

Focusing & Tailoring Our Outreach and Building & Strengthening Our Grassroots Movements

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This is the April 2020 update to the January 2000 revision of a resource I had written before.

STRATEGIC STARTING POINTS:

1. A political or social change movement succeeds by convincing a large majority of the public to demand the change that we are promoting. Therefore, much of our work should focus on informing and activating members of the public.
2. However, when we think of outreach to “the public,” we often fail to recognize that “the public” actually consists of an array of “sub-publics” along several different dimensions:
 - A. DEMOGRAPHICS:** “The public” includes many demographic subgroups, each of which might respond to different messages and approaches. Therefore, we could custom-tailor our outreach to men and women, to different age groups, different racial or ethnic groups, different religious groups, different educational levels, different economic interests, etc.
 - B. POLITICAL SPECTRUM:** Likewise, we might devise different outreach strategies – and different “talking points” – that will appeal to people who are at different places on the left-to-right political spectrum.
 - C. AWARENESS AND AGREEMENT:** People differ also in how much they are paying attention to the issue we are organizing about – and how much they already agree with us – and how much they might be willing to actively support our movement. Let’s devise different outreach strategies – and different “talking points” to appeal to each of these different kinds of people. *For some kinds of issues, dimension C might be more strategically useful than dimensions A or B. The next few pages explore this approach.*
3. **One way to generate strategies is to think of real, live individuals we know** in each of the FIVE SEGMENTS of the public listed below, and then figure out how to inform and activate them. **We can build valid strategies empirically from the grassroots up!**

SEGMENTS OF THE PUBLIC:

Some issues and grassroots movements lend themselves well to devising outreach strategies based a STRATEGIC STARTING POINT above on this page, such as 2.A (DEMOGRAPHICS) or 2.B (POLITICAL SPECTRUM). If we do this, we could still use the empirical method described on the following pages, by thinking of real, live individuals we know in those groups and figuring out how to inform, convince, and activate them.

For many issues and grassroots movements, we might find **STRATEGIC STARTING POINT 2.C (above)** to be especially effective for bringing people into our grassroots movement and deepening their knowledge and involvement. The following pages show you exactly how to do this.

STRATEGIC STARTING POINT 2.C suggests devising different outreach strategies for the different segments of the public whose relation to your issue/movement range on the next page’s scale from apathetic or negative to activist.

To illustrate this approach, let's see that the public could be divided into five segments on this spectrum:

APATHETIC: These people are not interested in the news, or the kinds of issues you are working on, or even voting. They still care about their families, hobbies, sports, etc., but they just do not follow the news or deal with public affairs. In many cases an issue would have to touch them personally before they would become aware and active. These people are relatively low-priority prospects for outreach on the issue you are working on – unless you can devise ways to show how your issue directly affects them or their families.

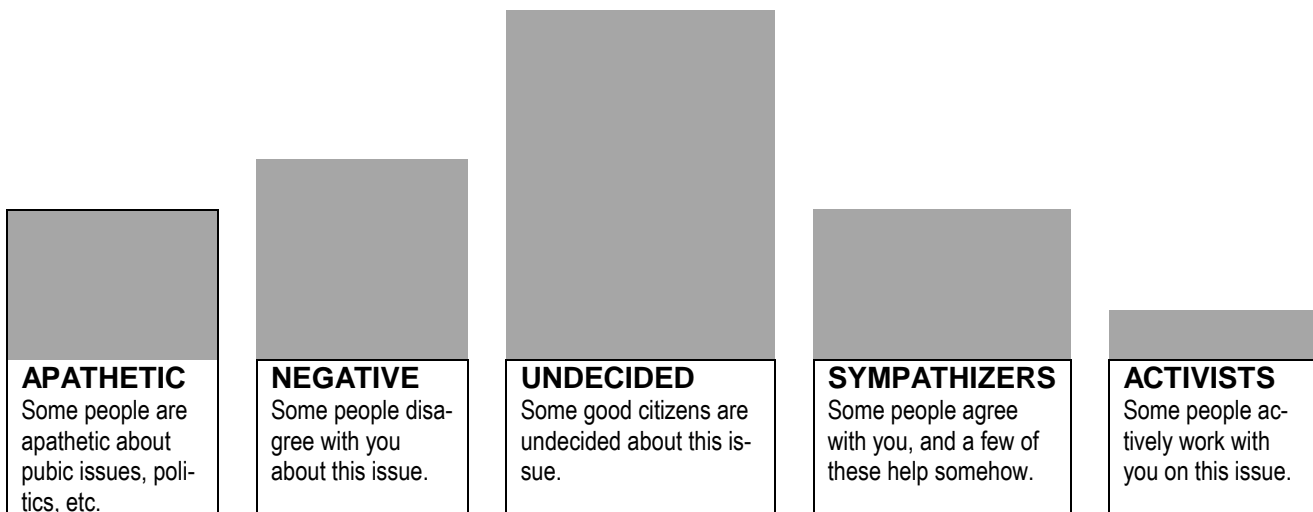
NEGATIVE: These people are on the opposite side of the issue from us. We should not let their opposition demoralize or distract us. We are not likely to convert them easily, but if we can understand their thoughts, their values, and their feelings, we might find ways to neutralize or diminish the strength of their opposition – and perhaps move them into the **UNDECIDED** segment described immediately below. We can make good progress by reaching out to the three segments described below. We can devise ways to inform, convince and activate people in these next three segments.

