




THE SPIN PROJECT

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Communications and Organizational Development

Communications Capacity Building Throughout the Organizational Life Cycle

In a media environment saturated by sophisticated advertising and a constant flow of Internet communications and a round-the-clock news cycle fed by cable networks, nonprofit organizations find that communications skills and strategies are a critical ingredient in their ability to survive and thrive. Much of the American public is over-saturated by information – often to the point of suffering from “compassion fatigue.” Public interest groups must be savvy, brief and opportunistic in educating the public about the issues that matter most in order to move people to action.

This need is particularly true for social change groups working to shape public policy. At a time in our nation where Americans are more frequently spoken to as consumers than citizens, social change groups struggle to engage the public in the debates on issues that will shape the future of our society. Increasingly, these organizations must borrow from the communications strategies used by corporations and national politicians – but on a fraction of the budget, time and person-power.

Furthermore, many organizations simply do not have the skills and experience to help them shape their issues in a way that will resonate in today’s communications environment.

It’s clear that an organization’s communications capacity directly corresponds to its ability to move an issue. Communications advocacy is the ability to shape public opinion toward policy change. A social change group must be able to identify the issues of concern on their community, frame the issue in a way that is timely and relevant to the community, and then influence the community and decision-makers to take appropriate action on these issues. All of these steps require savvy communications skills if the organization is to move the issues relevant to their mission. Indeed, policy change is fundamentally a communications task.

The Five Life Stages of Nonprofits: Lessons for Organizations and Communications Consultants

To illustrate an incremental, developmental approach to communications capacity building, this article refers to the book, *The Five Life Stages of Nonprofit Organizations*, by Judith Sharken-Smith, published by the Amherst Wilder Foundation in 2001. Sharken-Smith maps the phases of development that a typical nonprofit progresses through in the course of its work:

Stage 1 Imagine and Inspire

Stage 2 Found and Frame

Stage 3 Ground and Grow

Stage 4 Produce and Sustain

Stage 5 Review and Renew

This article briefly outlines each of the life stages and details how they apply to communications capacity building. Case studies illustrate how organizations' communications abilities have grown savvier at each stage.

As organizations move from one phase of growth to the next, they need different things from communications advisors and capacity builders. At the beginning, they may need basic media training or simple spokesperson coaching. Later, organizations require more in-depth strategy guidance on specific campaigns. They begin to need advanced professional development – <http://www.spinproject.org/article.php?list=type&type=17> – deep learning and networking .

Communications consultants also must be aware of organizational growth stages. As organizations grow, they need consultants who offer a broad continuum of services to suit all skill levels, all designed to sustain organizations' progress towards effective, integrated strategic communications. Organizations need advisors who operate within a holistic, capacity building framework, emphasizing the client's organizational needs, sustainability, and integration of communications with its policy, research, fundraising, litigation, and community organizing efforts.

Of course groups can flow from one cycle to another quickly. Progress is not always linear and groups may

The SPIN Project

The SPIN Project was created to support organizations that want to shape public policy, with the understanding that communications is a critical component in any social change effort. We provide tools and resources to increase nonprofit communications capacity, and focus both on campaign-specific strategy and tactical advice for social change organizations. The SPIN Project has offered communications support to thousands of grassroots organizations in the form of skills-building workshops, strategy consultations, coaching, tutorials, publications and hands-on help.

The SPIN Project is unique when it comes to developing and nurturing grassroots communications leadership. We are building the capacity of social justice organizations to engage in effective communications work. We know that policy change campaigns are often long, hard struggles, and groups involved in those struggles need all the tools at their disposal. That means public interest groups need skills within their organizations and coalitions – not just in the hands of PR firms who pull up stakes and leave when the campaign is over. We want to build skills within organizations to leave them stronger for the next fight. The SPIN Project alters the political landscape by changing the culture of our client organizations to ensure they learn, value and apply communications as a powerful tool in the work for social change.

go through the cycles in a different order. Different parts of one organization may simultaneously operate at different levels: a mature organization may support “young” campaigns. Organizations and consultants alike must be aware of these dynamics.

Stage I: Imagine and Inspire

The first stage of the organization's life cycle is characterized by the BIG IDEA, often championed by an entrepreneurial leader working to engage others in the vision. Those engaged in the fledgling effort may be asking, “Can we really pull this off? How?” The work of a social change organization in this phase may be to define the problem they wish to solve in terms that their community can understand and identify with.

STAGE 1 SNAPSHOT:**Transgender Law Center**

Oakland, California

Groups in the start-up phase often require assistance in shaping their initial efforts and translating the BIG IDEA into terms the broader public can understand and absorb. This was certainly the case for the Transgender Law Center, founded in 2002 to advocate for the civil rights of transgender people across California. Transgender Law Center utilizes direct legal services, public policy advocacy, and educational opportunities to advance the rights and safety of diverse transgender communities.

As a tool to educate the general public on the issues faced by transgender people, the organization's founders wanted to lead an effort to change practical policies on public restrooms – the single most common place where gender non-conforming people are harassed or assaulted. But the lawyer leading the effort was, by virtue of his legal training, accustomed to talking about the issue in complex jargon. Staff working on this basic question of safety expressed it as a "civil rights crisis of gender binaries and segregation."

