

# Planning to Win

How to Post Wins in  
Challenging Times



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# The Campaign Planning Process

**Planning to Win: Posting Wins in Challenging Times** builds on our Planning to Win process. Over the last 11 years, hundreds of organizers and nonprofit leaders have used Planning to Win to launch successful campaigns, from increasing the number of people counted for the census to creating a pipeline of people advocating to end fossil fuel use. We updated the guidance and examples because we know that even though you're facing the wind, you won't cede the moment. There's power in making progress — even if wins take more creativity and persistence to achieve.

As you begin, remember: Strong campaigns rarely follow a straight road. There are forks, roundabouts and U-turns. But at each intersection, if you lead with strategy, your campaign plan will tell you the best way forward.

In this version, we've added ways to integrate Asset-Framing® into your planning. With Asset-Framing, which social entrepreneur [Trabian Shorters](#) created, you first define people (places or things) by their aspirations and contributions (this can include assets, achievements, actions and positive statuses) before noting their challenges. It's a powerful shift that will strengthen your campaigns.

Here are the nine steps to successful campaign planning:

- 1. Assemble Your Dream Campaign Planning Team**
- 2. Define the Victory**
- 3. Evaluate the Campaign Climate**
- 4. Chart Your Course to Create Momentum**
- 5. Choose Your Influence Strategy to Make Progress**
- 6. Navigate Collaboration and Opposition**
- 7. Craft Your Campaign Messaging**
- 8. Manage the Campaign**
- 9. Plan for After the Campaign**

**LET'S GO.**



# 1. Assemble Your Campaign Planning Dream Team

Good planning takes good teamwork. Your first step is to build a team of people to develop and execute the campaign plan.

The expertise most critical for your campaign planning team will shift depending on the nature of your campaign. However, to be effective, campaign planning teams often require expertise across:

- ✦ Policy
- ✦ Advocacy
- ✦ Communications
- ✦ Organizing
- ✦ Development
- ✦ Issue expertise
- ✦ Audience expertise about the people you will engage

When building your campaign team, consider that this will likely involve people outside of your own organization. The planning team should include:

**The Captain or Co-Captains.** Every strong campaign needs a captain or co-captains of the ship. If a campaign is an organizational priority, you must make space for one person with the appropriate strategic and project management skill set to see the big picture, design the team, and develop and execute the plan.

**Campaign Leadership.** These people make final campaign decisions. They won't be part of every step, but they are ultimately the green-light givers and those who have the power to veto recommendations and make the tough calls. They believe in your plan, and they're ready to advocate for its effective execution when times get tough.

**Input Givers.** You'll need valued partners who will give you their opinions but understand that what you do is up to you. You'll want to ensure that this group does not feel territorial over any part of the process. While ultimate decisions do not rest in their hands, they bring valuable, diverse perspectives and expertise to the table.

**Hard Truth Squad.** These individuals will be your unbiased sounding board — for your goal and plan — and will flag any weaknesses and potential threats, both from opposition or allies. Include them in any review of visual elements of campaigns in addition to strategy, messaging and material execution.

**Doers.** These are people who will make the campaign happen. They don't just need to buy in; they need to feel ownership of the end result and be energized to contribute.

**Personally Impacted.** Consider where those personally impacted by the campaign issue sit in the campaign. Are they problem-solvers and presented as such? Do they have decision-making authority?

**Once you finalize your team, write them down by category for easy reference.**



## 2. Define the Victory

Plan with the end in mind. In this section, you'll identify your aspirational goal and the specific concrete campaign win that will move you closer to it.

**Align on the aspirational goal: Think big.** Ground your victory in an aspirational vision of what you want for the future or, even better, what the people you're supporting want or deserve for the future — not just what you don't want. It's a good practice that takes an Asset-Framing approach. Centering what you want the world to look like will help you avoid focusing on short-term gains at the expense of long-term wins. Think of the audacious goal that you are trying to achieve 5, 10 or 20 years from now? Write down your aspirational goal.

