

Virtual Advocacy During COVID-19 and Beyond

Best Practices When In-Person Communications Is Not Possible

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advocacyassociation.org

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Design and Formatting by Erin R Holland

What's Your Digital Advocacy Credibility Quotient?

Amy Showalter

Every organization that wants to promote or defend their cause has a digital presence. In today's world of physical distancing, it's natural that groups will rely on that medium more than ever before for what it excels at: educating and mobilizing your advocates. As I have constantly reminded grassroots leaders, abundance dilutes impact. Therefore, the abundance of any tactic, in this instance digital advocacy, requires that organizations assess their online credibility by conducting a digital credibility audit. They also need to evaluate their advocate's online communications credibility. Credibility is not persuasion —it is, however, the aspect of persuasion that garners attention of those with opposing views. You are more likely to receive the proverbial benefit of the doubt, and that is one of many steps to successful persuasion.

Risks to Online Credibility

In the offline realm, we have several ways to determine an individual's credibility. Elements like body language, punctuality, use of language, education and experience are just a few factors we consciously and unconsciously use to judge (yes, we all judge) credibility. They flow into the mega-factors of credibility which are trustworthiness, expertise, and goodwill. Since the visual cues are largely absent online (except for the curated highlight reels), we use heuristics to assess an organization's or an individual's credibility.

Social psychologists have found at least 20 ways that consumers of digital content determine online credibility. Here are a just a few to help you assess your true DCQ – your Digital Credibility Quotient.

Attempts at Sarcasm: The Greek translation of sarcasm is sarkazein, which means “to tear flesh.” While your organization's online brand won't veer into this territory, what about your advocates? Remember, while you are an advocacy professional, they are mortals. Remind your advocates/ stakeholders to refrain from reading your opponent's posts when they are

stressed, tired or anxious —it’s the devil’s playground! It can lead to them writing their own sarcastic messages that reflect negatively on your advocacy credibility.

Disseminating Inaccuracies: Of course, honesty is critical, particularly when the information you distribute is easily verifiable as being incorrect or purposely dishonest. I realize that “truth” is unfortunately highly subjective at the present time, but that’s not a reason to jettison oversight of facts they disseminate. *Are you monitoring your stakeholder’s posts for accuracy, particularly those of your leaders?*

Coarse Language: While you may think “it goes without saying” that language sodden with profanity isn’t appropriate in any medium (I agree!) your stakeholders may think it’s acceptable —look at the number of book titles and acceptance speeches with profanity. However, people who must use obscenities instead of normal adjectives and adverbs don’t have the vocabulary or intellectual capital to find more powerful or refined words. And of course, the more it’s used, the more mundane it becomes.

Increasing Online Credibility

What many organizations forget is that online credibility is also determined by your advocate’s offline presence —their trustworthiness, expertise, and goodwill.

Amyism #82 Maximizing Social Media Influence

“Legislators who agree with your cause may cite your social media messages as an authentic influence on them, while those opposed cite the same messages as inauthentic ‘noise.’ Both characterizations cannot be true. To increase your social media authenticity and hence it’s influence, you must have *real, credible* advocates on the ground pressing your case.”

Therefore, how they communicated in the past when face to face with a lawmaker, their staff, the local media, or community representatives greatly affects your present online credibility. As I wrote in *The Underdog Edge*, lawmakers particularly examine an advocate’s reputation (or lack of it) when first communicating with them, particularly when face to face. I wrote

that “Where you are is who you were.” What your advocates do accumulates, so start planning now on how you can help your advocates ramp up their credibility quotient.

Other aspects of your digital presence that increase online credibility include:

Communicating in the Correct Cognitive Place: As my colleague Dr. Kelton Rhoads stated in his *Ten Influence Errors Checklist*: “Novice digital advocates aim their message at the cognitive place they want their audiences to be, rather than where their audience actually is. Expert influencers first determine the latitudes of acceptance, noncommitment, and rejection ratio before aiming their messages, realizing that incrementalism may be required.” Translation: research is required.

Links to Credible Sources: All digital content is loaded with links to other sites, but are they *credible sites*? Are the sites trustworthy, do they display issue expertise, and do they convey goodwill? Connecting with other sites/organizations that don’t embody these three facets of credibility can obliterate your entire effort. This applies to coalition memberships, as well.

Respond to Negative Stakeholder Comments: The nuance here is *stakeholder* replies, not the general public or your opponents. I remember reading the blog post by an executive of a national public affairs organization with corporate and association members. The organization shares government relations and public affairs best practices. His public blog posts (and that of his staff) have no space to submit comments. That’s a mistake, because credibility is enhanced when we encourage reasoned debate.

Stakeholder Attention: To increase the credibility of your website, find out what elements your stakeholders, members, and/or advocates view most favorably and make those elements the most prominent. Yes, research is required.

Strategically improving your digital and offline credibility, and hence, persuasion, isn’t inherently unethical. Being judged for your credibility is, however, inherently unavoidable. Proceed accordingly.

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About The Authors





Amy Showalter

What do International Paper, Dow, the National Association of REALTORS® and the American Kennel Club have in common? They have all turned to Amy Showalter for her expertise and motivation to elevate their government relations influence. Amy is a grassroots and PAC influence expert who founded The Showalter Group to help associations and corporations increase their grassroots and PAC effectiveness. In fact, over 85% of her long term consulting clients have experienced an increase in budget, staff, PAC contributions and senior management recognition after collaborating with Amy.

She has delivered over 300 workshops and keynotes to over 25,000 grassroots advocates, PAC contributors, and PAC boards of directors, government relations staff, and non-profit volunteer leaders about how to maximize their political and civic influence. For nine years she directed the efforts of the highly acclaimed Nationwide Insurance Civic Action Program (CAP). During her tenure, over 2,000 public affairs professionals across the country ranked Nationwide's program as one of the top two corporate grassroots programs in the country. (Ed Grefe and Martin Linsky, *The New Corporate Activism*)

Amy has published over 130 articles, including over 30 columns published on Forbes.com and Bloomberg Government. She has been cited in over 900 media outlets, including the *The Hill*, *Politico*, *CNN Money.com*, *Foxnews.com*, *CNBC.com*, and *Roll Call*. She is the author of "The Underdog Edge: How Everyday People Change the Minds of the Powerful . . . and Live to Tell About It." (Morgan-James) and "The Art and Science of the BFF: 105 Ways

to Build Relationships on the Hill, at the State House, and in City Hall”, which has sold over 16,000 copies. Amy also is the Executive Editor of *Creating and Managing an Association Government Relations Program*, published by the American Society of Association Executives.

She has served as a faculty member at the U.S. Chamber’s Institute for Organization Management, as a guest lecturer at George Washington University’s Graduate School of Political Management, Kent State University, and the University of Texas at Austin’s LBJ Graduate School of Public Affairs, where her “Underdog Edge” book is on the LBJ’s Graduate School Curriculum. Amy has served in several national government relations leadership positions, as a past Chairman of ASAE’s Government Relations Section Council, as a board member of the Washington Area State Relations Group, and is the Producer of the annual Innovate to Motivate® conference for political involvement professionals.

Amy has a BA in Political Science from Wright State University and an MSA from Central Michigan University.

She and her husband, Randy Boyer, co-exist with their dogs Eli and Finn in the greater Cincinnati area. Finn is a registered Pet Partners® therapy dog. Finn and Amy are regular visitors at the Cincinnati Ronald McDonald House and the “Barks and Books” reading program at the Clermont County Library.

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