Through advanced media training and coaching, we were able to help him hone his message to the core of the issue: "Everyone needs a safe place to do their business!" This simple, pointed message led to the organization's efforts being covered in the *New York Times*.

Communications needs fall into the areas of research and information gathering at this stage.

An organization in this early phase ideally focuses on communications planning, and most likely would benefit from outside perspectives. As the group develops an identity – a name and a brand – they may require consultation and team facilitation. In this stage, an organization must clearly articulate its goals and the incremental campaign and communications steps the it will follow to achieve those goals. Organizations must take care to avoid "wagging the dog," and instead ensure that the communications effort follows the group's political goals.

At this stage, an organization should gauge the news value and communications opportunities presented by the BIG IDEA, and identify the appropriate tools to seize those opportunities. It also ideally expends resources on research to understand its audiences, niche, current public opinion, etc. This often leads to initial

framing efforts which help the group identify direction and focus for their work. Often, a consultant can help in this stage through strategy consultations with a small group of key leaders, or by coaching for the key leader in the effort.

Stage 2: Found and Frame

Organizational structure begins to formalize in the second stage. The leader is working to attract resources such as start up funding, volunteers or staff to help them work toward their dream. Staff is highly focused and dedicated, but small. Campaigns begin to take shape.

Communications work in this phase may be to inspire others to the dream and create public demand for the group's goals. In this phase, the organization begins to conceive and design public education efforts and prepare staff to implement those efforts. It develops fact

STAGE 2 SNAPSHOT:**National Alliance for Fair Employment**

Boston, Massachusetts

An example of SPIN's work with a group in stage 2 is the National Alliance for Fair Employment, a network of more than 40 workers' rights groups who support equal treatment regardless of employment status. When the leaders first engaged us for assistance, we offered them some basic training in media strategy, and began to offer coaching on framing of their issues and positioning of their work. This eventually led them to change their name -- the organization's original working title was the Campaign on Contingent work.

We assisted with message development for the new effort, generating core messages and talking points for the all the organization's members and leaders. We also led intensive strategy sessions and helped shaped the release and launch effort for their debut report "Contingent Workers Fight for Fairness." The report appeared in 7 major daily papers, including the *Washington Post*, the *Dallas Morning News* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. The group has enjoyed some 40 major media mentions since the release of the report.

sheets and other basic campaign and/or organizational literature to help the group begin to tell their story to a broader audience. Consultants can be critical in this phase, especially in facilitating group strategy sessions to help generate agreement on goals and approaches.

Stage 3: Ground and Grow

The key question for the organization in the third phase is: “How can we build something that will be around for the long haul?” In this phase, the group may get an early campaign win, adding a sense of importance and momentum to the work. Board leadership often deepens in this phase. The Executive Director often takes a more visible role in the community, speaking out at city council meetings or other high profile events. Increased public awareness creates demand for the work, and staff can be challenged to keep up with that demand. As more opportunities come to the organization, it may have to start saying “no” to certain ideas because of capacity constraints. Groups in this stage often develop a keener sense of how and why communications is important to their work, but often do not have a plan and still operate in a reactive or responsive mode.

There are clear communications demands and opportunities in this phase. Publicizing early victories helps build credibility and visibility, thereby attracting more members and other resources. At this stage, organizations must be thoughtful as they integrate communications into decision-maker education and persuasion at key points in the campaign. The Executive Director, Board and staff hone their spokesperson skills. At this stage, basic media training for a wider circle within the organization is invaluable as it means that more people have access to communications as a lens for strategic thinking.

Communications in this phase is often staffed by default: the lead organizer on a campaign or the lead researcher on a report ends up taking on at least the bare minimum communications work. As staff grows and roles solidify, the staffer assigned communications responsibilities may need <http://www.spinproject.org/article.php?list=type&type=17> advanced training and support. The broader staff can benefit from in-house skills-building workshops to help the group develop a

STAGE 3 SNAPSHOT:

Miami Workers Center Miami, Florida

Miami Workers Center, like most community organizing outfits, engages in ground campaigns to fight for concrete improvements on key issues of concern for the organization’s low-income, largely African American constituency. The group had several neighborhood wins on affordable housing, but recognized their members were losing the larger battle as rampant upscale development began to march across Miami. They recognized that if they wanted to take on the city-wide issue of gentrification, they would need to leverage the power of the local media.

To help them assess their position, the SPIN Project conducted a communications audit, in which we examined the organization’s messages, media opportunities and communications capacity. We led several training sessions with community organizers and grassroots leaders to help them see how communications could leverage their organizing efforts, and to help them hone in on a communications strategy to compliment their work. We helped them frame the issue and craft messages calling on the Mayor to institute “community-driven development for Miami’s future.” Following the SPIN Project’s efforts on their campaign, they were featured in a total of 10 news stories in just four months.

common approach to communications, and to help create a larger stable of communicators within the organization to help them tell their story to more people. Organizations at this stage also often need help with specifics, such as press release editing, pitch call coaching, etc.