**Define the campaign win: Get specific.** Now, visualize a concrete campaign win that will move you closer to your big-picture goal. This isn't possible for ongoing awareness campaigns that aren't seeking concrete wins. This step — and this entire guide — is for campaigns with a beginning and an end that you can define as a win. For example, The **Clean Slate Initiative (CSI)** dreams of a world where “People will no longer be defined by their records and will have the opportunity to contribute to their community, have a fair opportunity to work, get an education, and achieve their full potential.” CSI's campaign win is to pass clean slate legislation that automates record sealing for eligible arrests and convictions in all states and at the federal level.

Here are more examples of big aspirational goals and corresponding concrete campaign wins:

| Aspirational Goal                                      | Type of Campaign | Campaign Win                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Plant-based foods are affordable choices.              | Corporate change | Get companies like Starbucks to eliminate their upcharge for plant-based milk alternatives across the nation.                        |
| Everyone can access and afford life-saving healthcare. | Behavior change  | Within one year, get 55 easy-to-access Naloxone vending machines in place in high-need areas to prevent overdoses in New York state. |
| Families flourish.                                     | Policy change    | Secure affordable and safe, government-funded child care for all children in New Mexico.                                             |

**Identify the type of campaign you want to launch.** It will likely fall in one of the following categories:

- ✦ Corporate change
- ✦ Behavior change
- ✦ Policy change, including:
  - Executive order
  - Legislative (federal or state)
  - Ballot initiatives
  - Regulatory

For some, this is an easy answer. You want a new policy in place and need to go through the legislature or a ballot measure. But you may have options. Maybe you want to get businesses to voluntarily adopt a policy, or you want people to sign up for an underutilized government program before you seek more funds for it. To help you decide whether you should run a campaign and what kind, consider the following:

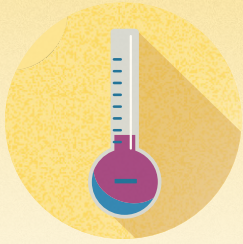
- ✦ **What is the specific win you want to make happen** (e.g., lower asthma rates in kids), **and what kind of campaigns would make a demonstrable difference?** Is it passing laws that reduce air pollution, getting companies to change their internal pollution standards or increasing the number of caregivers who keep their kids inside on bad air days? All are options to achieve the outcome you want. You need to decide which might be best for now.
- ✦ **What win will suffice?** If you are seeking investment, will a \$1 million pilot project suffice, or are you seeking \$25 million to tackle the scale of the need? If you are trying to ban single-use plastic, can you live with a phased-in approach just affecting grocery bags but leaving straws alone for now? What about a total ban that doesn't start until five years from now?
- ✦ **Is this issue ready to move?** Campaigns drive people to make decisions. They might vote for/against something, boycott a company or change how they do things. For people to take action, they need to have some idea about the issue; feel like they can do something about it; and feel that if they do take action, it will matter. Does the issue at the heart of your campaign idea meet this criteria?
- ✦ **Can you clearly identify what it will take to win this campaign now?** Are all the things that you need gettable — from power to partnerships to resources? Do you see opportunities for momentum? Can you spark supportive conversations on social media and media? Can you outwit opposition that may form?
- ✦ **Which campaign possibility has the fewest complications and assumptions?** Does the campaign you envision require 15 steps to get to victory or only three? Are you making a lot of assumptions that, if proven untrue, will decrease your chances of success? Are there significant requirements that, if you fail to meet them, you are sunk, and meeting them is a long shot (e.g., a ballot initiative requires 300,000 signatures, and if you don't get those, you lose).
- ✦ **Which possibility are you best suited to take on?** Do you have relationships with the necessary policymakers or business leaders? Do you have credibility with community organizations that will need to support your play?

