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Educational Article

How is your advocacy lawn doing?

Seth Palmer

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How is your advocacy lawn doing?

Three tips to ensure your grassroots and grasstops are ready for your next issue

By Seth Palmer

With spring having just sprung and summer on the horizon, we are all wrapping our heads around how to get out there and do some actual lawn maintenance.

But have you thought about your advocacy “lawn?”

In building any successful advocacy campaign, having a strong network of grassroots and grasstops supporters is a crucial component. And much like the grass in your yard, building key contacts and supporters requires patience and work long before you need them to do anything. For a level-setting, grassroots advocates are your supporters in the field who you can mobilize for action when needed. Grasstops are the leaders you want to build into champions who will stand with you on any issue.

Here are three tips to help you build a strong advocacy lawn through supporting and growing your grassroots and grasstops year-round.

#1 Treat your lawn with the importance it deserves

In lawn maintenance, it is necessary to ensure your yard has the proper water, fertilizer, and care out of fear that it will die and leave you with a pile of dirt. While advocates shouldn't be treated like actual grass, many of the same principles apply: without a strong foundation, those who have stood with you in the past may not be around in the future.

This means starting with a strong foundation through recruitment and engagement. It is next to impossible to grow relationships on a shaky footing, like trying to get grass seed to take root in hostile soil. Knowing your desired outcome is a great place to start. For grassroots advocates, it gives them an objective to work towards and allows for benchmarks to be set to gauge performance. And for grasstops leaders, knowing where you stand is vital in building these relationships because leaders usually have an idea of where they stand, which might already not be with you. It's good to know that before you expend the time and resources engaging with them.

#2 Constantly tend your lawn

If you don't take care of your lawn regularly, it will take care of you. Not only will your HOA be sending you red notices, but it will also be near impossible to make meaningful progress without tearing it completely down and starting over. In advocacy, there may not be the opportunity to start over from scratch, regardless of how deep the problem has gotten.

For grassroots advocates, tending equals information, both given and received. As an education effort, this engagement can take many forms. From a monthly newsletter to regular calls or training, ensuring that advocates have the clearest understanding possible of the situation, the objectives, and what success looks like will provide them the tools needed to realize that

success. And you shouldn't just leave them on an island alone. You should establish regular communication channels to allow the advocates to provide information and insight from interactions in the field.

Tending grasstops leaders is a similar but different effort. Education is still the name of the game, but the methodology is drastically different. Building a rapport with these leaders goes a long way in facilitating a long-term relationship. Developing fertile, evergreen grasstops takes time. And it will likely take in-person interactions, which may remain challenging in COVID times. It doesn't mean you can't, but it will take a renewed and different-looking effort.

#3 Don't get fixated on new toys—stick to what works

Humans have been cultivating the land for hundreds of years using various forms of the same tools. While they may have gotten faster or more efficient, the process hasn't changed. That's the same in advocacy. Lobbyists have existed since the dawn of democracy, though less sophisticated in their methods.

There will always be a newfangled gadget or gizmo which is telling you that it can help build a grassroots network or allow you to engage with grasstops leaders in a new and different way. Much like the newest electric lawnmower will likely quit halfway into clearing the 12-acre homestead, the scalability of many of these tools is questionable at best. It's not to say that all technology platforms should be treated the same, but rather that you shouldn't trust them blindly without knowing the value of traditional methodologies.

Regardless of the comparisons this article has made between advocacy and lawn maintenance, building a robust advocacy program takes time and effort. And that is an investment you have to regularly make over its lifetime to ensure it is ready when you need it most. Take the individuals who make your program strong for granted at your own risk. It can be harder to get them back than growing a lush green lawn in a desert.

Seth Palmer is the Director of Strategic Communications at NP Strategy. NPS+ is a strategic communications agency that helps clients connect with the right people in the right way to reach their goals. A wholly-owned subsidiary of Nexsen Pruet, a 200-attorney law firm providing additional resources, including deep relationships across the Carolinas and the United States, the NPS+ team guides our clients in navigating challenges and leveraging opportunities. For more information and to contact Seth, visit www.npstrategy.com.

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