people to produce comment letters and encourage turnout for a public hearing. Many people feel a phone call is more personal and will respond to a call, whereas they might not be responsive to a letter or e-mail from the organization.
- **Invite people to an event.** Phone banks let you personally invite your supporters to a special event that the SNCCA may be holding or attending. You can also follow up on a previous invitation to find out if they plan to attend.
- **Keep communities informed.** A phone bank may be used in targeted areas to help keep area residents informed of activities such as road construction projects, new development projects, or changes in zoning that will effect their specific area.

Steps for Successful Phonebank

1. **Start planning in advance.** Time is needed to recruit volunteers and plan the calling lists. You need to determine in advance how many people you plan to call and how many volunteers it will take to call them. Hold the phonebank activities at least 7-10 days before the hearing, comment deadline, or event.
2. **Define the target audience**. Who do we want to call? How many people? This will help plan for the number of volunteers. As a general rule, each phone bank volunteer can contact about 25-30 people per hour. The best time to contact people is to call between 6PM and 9PM on weekdays. Do not call after 9PM.
3. **Recruit and Schedule Volunteers**. Identify volunteers from the SNCCA membership and supports. Remember that phonebank work is hard and sometimes tedious, so don't overwork the callers. Keep the shifts short 1.5-3 hours.

4. **Produce the calling list**. Depending on the issues and objectives of the phonebank, the calling list may include SNCCA members, a list of residents that have attended past SNCCA meetings, specific communities, or the general public. Divide the list up among volunteers. Leave space for callers to leave notes such as “number disconnected” or “attending hearing”.

5. **Create a phone script**. A script gives volunteers more confidence when calling someone they don’t know. It includes all of the important information and helps them sound professional. The script may also have an option for leaving a phone message.

Tips for Callers

- **Always be polite and considerate. If the person you called is rude, don’t argue with them. Instead, end the call as quickly and politely as possible by saying, “I’m sorry you feel that way. Thank you for your time.”**
- **If the person you called has questions you can’t answer, ask the lead person setting up the phone bank. If you are calling from a location alone, tell them that you will check and get the answer. Then call them back when you do get the answer for them.**
- **Write something down about every call you make, such as “left a message” or “plans to attend workshop”. Get it written down quickly or you will forget.**
- **Remember to get up and stretch. Calling can be tiresome, so it’s good to take frequent breaks.**
- **Keep a glass of water by your calling station in case your throat gets dry.**

Successful Meetings

True organizing can only happen on an individual and personal basis. Face to face meetings are extremely important to building relationships and getting tasks accomplished, but they can also be an enormous waste of time if not prepared for and conducted properly. Follow these tips for better, more efficient meetings.

The Basics of a Good Meeting

- Designate a facilitator who moderates discussion, sticks to the agenda, and watches the clock.
- Designate a note taker who will distribute the notes to the group afterward. This way no one else has to take notes.
- Provide a comfortable setting (may want light refreshments).
- Prepare an agenda that is not overly ambitious.

Preparing for the Meeting

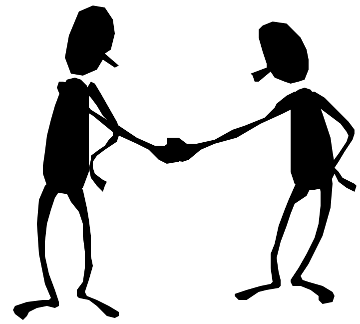
- Spend twice as much time preparing for the meeting as the length of the meeting.
- Set clear goals for the meeting and prepare an agenda that is within the time frame.
- Contact the participants of the meeting ahead of time (individually if possible) and talk to them about the goals of the meeting and the agenda.
- Prepare the meeting room and get all the necessary materials: easels with paper and markers, refreshments, pads & paper, pens, and copies of the agenda.

Running the Meeting

- One frustration people have with meetings is that people talk at the start and the meeting ends up starting late. To address this, especially if folks know each other, go ahead and allow 10 minutes of “chit chat” time on the agenda. The chit-chat will happen anyway, but planning for it will prevent it from cutting into your meeting time. Also, this social time helps ease tension from the workday and put people in a good mood.
- Introductions are important. Begin the meeting by going around the table and having everybody introduce themselves.

- Keep the discussion relevant by letting the participants know when the discussion has drifted. If this fails to bring it back on track, politely but firmly steer it back. Cut off the discussion when it becomes repetitive.
- Emotional discussions often occur. Don't invalidate a participant's feelings by cutting them off. Acknowledge it when someone is obviously angry so that they feel they are being heard and that it is all right to be honest.
- Listen for agreements. If an agreement seems to be emerging on an action item, try repeating what you think you re hearing from the group back to them. They may still want to continue discussion, but there may be enough agreement that you can move on to the next action item. If agreement seems to have been reached too easily, do test the agreement out on the group until it is clear that everyone agrees.
- When the meeting ends, make sure that everyone knows which follow-up tasks they agreed to do.

Building Relationships and Coalitions



One of the most important tasks in organizing a community advocacy effort is establishing a broad base of support. The key to doing this is through outreach to other groups and audiences. When you join voices with other influential people in the community, your message takes on added credibility. There are many potential allies for your cause. Even though you may not agree with someone on all issues, they may still be a valuable ally. Search for common ground and shard concerns.