- ✦ **If a campaign on a similar issue failed before, why can you win now?** What worked, and what didn't in past campaigns that focused on your issue? Have dynamics changed in a way that position you to succeed?
- ✦ **Are there other outcomes — in addition to winning — that you want this campaign to achieve?** Through a campaign, you can build community power, galvanize new supporters, create a pipeline of future organizers and/or raise your organization's profile. You may want to use this campaign to do majority-making, where you recruit more people to the cause, in which case you'll likely be working beyond the choir and need strategies that will succeed.
- ✦ **Can you face a loss?** Will a loss at this moment make it difficult for you to win in the future, cost you important relationships or damage your standing? In the event of a loss, can you use the attention and power-building as a stepping stone to your next campaign?
- ✦ **Can you handle backlash?** The results of campaigns have winners and losers. Those that see your campaign as a threat may form strong opposition. Are you prepared to face opposition, knowing that it may come at you for more than this issue you are campaigning on?
- ✦ **Did the campaign choose you?** Most of the above applies when you proactively consider launching a campaign. However, sometimes campaigns choose you. When the Department of Government Efficiency decided to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), many organizations had to mount campaigns to block defunding as well as generate support for their missions from other sectors. When situations like this happen, consider these questions through the lens of when, rather than if, you launch so that you choose your best campaign win.

**Do you still have a great campaign win idea? Write down your win and the type of campaign.**

**Get a gut check on your campaign win.** Now is a good time to tap your hard truth squad. Walk the squad through your thinking. Then ask: Is this campaign viable, and does it ultimately have more pros than cons? If needed, after the conversation, update your campaign win.

**Know your legal limits.** Check with a lawyer before launching any policy-based campaign. It's critical that everyone involved with the campaign knows and minds the line between advocacy and lobbying. IRS rules allow 501(c)(3) public charities to do an "insubstantial" amount of lobbying. Private foundations can fund public charities that lobby so long as they don't earmark their funds for lobbying. Some funders may, however, choose to restrict their grants to nonlobbying activities only. You can learn more at [Bolder Advocacy](#).



## 3. Evaluate the Campaign Climate

Your campaign will operate in context, not a vacuum. You need to know what is going on in the world around you to maximize opportunities and minimize vulnerabilities. You'll revisit your campaign win once you have a strong sense of the context around you to set yourself up for success.

### State of Your Issue

To get a full picture of the climate around your campaign issue, assess the public sentiment on it, the related narrative landscape and the political landscape. As you dig into each, pay special attention to potential headwinds (challenging conditions) or potential tailwinds (positive momentum that could benefit your cause).

For example, if you are working a campaign to get more people to support democratic ideals like the rule of law, a potential headwind could be the [recent data](#) that suggests Gen Z is giving up on democracy. However, if you are working on a campaign related to healthy and safe food, a potential tailwind may appear as [Make America Healthy Again moms speaking out against microplastics](#) in food. In the past, scientists and environmentalists have largely shared the dangers of spreading microplastics, and this new constituency offers power-building opportunities.

Consider the following questions to make this determination:

- ✦ Is your issue hot on the agenda? Stuck in limbo? Or so far off the agenda that you'll need to invest considerable time just to get your issue into the public conversation?
- ✦ Is there polling or conversation on your issue, and is it positive or negative?
- ✦ Is the language on your issue so polarized that you need to reframe your issue before you begin?

- ✦ Is this a crowded field with lots of organizations creating noise, or do you have the field to yourself?
- ✦ Are there upcoming opportunities where this issue will be front and center, e.g., the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, book releases, new research out?
- ✦ Are there dedicated channels and voices that regularly feature the issue or are underrepresented in the information ecosystem, e.g., mom influencers, specific media beats, etc.
- ✦ Is your issue widely misunderstood or mischaracterized? If so, is this due to intentional disinformation or a lack of information?
- ✦ Is there appetite among aligned organizations to campaign, and are there financial resources available to tap?

When assessing, draw conclusions. For example, [Gallup](#) recently did polling on immigration, and it found that 30% of Americans want immigration decreased, down from 55% one year ago. More importantly, a record-high 79% consider immigration good for the country. If you want to run campaigns on immigration issues, you'll need to decide what you think this means for you. Are these tailwinds that record numbers think immigration is good? Has the intense national conversation on this issue opened doorways to new support for the solutions you want to get in place? Don't drown in data. But consider research from reputable sources that helps you take the pulse on conversations.

