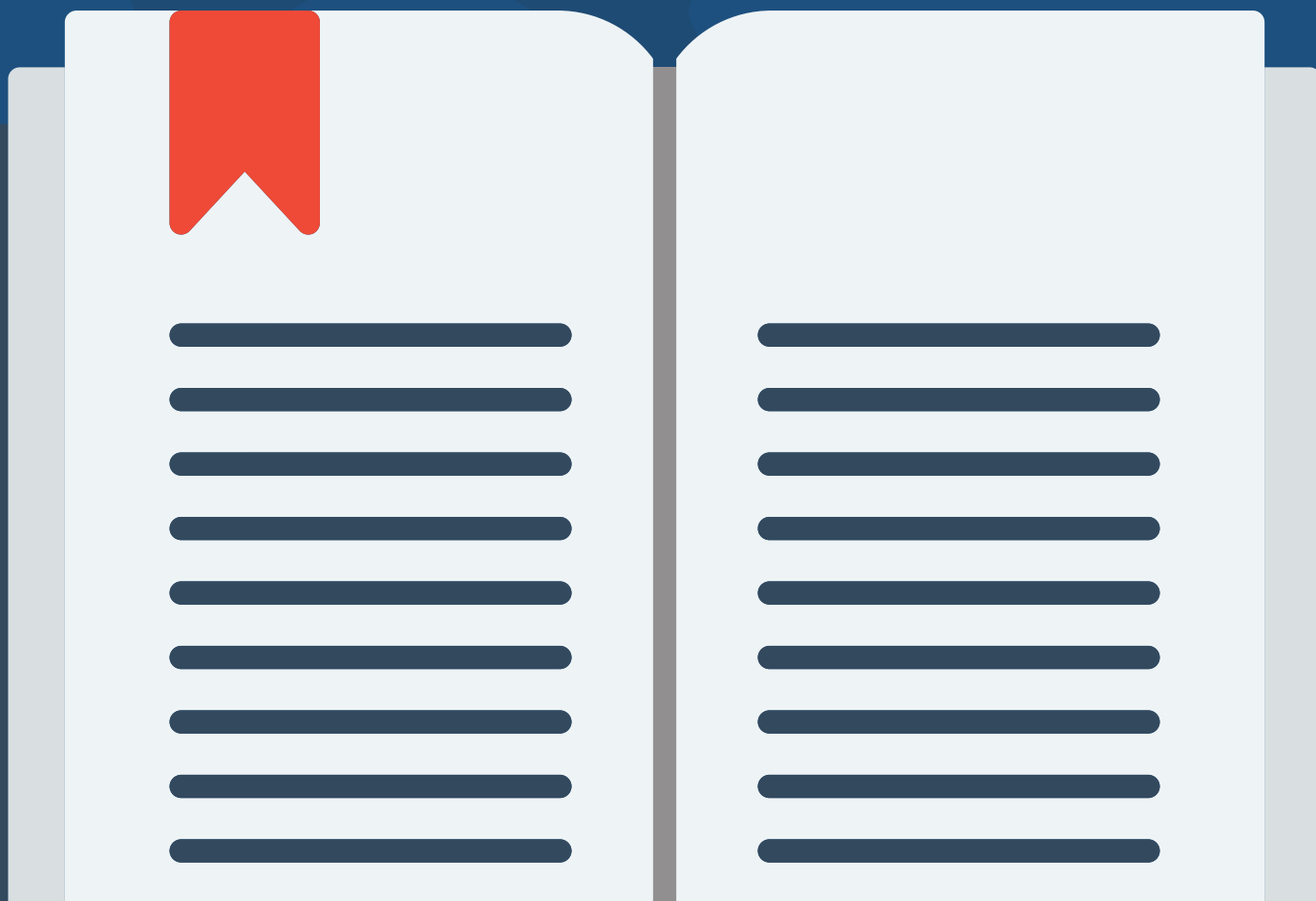


Why Aren't We All On The Same Page?



Why Aren't We All On The Same Page?

7 Lessons for Improving Affiliate Communication and Engagement

If you want to drive positive change at the national or state level, then leveraging affiliates, members or chapters at the state or local levels can be a great strategy. (For simplicity's sake, we'll refer to them all as "affiliates" in this article.) Affiliates can be valuable allies, helping you spread messages and calls to action in ways that resonate in very place-specific ways. They can also serve as important informants, sharing the reactions, concerns and interests of their various communities to enlighten your overall advocacy, community engagement or communication strategy and content.

The challenge is in knowing and understanding just how sophisticated and capable each affiliate is and recognizing how to engage them as eager and effective (vs. frustrated and disenchanting) participants in your strategic efforts.



1.

2.

How do you go about it?

For more than 15 years, we've worked with several organizations that depend on affiliates to get the job done. Throughout our experience, we've learned several lessons that can help just about any organization jumpstart or improve affiliate capacity in advocacy, communications, and engagement. Here are seven to keep in mind:

1. Recognize that everyone is coming to the table with varying levels of skill and knowledge.

Just because you may be an ace at message development and deployment, or at crafting a community outreach strategy, or at conducting productive meetings with policymakers, doesn't mean your affiliates are comfortable with it. You likely have affiliates in the mix that range from those who can pull off a flawless campaign to those who cannot message effectively or identify a key audience. If you don't already know who's who, find out by conducting a capacity assessment or even a simple survey about what they need, and repeat it regularly!

Once you understand the various capacities and competencies of your affiliates, you'll need to design an organization-wide strategy that meets each affiliate where they are and provides the support they need to succeed. You'll also need to keep in mind that you likely can't provide everything needed to every affiliate. It may be worth assisting those with the biggest learning curves by connecting them with some expert help!