UNDECIDED ON THIS ISSUE: These are the majority of the public – the mainstream and reasonably informed citizens who allow democratic society to function at a normal level. They follow the news somewhat through broadcast and print media. They vote, and they are interested enough and knowledgeable enough to discuss political issues, but they are probably NOT YET well informed of the issue you are working on, and they are not particularly engaged in advocacy or organizing. *This majority of the public includes good prospects for you to inform, convince, and convert into future supporters!*

SYMPATHIZERS TILTED TOWARD AGREEING WITH YOU: These people's hearts are in the right place. They pay some attention to the issue you are working on and they might tend to agree with you. Most likely they do not know nearly enough about the issue, and they would be open to learning more about your issue. They might be working on some other important issue, belong to an issue-based organization, be on one or more issue-based mailing lists, and perhaps attend events related to issues they already care about, and perhaps they donate money to one or more issue-based organizations. *These are your best prospects for you to mobilize into joining you in activism on your issue!*

ACTIVISTS: These people are already providing the day-to-day people-power that guides and sustains the grassroots movement for your issue. Many of them are dedicated and hardworking. Some roll up their sleeves and work hard for a few months or a few years. Some of these folks are deeply committed to working hard over a period of many years or decades. They may perform any one or more roles – as individual organizers or activists, as informal leaders of ad hoc groups, or as recognized leaders of committees and established organizations. They conduct research, writing, fundraising, and other services to advance this issue. Some of them donate generous financial support. *We need to sustain these activists over the long haul until we win.*

Each of the five segments defined above contains some portion of the public. However, the relative percentages of the public in each of these five segments will vary from issue to issue. Just to illustrate this concept, suppose your issue's distribution of numbers in each segment looks like this:



This model suggests that instead of merely reaching out to “the public,” we need to recognize that there are five distinct “publics.” Let’s devise different strategies for reaching out to EACH of these five distinct segments of “the public.”

Our strategies could devise various ways to:

- Sensitize the **APATHETICS**
- Neutralize the **NEGATIVES**
- Convert the **UNDECIDEDS**
- Activate the **SYMPATHIZERS**, and
- Sustain the **ACTIVISTS**

Remember, our goal is to convince and activate a majority of public opinion to demand the political or social change for which we are organizing.

Probably most of the public will be in the first three segments (**APATHETIC**, **NEGATIVE**, and **UNDECIDED**). Our best prospects for **finding enough new people** to cultivate a public majority will be in the **UNDECIDED** segment. Our best prospects for **strengthening the grassroots movement** will be in the **SYMPATHIZERS** segment, along with the new people we’ve recruited and inspired from the **UNDECIDED** segment.

We should devise different ways to reach out to people in EACH of these five segments. We need to move **UNDECIDED** people into becoming **SYMPATHIZERS**, move **SYMPATHIZERS** into **ACTIVISTS**, and sustain the people who are already **ACTIVISTS**.

The next few pages will help you figure out how to do that!

AN EMPIRICAL WAY TO DEVISE STRATEGIES:

Getting the **APATHETIC to pay attention to your issue:**

1. First, make sure you understand each of the five segment definitions described on page 2.
2. Think of three actual individuals you know who seem to fit into the **APATHETIC** segment. Write their names in the “**PERSON’S NAME**” column here:

PERSON’S NAME	WHAT WOULD IT TAKE? (List several ideas)
A	
B	
C	

3. For **PERSON A**, ask yourself: “**What would it take to move this person** from the **APATHETIC** segment to the **UNDECIDED** segment? Think of some methods, approaches, or actions that you, someone else, or your organization could do that would likely cause this person to **start to deal with this issue**. At this point, do **not** yet worry about how to convince the person to agree with your viewpoint on the issue. In the “**WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?**” column, write down several of the most workable, useful or creative ideas that would be most likely to succeed with **PERSON A**.