An example to draw inspiration from is the largely parent-led movement to [make schools bell-to-bell smartphone free](#). Organizations like [Screen Time Action Network at Fairplay](#), [Parents for Safe Online Spaces](#) and [Smartphone Free Childhood](#) were already agitating that smartphones and social media are robbing kids of their childhood. When Jonathan Haidt's bestselling book, "[The Anxious Generation](#)," started making waves, parents, policymakers and media suddenly had common language to talk about the issue, where previously the conversation had been fragmented. Organizations took advantage of all the people who wanted to volunteer to protect kids. They formed the [Distraction Free Schools Policy Project](#), and parents from more than 30 states strategized about how to get policies with teeth in place; phones out of schools; and kids' attention back on living, not scrolling. By strategically using the tailwind that Haidt's book offered, they sparked serious momentum. Now more than 20 states have some kind of ban in place. Parents' sights are set on more states in the near future.

**Get up to date on the political landscape.** If you're working on a policy play, ask:

- ✦ Is this a politically potent issue that is getting attention or on the sidelines?
- ✦ Is this seen as a partisan issue? Are there opportunities to depolarize it?
- ✦ Have there been political or legal wins that elicit hope or doom at the federal, state or county level?
- ✦ Are there unlikely allies with political power with whom you have common ground and who may join forces on this?
- ✦ Are there expected opportunities where this issue will be front and center that you can take advantage of, e.g., reauthorizations, elections, etc.

**Summarize your evaluation of the climate around your issue. Write it down.**

## State of Your Opposition

Many campaigns will have active opposition, those who adamantly disagree with or are ideologically opposed to your big goal. On the other hand, opposition may not always be clear. Sometimes people will agree with you on the big goal but oppose your approach or solution to the issue. Instead of active opposition, you may face apathy, and that will cause resistance or make it hard to motivate people.

Consider these questions to map your state of play:

- ✦ If you succeed, who are the winners, and who are the losers? Focus on the losers to track potential and real opposition.
- ✦ Which group or person(s) would agree with you on the big-picture goal but not your approach for solving? What is their main message around their position, and what do they say about your position?
- ✦ What are their assets, and how might they leverage them to counter you?
- ✦ What are their challenges that might limit their effectiveness and that you can use to minimize any attacks?
- ✦ What might you do proactively to limit their ability to derail your campaign?

**Crimson Courage** offers an example of being clear-eyed about the political state of an issue and sizing up its opposition. To fight for academic freedom at Harvard University and beyond, Crimson Courage used its assessment to find a powerblock that would give Harvard good reason to not bow to political pressure: alumni.

With your hard truth squad, conduct one final assessment about doing this campaign before you move to planning how:

- ✦ Is now the right time for this campaign? It is not enough to just say it is urgent; you need to have a strong case for why this and why now.
- ✦ Is your organization the right one to play a lead role? What does your organization or coalition have that makes you best suited to lead this campaign?
- ✦ Can you win? Can you articulate what gives you a competitive edge, the power and the know-how to get this done?
- ✦ Can you handle the risks involved? Can your organization's reputation, strategic positioning, resources and relationships stand up to the risks inherent in this campaign?

**Outdoor Alliance**, a coalition of nine outdoor recreation advocacy organizations that represents millions of human-powered outdoor recreationists who depend on public lands, offers a recent example of setting a strategic campaign win under tight timelines and pulling it off. When the Big Beautiful Bill started moving through Congress, Outdoor Alliance and allied organizations realized that the government was planning to put millions of acres of beloved public lands up for sale. They sounded the alarm. First, they created a [map](#) showing the 11 states that would be most affected. The map took off on social media. An early victory came when the Senate Parliamentarian ruled the provision could not remain in the bill because it was unrelated to the budget per the Byrd Rule. But Senator Mike Lee (UT) reworked his proposal and claimed the land sales would help with housing issues. Across the political spectrum, public lands have support and Americans didn't buy Senator Lee's proposals. They united behind the idea that this was a land grab and had policymakers' phones ringing off the hook. As [E&E News reported](#): "For weeks, hunting groups, outdoor recreation advocates and even prominent Republicans pummeled Lee's proposal online and urged other senators to oppose it. Some alleged the bill would open up a fire sale of public lands to foreign nations and venture capital groups."