Steps for Building Relationships

1. Identify the influential groups in New Castle County who the SNCCA would like to partner with in a coalition. Think through how their issues and ours might intersect. Having related interests can provide the common ground we need to build relationships with them. For example, here are some groups and potential shared issues we might consider:

    - Farmers (protecting rural areas from development)
    - Environmentalist (protecting natural resources)
    - School Boards (controlling growth to ensure adequate school infrastructure)
    - Teachers (battling overcrowding of our schools due to over-development)
    - Commuters (transportation issues)
    - Hunters & Fishers (habitat protection and enhancement)
    - Small business owners (battling large scale development or corporations such as Wal-Mart)
    - Homeowners and Civic Groups (Land use issues)

2. Identify who in SNCCA has the access to the potential partners. Also identify whom you'd like to meet with in these targeted groups.

3. Set goals for cultivating the relationships. Be realistic about who you have access to and who you can reach.

4. Make contact. Meet over coffee. Explain our issue and why we think their group is a natural partner for delivering the shared messages. Emphasize how our issue intersects with and impacts their group. Approach them with the attitude that a coalition will help both groups.

5. Use every opportunity to build your relationship with the contact and their group. Ask them to attend meetings with you and you attend meeting with them. Support each other on key issues at public meetings and hearings.

Tips for Building Relationships

- For the initial contact, try to meet face-to face for no more than a 15 to 30 minute meeting. Be very focused and quick; this gives the sense that you are well organized.
- Be careful and willing to learn as you go. When you are talking to someone who is from a group that you know little about, be prepared and committed to learn from them.
- Focus on the commonalties, not the differences.
- Be respectful of time commitments. Your issue is not central to their group, so don't expect them to put as much time into your cause as you do. Be appreciative of whatever support they can provide.
- Only ask people to speak from their own expertise and experience. After all, you are partnering with them because they can deliver your message from a **different perspective** than you can.

Outreach Events

Outreach and public involvement are among the most important building blocks of any community advocacy campaign. The will of the public is a very powerful force. Outreach events are a good way to get your message to the public. However, the success of the outreach effort will in large part hinge on how well the event was organized. Here are some tips for organizing successful outreach events:

- **Publicize educational meetings in the media**.

- **Prepare a "Meeting Survival Kit"** with the essentials for conducting any meeting. Include things such as:
  - Registration sheet for attendees
  - Name tags
  - Double-faced tape
  - Logo banner for podium
  - Pencils, markers, and pens
  - Paper
  - Scissors
  - Extension cords and extra projector bulbs
  - Masking tape
  - Paper clips

- **Look professional!** Recognize that your audience will get a first impression of you from your appearance and behavior.

- **Develop a detailed outline** to organize the meeting.

- **Prepare visual aids** that will assist you in your message delivery.

- **Preview all audio/visuals** and determine how to operate the equipment. Be sure that visuals are complete and that slides are properly in place. Always pack extension cords and extra bulbs.

- **Become familiar with the meeting room and the meeting location.** Locate the light switches, room temperature control, water fountain, and restrooms.

- **Have the meeting room arranged** with chairs in place before attendees arrive.

- **Have people sign in** at a greeting table by the entrance.

- **Use nametags** for participants.

Action Alerts

An action alert is a message that someone sends out over the Internet or in the mail. It asks for a special action to be taken, usually on a current political issue. Well-designed, compelling action alerts are a powerful way to get people's attention and get them involved. They also provide far-reaching exposure for your cause.

Action alerts are very effective when sent to your organization's mailing list and to other organizations with similar messages. These people are more likely to pay attention to the issues, not only because they are part of your group and share your interests, but because they are probably already active in other ways in the community and have an ear for what's going on.

Helpful Hints:

- Identify your issue. Make sure that the headline is compelling, so that the reader is interested in reading further.

- Make sure you note the date. Action alerts can travel around for a long time and eventually become outdated. You want people to know when the alert is active and when they will be most effective in responding.

- Be concise. Effective message delivery includes a clear, concise message that people can easily understand. But avoid cutting out anything compelling when you compact the message.

- Provide the next steps. People care more about an issue when they become actively involved in its progress, but they often don't know how to help. Tell them how they can help.

- Be compelling. You are trying to inspire people to take action. Speak from your heart about why this issue is so important to you and to the community. Get people excited.

- Include your group's information. This helps establish the authenticity of the alert, making it more credible to the activist community.

- Use short paragraphs. Small sections have greater visual appeal and are easier to read.

- Be factual. You are responsible for the information you are sending out. Mistakes can discredit the SNCCA.

- Don’t assume the readers will be educated on the issue. Give them enough information to fully explain our position, but don’t overload them with material.

- Include clear beginning and end markers. Put a row of dashes or a graphic border along the top and bottom, so that any additions made by people other than yourself will clearly be modifications to your original.

- Ask for feedback. Tell people you want to know what they’ve done (e.g. sending letters or emails or making phone calls). This gives us an idea of who you can count on to be more active in general. It also gives us great statistics to present to elected officials or other decision-makers.

- Be selective in the number of action alerts sent. People can easily get sick of them.

- Follow-up. When the campaign is over, try to derive some lessons that others can benefit from. What problems did you have? What mistakes did you make? What unexpected connections did you make?

Tips for Activists

- Think big, start small
- Strength in numbers
- Learn from those with experience
- Protect your base of supporters, convince the swing, and forget the rest
- Always tell the truth
- Create small successes to build confidence and momentum
- Endless pressure, endlessly applied
- Celebrate each victory as it happens
- Take stock in our strengths
- The most important resource to conserve is our supporter's energy
- Form broad coalitions
- Localize and personalize the issues
- Stay on message, always
- Have echo power, our listeners remember and repeat our viewpoints
- Focus our message on the future
- Have fun!