4. Repeat the above step for **PERSON B** and for **PERSON C**.
5. Ask other activists who are working on your issue to try this same exercise with three different, actual, real, live **APATHETIC** persons they know.
6. Share your **WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?** answers from step 5 with your fellow activists who are working with you on this issue. Compile your answers to build practical, grassroots strategies to convert **APATHETIC** persons into persons who will start paying attention to the news and public policy issues, including the issue you care about. After they start paying attention you can figure out how to move them from **UNDECIDED** toward **SYMPATHIZERS**. But first things first! **Getting them to start paying attention to issues is huge progress!**

Converting the UNDECIDED into SYMPATHIZERS:

7. Now use the same method to move three different persons who already do pay attention to the news and who vote from being **UNDECIDED** about this issue, toward becoming **SYMPATHIZERS** who will start agreeing with you about this issue. Think of three actual individuals you know who seem to fit into the **UNDECIDED** segment. Write these three persons' names in the "**PERSON'S NAME**" column here:

PERSON'S NAME	WHAT WOULD IT TAKE? (List several ideas)
D	
E	
F	

8. For **PERSON D**, ask yourself: "**WHAT WOULD IT TAKE** to move this person from the **UNDECIDED** segment to the **SYMPATHIZER** segment? Think of some methods, approaches, or actions that you, someone else, or your organization could do that would likely cause this person to **understand this issue and start to feel supportive of the position you have been advocating**. In the "**WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?**" column, write down several of the most workable, useful or creative ideas that would be most likely to succeed with **PERSON D**.
9. Repeat step 8 for **PERSON E** and for **PERSON F**.
10. Ask other activists who are working on your issue to try this same exercise with three different, actual, real, live **UNDECIDED** persons they know.
11. Share your **WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?** answers from step 10 with your fellow activists. Compile your answers to build practical, grassroots strategies for converting **UNDECIDED** persons into **SYMPATHIZERS** – persons who will now **understand this issue and start to feel supportive of the position you have been advocating**. Now you are **making more progress!**

→ Go on to the next page.

Getting the **SYMPATHIZERS** to become **ACTIVISTS**:

12. Repeat the same process with three current actual **SYMPATHIZERS** whom you know. (One of them might be yourself if you are not already an **ACTIVIST**.) Write their names here. For each person, write some specific ideas of **WHAT WOULD IT TAKE** to motivate and enable these **SYMPATHIZERS** to become **ACTIVISTS**.

PERSON'S NAME	WHAT WOULD IT TAKE? (List several ideas)
G	
H	
I	

13. For **PERSON G**, ask yourself: “What would it take to move this person from the **SYMPATHIZER** segment to the **ACTIVIST** segment? Think of some methods, approaches, or actions that you, someone else, or your organization could do that would likely cause this person to **turn their support for your issue into specific work, donations, etc.** In the “**WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?**” column, write down several of the most workable, useful or creative ideas that would be most likely to succeed with **PERSON G**.
14. Repeat the above step for **PERSON H** and for **PERSON I**.
15. Ask other activists who are working on your issue to try this same exercise with three different, actual, real, live **SYMPATHIZER** persons they know.
16. Share your **WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?** answers from step 15 with your fellow activists. Compile your answers to build practical, grassroots strategies to convert **SYMPATHIZERS** into **ACTIVISTS** – persons who will **actively work with you and other people to strengthen the grassroots movement for your issue. Now you are making more progress!**

Sustaining your **ACTIVISTS** over the long haul:

17. Some activists and organizers burn out after a period of time. But we can’t afford to wear out and lose our best folks. We need to sustain people both for their sake as human beings and also for the long-term success of our grassroots movement. So let’s try the same exercise with your current **ACTIVISTS**.

Repeat the same process with three current actual **ACTIVISTS** whom you know. (One of them might be yourself.) Write their names here. For each person, write some specific ideas of **WHAT WOULD IT TAKE** to sustain that person as a healthy and productive **activist** over the long term until we win on this issue?

PERSON'S NAME	WHAT WOULD IT TAKE? (List several ideas)
J	
K	
L	

18. Ask other activists who are working on your issue to try this same exercise with three different, actual, real, live **ACTIVIST** persons they know.
21. Share your **WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?** answers from step 18 with your fellow activists. Compile your answers to build practical, grassroots strategies to sustain your issue’s **ACTIVISTS** to **remain healthy and productive over the long haul** until you win on your issue.

→ Go on to the next page.

The more people who participate in this exercise, the more data we can gather. More data will help us devise better strategies and activities, so we can build and strengthen our grassroots movements!

For each of these four exercises, compile the ideas that were generated by several of your participants. Write them on an easel or whiteboard, and/or share them by e-mail with other organizers. These ideas are likely to be the most useful for building and strengthening our grassroots movements.

These will help you develop strategies and activities that will:

- Build majority public opinion so you will win on your specific issues
- Strengthen your overall, larger movements for social and political changes
- Sustain your activists over the long haul

For further resources, training, and consultation in grassroots organizing, contact me:

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Visit the “Organizing” part of my blog, www.parallaxperspectives.org