

Advocacy communications planning resource



Communicating about water policy can often feel dry and complicated. But to connect with policymakers and the constituents they care about, we have to break down those barriers and make complex issues feel emotionally resonant. Yes, even to lawmakers and other policy nerds! This resource is a cheat sheet that simplifies advocacy communication into actionable steps, making it easier to connect with both policymakers and communities. [Download the worksheet version](#) to start planning.

Define advocacy goal

Let's get specific about what policy you are working to advance or influence. Your campaign goal should be clear, measurable, time-bound, and pragmatic. The more specific you are, the better your audience will be able to grasp what's at stake.

Goal setting

- **Clear:** Define a specific policy goal that is clear, actionable, and measurable. For example, rather than a broad goal like “improve water quality and affordability,” a more specific goal could be, “pass a bill that mandates regular water quality testing in all communities by 2025.”
- **Measurable:** This is scary because if you can measure success, you can also measure failure. But the stakes are what makes your advocacy work real for people! Describe what successful steps look like for a policy goal. Do you want to pass a new law, change local regulations, or secure funding for a water infrastructure project? Again, be specific.
- **Time-bound:** Set a clear timeline for achieving the goal. Break it down into short-term (within 6 months or less), medium-term (within a year), and long-term (1-3 years) objectives.
- **Bought-in:** Identify key collaborators whose support is crucial for achieving the goal. This would include policymakers, community leaders, and influential organizations on a local and state level.
- **Pragmatic:** Acknowledge and anticipate potential challenges and opposition. Frame the goal in a way that emphasizes common ground and shared values to gain support. Water policy work — from designing and funding water programs, to passing legislation, or influencing regulations — can be long-term efforts. When working on multi-year

campaigns, think about identifying milestones along the way and breaking your goal into achievable chunks to build forward momentum while managing expectations.



Frame campaign story

Communications building blocks

Message development

We like to use the Opportunity Agenda's [VPSA message development](#) framework to start as the foundation for any communications plan.

- Value: What shared values does this issue tap into for people? This could include pride in community, a love for a special place, a fear of losing something, or building a better future for the next generation. An affirmative vision rooted in shared values connects you and your audience, priming them to listen to the rest of your message.
- Problem: What threatens your shared value? This should describe how the issue impacts people's lives. Facts alone don't change minds, so choose a story, alongside a statistic, to back up your case.
- Solution: How does the policy you are advocating for address the identified problem? How will this solution improve people's lives? Get as specific as you can about who the decision makers are and how they can act.
- Action: What can your audience do to move this policy forward? Give your audience a clear call to action.

Character

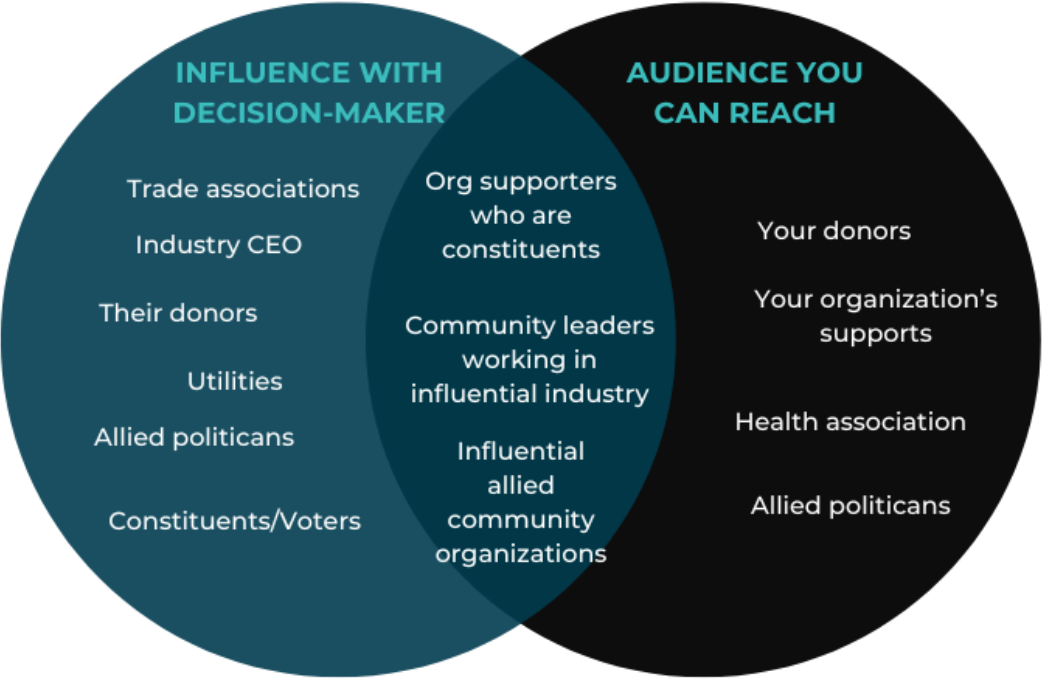
Every story needs a cast of characters. Who are the bad guys? Who are the heroes? Who is caught in the cross hairs? Think about what character your audience plays in the story. Rooting our stories in character re-emphasizes our shared humanity, lived experiences, and shared impact of the problem.