Stage 4: Produce and Sustain

The fourth stage is the mature stage of the organization, and groups are sometimes moved into this stage through strategic planning or some similar long-range look at their work. In this stage groups are often recognized as leaders in their field, which can present new communications opportunities – such as leader profiles, columns, etc. In this phase leadership is often spread through several levels of the organization. Campaigns are working in full swing – goal-oriented

STAGE 4 SNAPSHOT:**Center on Policy Initiatives**

San Diego, California

The Center on Policy Initiatives is a research and advocacy organization committed to exposing and improving the real-world impact of regional economic conditions on the lives of San Diego's low-wage workforce. The SPIN Project first began working with CPI in 1999, shortly after the organization was founded. Initially we consulted with the Executive Director on short-term strategies, and encouraged him to hire a staff person dedicated to communications. When a Communications Coordinator position was filled in 2001, the SPIN Project began an intensive process of training and coaching the new staff person, including offering tips on how to build a communications department and integrate communications into all of the organization's programs.

SPIN continues its ongoing relationship with CPI, regularly coaching their communications director on specific media tactics and brainstorming media strategies. We've offered advanced training to many of the organization's staff members through the SPIN Academy. Most recently, we were proud to help their communications director embark on a hiring process for a second position CPI is adding to their communications department.

CPI recently earned scores of print and television coverage for their work on San Diego's Living Wage Ordinance. Since we began working with them in 1999, the organization has received some 140 hits in local and national media for their work on living wage, responsible development and the challenges facing the working poor in San Diego.

and integrating the organization's constituents into the work. Communications efforts often become less reactive and more driven by the group's goals. The organization may formalize the communications function by naming a Communications Director – often at the high point of a campaign.

Groups in this phase sometimes begin to coordinate communications training and strategy among their circle of allies and coalition partners. In this phase, groups continue to formalize their communications efforts. They may decide to generate a comprehensive, proactive communications plan, often in conjunction with a strategic planning process that recog-

nizes their current level of maturity. Many groups will opt to build a communications department in this phase, investing in staff to carry out this increasingly important work. New Communications Directors often develop relationships with seasoned consultants in this phase, helping them create their new department (often a department of one), generate their work plan, set communications priorities for the organization and create a strategic communications plan for the group. These people greatly from identifying a peer network of others in their field that can also offer advice and support.

Stage 5: Review and Renew

This phase is often initiated by the conclusion of a campaign, and whether it was a win or a loss, the organization begins this stage by evaluating and planning for next steps. The question for the organization becomes “What is the NEXT BIG IDEA?” and program development may loop back to the beginning of the cycle. This presents opportunities for new directions, new programs. Leadership configurations may change to adjust to the new situation, and may include board or staff turnover. The group may seek out new coalition partners or collaborators. Communications may go into a dormant phase as the organization regroup, then launches again as new direction is solidified. The relaunch often includes a proactive communications plan, building on the successes and experience gained in the organization's prior work. With the start of the new effort, communications tend to be integrated into the earliest phases of strategic decision-making and planning.

In this phase, the organization often engages a consultant to help evaluate the role of communications in programs and campaigns. This generally includes a review of communications systems and infrastructure and the integration of communications into the programmatic work of the organization. As the organization engages in evaluation of their work, we can help them evaluate communication efforts, and consultants can make recommendations on future campaigns and communications opportunities.

STAGE 5 SNAPSHOT:**Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy**

Los Angeles, California

The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) came to prominence by leading the effort to pass one of the country's first living wage laws, raising wages for 15,000 workers. LAANE also initiated the Santa Monica living wage movement, which has raised wages and passed protective legislation for hundreds of workers in the city's tourism industry.

When we first began working with LAANE in 1999, they had no communications infrastructure. Through their campaigns and at the SPIN Project's urging, they have effectively used the media to create demand for and ultimately secure unprecedented victories for workers in Los Angeles. LAANE is one of a number of organizations who continue to turn to the SPIN Project for strategic advice and coaching year after year.

When they hired a communications director, we coached him in his role and helped him build what is now a four-person communications department. We've trained many of their leaders in the art of framing, and given them intensive skills building as spokespeople. Many of LAANE's organizers and researchers have received advanced instruction in communications strategy via the SPIN Academy.

As LAANE's strategies have evolved from living wage to accountable development, the SPIN Project has kept pace. We continue to provide communications strategy for their work, most recently supporting their efforts to defeat Wal-Mart in Inglewood and the recent media tour the Inglewood Coalition launched at Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas. We've also partnered with LAANE and their allies to create a message guide for organizations working on accountable development for community benefits.

convey their messages. Strengthening an organization's use of strategic communications also means strengthening its leadership, refining strategy, building infrastructure and addressing critical questions that help position the organization for success. In the end, a strong organization that has integrated strategic communications into its entire growth cycle is sure to be a formidable force for social change.

Conclusion

Time and again, the SPIN Project has seen in our work with nonprofits that embarking on a strategic communications effort often prompts organizational development questions – questions that strike at core organizational considerations like vision, values, organizational identity, constituency and scope of work. To be successful, organizations must build their communications savvy and their organizational capacity to communicate their vision, project their values and