Several Republican Senators vowed not to vote for the bill unless the land sales provision was removed. Lee withdrew his proposal, and the public lands came off the chopping block.

**Detail your anticipated opposition and what you know about it. Write that down.**



## 4. Chart Your Course

A campaign win is in sight — now it's time to map out the steps to victory. Every campaign has a series of milestones that you must hit on your way to the win. These milestones build on each other and let you know you are gaining momentum.

**Mark your milestones.** Milestones are the achievements that show you are making headway. Some milestones may be sequential (you need to reach the first to move to the second), but others may move simultaneously. It is important to identify all milestones necessary for you to reach your goal. Then put them in the most logical order to keep the momentum building.

Frame the milestones as outcomes so they represent what you will achieve that will enable you to move forward. For example, if your campaign is going to release a report to persuade a corporate leader to become an ally, your milestone is not that you release a report, which is the tactic. Your milestone is that the leader speaks in support of the cause. If one of your desired outcomes is to do majority-making and bring more people to the cause, you'll want milestones that represent that, e.g., faith community signs on to a joint statement.

**Generation180** offers inspiration in how to think about majority-making. For its behavior change campaign, it wanted to get more people driving electric vehicles (EVs). When Generation180 did its scan, it learned that only 30% of women had some familiarity with EVs, compared to over half of men. More importantly, 70% of EV owners are men. The data gave Generation180 a target-rich environment with women. Now one of its milestones is to increase women driving EVs. It is experimenting with the best way to do that. Its latest play is an [“I’ll Drive What She’s Driving”](#) campaign that is getting a lot of attention, including receiving [two MarCom Awards](#) for excellence and [coverage in The Washington Post](#).

Importantly, milestones are not tactics. They are the good results that happen if the tactics work. They are outcomes.

As of Nov. 1, 2025, all parents in New Mexico, regardless of their income, are able to avail themselves of [government-funded child care](#). Here is the course that grassroots group **OLE** took to make this a reality:

- ✦ Milestone: Leaders established the seriousness of the problem — the fact that New Mexico is often 48th, 49th or 50th on lists about child well-being — and the media widely amplified it.
- ✦ Milestone: The campaign overcame expected opposition on cost by showing that funding can come from royalties that oil and gas companies pay to lease land.
- ✦ Milestone: Early education leaders agreed with campaign effort and positioned this as an extension of a current program that has high recognition and support — not a new program that they would have to socialize.
- ✦ Milestone: The state legislature voted to put the issue on the New Mexico state ballot for voters to approve. (Note: The Legislature stalled for 10 years.)
- ✦ Milestone: A handful of legislators were unseated to get the numbers in favor of an extension.
- ✦ Milestone: The governor became an outspoken advocate and prioritized the issue on her agenda.
- ✦ Milestone: The Legislature passed the resolution to put the measure on the New Mexico state ballot.
- ✦ Milestone: A majority of voters voted for it. (Truth: 70% did!)

As you chart your course, gather your team and ask, “Based on the approach we’ve chosen, what is the first milestone we need to tackle to get closer to our campaign win?” **Starting with the first milestone, write down all the milestones you need to reach your campaign win.**

This is a good time to check in with your campaign planning team to make sure all team members agree with the path you’ve laid out and are willing to mobilize.



## 5. Choose Your Influence Strategy

For every milestone you've identified, there is a person or group who determines whether you are successful. In the example above, it was ultimately New Mexico voters. But along the way, there were different decision-makers, from early childhood leaders agreeing to call this an extension, not a new program, to the governor becoming a vocal champion. Here are guiding questions to determine the decision-makers whom your campaign will need to influence:

- ✦ Who has the power over whether you reach your milestone? Name them, if known. Be as specific as possible. Name people, not institutions.
- ✦ Do you have direct relationships with them, and would they give your opinion serious consideration?
- ✦ What event or circumstance would cause them to *need* to make a decision on this issue? Why?
- ✦ What conditions and factors will impact their decision? Knowing what external conditions will influence the decision — from timing to the political climate — will help you understand what is shaping their thinking.
- ✦ What different strategies or levers — from champions that the decision-maker trusts to media and social media to research and facts — will convince the decision-maker to act?
- ✦ In instances where you can't convince a decision-maker directly or on your own, which audiences will you need to engage to move the decision-maker?
- ✦ What might it take to do that, e.g., forming a coalition, starting a petition, coordinating days of action, etc.