Imagery

People cannot imagine a future they cannot see and hear and feel. Imagery from graphics and photos to video plays an important role in defining a story and painting a picture for your audience. Think ahead of time about the kind of imagery and creative that will reinforce the values and story you want to tell.

Establish the audience

Your audience is the person or people who you are trying to move to act. We recommend focusing on up to 3 audiences (your decision-maker(s) and 2 others that can help influence them). The sweet spot is to identify receptive audiences that you can reach who can then apply effective pressure to decision-makers.



Tailor to each audience

Not every piece of information is necessary for every audience. An inundation of facts and figures causes people to tune out rather than listen in. In this section, tailor your communications building blocks, messengers, call to action, and communications channels for the 3 target audiences.

To start tailoring your advocacy communications, define the core message for each audience segment, based on their values. For example, for decision-makers, you may focus on a policy's benefits, costs, and evidence-based impact. For communications with your supporters or voters, we recommend focusing on how the policy directly affects their lives and aligns with their values.


Target Audience:	Decision-maker	Your people (ex. org email list)	Allied utility partner
Tailored message	The proposed policy's benefits, data-driven impacts, alignment with their campaign promises or constituent interests	Emphasize the community impact of the policy, reaffirm shared values, and the power of collective action	Focus on the operational benefits, efficiencies, cost savings, and community goodwill that comes from partnering on equitable initiatives
Call to action	Pass the policy, support the bill, Introduce a funding motion, etc.	Write your rep Sign our petition Join our town hall/webinar	Endorse policy Collaborate on a program
Messenger(s)	You Other electeds and validators Their constituents	You! Influencers to leverage social media engagement	Community leaders, Organizational spokespeople, Rate-payers
Communications Channels	Op-eds Digital campaigns Policy briefs Fact Sheet	Email newsletters Social media Webinars SMS	Workshops Industry-oriented news Conferences In-person meetings

Choose campaign tactics

Once you've defined your story elements, campaign goal, and target audiences, you can more effectively and efficiently invest in communications tactics both digital and IRL.

Tactics checklist

Advocacy requires strategic actions to drive meaningful change. Here's a (non-exhaustive) checklist of concrete communications tactics you can use to amplify your message and engage segments of your audience. Choose up to three that best align with your campaign goal, target audience, and communications channels to start building momentum:

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- **Digital Campaigns:** Social media ads, social “day of action”, or targeted content that drives your online audience to take a specific action (e.g., signing petitions, contacting representatives).
 - **Grassroots Mobilization:** Organize IRL phone banks, canvassing, community town halls, or awareness events.
 - **Media Outreach:** Draft and distribute press releases, op-eds, and letters to the editor. Hold a press event and engage with local journalists and media outlets.
 - **Partner Collaborations:** Work with aligned organizations to co-host events, create joint messaging, or build coalitions.
 - **Influencer Engagement:** Collaborate with influencers who can sway public opinion or decision-makers. This can include respected community leaders, celebrities, or social media influencers. Invite user generated content from your online audience.
 - **Advocacy Days:** Plan visits to legislators’ offices or organize virtual advocacy days where constituents can share their stories and push for policy change.

Conclusion

Advocacy work is complex. That’s especially true when trying to reach different audiences with tailored messages. With a clear plan, cohesive, values-driven story, segmented audiences, and focused messaging, impactful advocacy is within your reach. [Download the worksheet](#) to follow this straightforward framework. Remember, successful advocacy is about clarity and action!