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Etiquette of Consumer Involvement: Ten Guidelines for Prudent Advocacy

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Etiquette of Consumer Involvement: Ten Guidelines for Prudent Advocacy

The types of advocacy projects your group chooses will contribute to its reputation in the community. Since your group is likely to address many issues over a long time, its reputation is key to success.

The following guidelines have emerged as characteristic of many successful advocacy organizations. This list is by no means complete, but it may serve as a basis for healthy community involvement.

Accentuate the Positive

Respond to at least as many positive events as negative ones by complimenting positive actions and honoring key figures. Keeping positive is easy, and it will win you friends and build your reputation as being a reasonable group. Constructive involvement can serve as the basis for many successful projects.

Begin by Assuming the Best of Others

Challenging the motivations of others often produces needless resistance. Assuming a negative act is the result of ignorance or inattention (maybe even your own) creates opportunities to teach and learn. A corollary is to give credit freely for beneficial decisions. Acknowledging the wisdom and vision of others who support you is likely to increase their commitment to your goals.

Do Your Homework and Document Everything

If your group takes a position or initiates an action based on an error in fact, you stand a good chance of being very embarrassed. Such embarrassment can damage a hard-won reputation. A significant error in fact can also direct attention away for your issues, no matter how important they are. Thus, the first step in developing a position or a project should always involve confirming your information. In addition, you should document everything you do as well as what others tell you. Documentation protects you from denials and countercharges.

Take the High Ground

When you take a position on an issue, always highlight the general values or principles you are promoting, such as independence, equal access, well being, dignity, or safety. The importance of these values and principles is hard for anyone to deny. They serve as a firm basis

for agreement on general community goals. They help prevent personality conflicts stemming from disagreement over details of solutions. An finally, positive values lend and air of eloquence to your position that will impress almost anyone.

Take a Broad Perspective

Although a consumer group is usually too small to act on every relevant issue, it is wise to spread your attention across different types over time. Various issues are likely to share many similarities. A group that focuses only on transportation issues will have a narrow appeal to members and the public. Addressing issues of accessibility broadens appeal and generates more opportunities for involvement. It probably increases opportunities for success, too.

Plan Many Small Successes

Groups are more likely to grow and maintain themselves over times if they have many successes. One way to facilitate success and growth is to have many small projects rather than one major one. Many successful efforts over time will build the competency and reputation of the group so that it can take advantage of major opportunities more effectively.

Begin with the Simplest Step

If an issue is personally important, members tend to want to make an immediate, strong response. This approach can seriously restrict your options and those of others who support you. Radical actions should usually be saved as options until other, less intrusive alternatives have been tried without success.

Be Prepared to Follow Through

Once you have begun to address an issue, be prepared to follow through. This means you should be ready to compliment responsiveness, attend meetings, compromise, or escalate your approach if their is no response. Some situations may become intolerable, and you should not seek to avoid conflict at all cost. If you don't follow through on your current efforts, others will be likely to ignore your future efforts.

Be Reasonable

Developing a quality community requires cooperation and compromise between groups with competing interests. Public support is almost always on the side of those who are most reasonable in their approach and demands. Action that offends interested parties--especially the public--decreases the chances for cooperation and success.

Prepare to Accept Success

Success might best be viewed a progress toward an ideal rather than capitulation by the enemy. You should advocate for your own proposals, but you should also keep an open mind for alternatives and compromises offered by others. They, too, have legitimate goals and need some control over their situation. Moreover, their knowledge of the workings of systems you may not understand, might lead to greater success than you imagined. A mutually acceptable solution to a problem is a success for everyone. Your willingness to help others win will contribute to a strong group reputation.

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