2. Remember that there is no one-size-fits-all plan for affiliates.

If you've seen one affiliate, you've seen one affiliate. What resonates well with affiliates in the Southwest may fall flat in the Northeast, both across the country and within states. Listen closely to what affiliates tell you about the audiences and issues in their area, their take on the policy environment, or their read of community mood, and make sure that whatever overarching communication, advocacy or engagement you develop can accommodate a tailored approach for each.

3.

4.

5.

3. Provide customizable tools.

One great way to support affiliates and provide them with flexibility is to provide tools and templates that they can customize to fit their specific audiences or issues. Think fact sheets with areas for local information, newsletter templates that save space for local stories, or sample OpEds with fill-in-the-blank spaces for local data or examples. Better yet, provide a kit with templates, tools and guidelines, such as our ACS [Media Matters](#) guide. This allows you to ensure top-level key messages are shared across all affiliates, while simultaneously helping affiliates create tools that are more relevant and resonate within their service areas.

4. Know when to get up and go.

While sharing tools, providing support over the phone or holding webinars are all great ways to maintain connections and provide assistance to affiliates, sometimes there's simply no substitute for in-person trainings. This can include sending your own staff or outside experts to your affiliate sites, or bringing your affiliates together for group trainings or technical assistance sessions. Getting together also brings an added bonus – building the relationships that are so critical for a successful affiliate structure.

5. Don't leave them hanging.

We've seen many organizations tell affiliates *what* they need to do – but never show them *how*. Telling someone “you need to build relationships with elected officials” is not nearly as effective as providing them with a [step-by-step guide](#) that details what building that relationship looks like, or [what to do](#) before, during and after a meeting.



6.

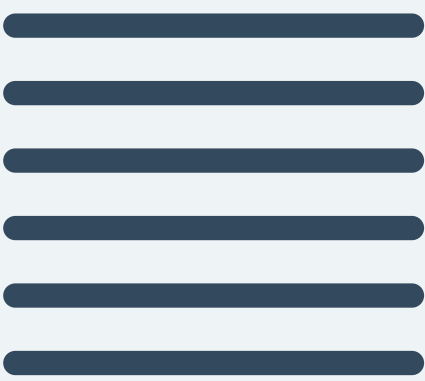
7.

6. Let your strongest affiliates lead the way.

While you might expect the home office of your organization to be the mothership for advocacy, communication, or community engagement expertise, there just may be affiliates who know even more. Maybe someone made a dream hire who's setting a new pace. Maybe an affiliate has a wealth of partners and supporters within the grassroots organizing or policy fields. Or maybe they're wildly creative and gifted at creating compelling messages. Whatever the case, you can use these affiliates as exemplars, ask them to serve as coaches or technical assistance providers for other affiliates, or invite them to be peer leaders for an organization-wide effort.

7. Base your work on theirs.

It's tempting to think about what *affiliates* need to do to accomplish your organization's goals. But to be successful, you also need to think in reverse: What do *you* need to do to help affiliates do their parts in accomplishing those goals? Who needs your attention and support most often? Who rarely needs you at all? Structure your own time and focus according to the needs of your affiliates and watch how much more powerful and effective your organization becomes.



There are many other nuances to strengthening affiliate and organization-wide efforts, based on the organization in question. But if you keep these seven lessons in mind as you work with your affiliates, you'll find your work less frustrating and more effective and rewarding for everyone involved.

What do all those terms mean, anyway?

Whether it is among affiliates, chapters, members, or with a group of partners, we often observe confusion about industry-specific terms or acronyms. ACS is committed to helping organizations cut through the jargon with a set of free, easy-to-use Glossaries. Download them and share them with your entire organization for more consistent understanding and messaging.

ACS' glossaries includes terms on trending policy and advocacy issues, and does not include every term about an issue. If you have a question about a term that is not included, please [contact us!](#)

Currently, ACS Glossaries are available for the following areas:

- **NEW** [Medicaid](#)
- **NEW** [K-12 Education](#)
- **NEW** [Health and Human Services](#)
- [Workforce Development](#)

Additional ACS Glossaries are available to help you [Work with the Media](#), [Engage in Advocacy](#), understand [Federal Budget and Appropriation Terms](#), or successfully [Collaborate with Partners](#).

Check them out today!

Where we've been:

- On March 26th, ACS conducted a webinar for North Carolina Smart Start Local Partnerships and their boards on behalf of North Carolina Partnership for Children. The webinar focused on how to integrate core and targeted messaging into their regular communication and outreach strategies.
- On April 26th, ACS presented at the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) conference regarding communication for early childhood workforce initiatives. This presentation was based on technical assistance ACS conducted to four NASBE state affiliates (Michigan, New York, Iowa, Nebraska).
- On May 2nd, ACS moderated a featured panel on early learning policy at the National Smart Start annual conference. Speakers included Brandy Archer, Michigan Department of Education, Joy Bivens, Franklin County Jobs and Family Services, and Danielle Ewen, Education Council.
- On May 18th, ACS conducted training for First Things First of Arizona outreach staff on various communication, outreach and engagement activities and strategies.

Want more?

Want to learn how communication, strategy development or advocacy can move your organization forward? Need an expert for training sessions or conference presentations?

Contact one of our team members, call toll free at **1-877-372-0166** or visit our [website](#).

[Lori McClung](#), President

[Scarlett Boudier](#), Vice President

[Rebecca Cohen](#), Senior Strategist