**Now that you know whom you need to engage to reach milestones, write down how best to do that.** This is how you'll bring people around to your way of thinking. On what grounds will you make your case and to whom? Whom will you mobilize and how? When will you do this so that you get the attention and movement you need?

**Sum up your influence strategy in a sentence or two so that campaigners can then offer creative tactics to conduct the influence strategy you think will work best. Write it down.**

**People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals** (PETA) offers an example in its campaign to stop companies from charging more for plant-based foods. Its influence strategy was to first publicly call out Starbucks for its policy that made customers pay more for alternative milks. PETA highlighted both animal rights and health, because lactose-intolerant customers were also charged more for milk alternatives even though it was necessary for them to avoid an allergic reaction. PETA's campaign tactics ultimately worked. Starbucks stopped charging extra for vegan milks in all its stores in the U.S. and Canada, effective November 2024. The win followed a vigorous four-year campaign that included letters from more than 160,000 PETA supporters; protests at Starbucks locations around the U.S.; help from actor James Cromwell, who glued his hand to a café counter in protest and starred in a satirical video calling out the upcharge; and an appeal from Sir Paul McCartney.

Notably, in its release announcing this change, Starbucks offered a different reason for its decision than animal welfare: "Core to the Starbucks Experience is the ability to customize your beverage to make it yours. By removing the extra charge for non-dairy milks we're embracing all the ways our customers enjoy their Starbucks," said Brian Niccol, Starbucks chairman and chief executive officer.

PETA took the win, getting the result it wanted, even if that result wasn't for the reasons that PETA fought so hard for.

**Determine the optimal timing.** As part of influence, you'll want to think through timing. When are your best opportunities timewise to influence? If you are trying to pass legislation, you want to be ready when legislators are in session. For example, if you want people to stop using fertilizer in areas where it can run into a waterway, you want to be ready by spring and fall, when this activity is most likely to happen. Also consider whether momentum on the issue is sufficient to support the campaign. Are people starting to tune in, or do you need to lay more groundwork to get attention and create buzz?

Also, consider what kind of timing you want to build off of:

- ✦ **Organic timing.** Is there a major moment that you can build off of (like a celebration or anniversary) or must-hit moments (like the beginning of a legislative session)? Sometimes you can use or need to use organic timing, which may focus your choices.
- ✦ **Invented timing.** If there aren't obvious hooks to take advantage of, you can build a moment and name it to claim it. For example, Giving Tuesday started as a fundraising campaign (invented timing) and has persisted to become organic timing that others build on.

**Consider timing, and make additions to your course to use it in your favor.  
Write down the adjustments.**



## 6. Navigate Collaboration and Opposition

In planning your course, you'll want to make sure you collaborate with whom you need to and minimize anticipated opposition. Look back over the course. If you have a milestone that says 10 business leaders announce support for a solution, you'll need to collaborate with the business community to make that happen.

**Where do you need to collaborate?** Every campaign faces a common question: “Can we do this alone?” More often than not, the answer is, “We need to work with others to get the job done.” That means working in a coalition or alliance. You can do this by listing the capabilities and connections that your campaign needs and then noting those that you have. Can organizations or other partners fill in the gaps?

Consider the following questions:

- ✦ Whom do you need to win this, and whom do you need to keep this win from rolling back over time?
- ✦ Whom does this give you the chance to build relationships with? Who might come in on this that you wouldn't otherwise reach?
- ✦ How might you use this campaign to build power and set yourself up for an even bigger win next time by using it to build trusted relationships and large majorities behind ideas and solutions?
- ✦ Are the communities who are directly impacted by this campaign involved? And if not and you add them, is there space to reset the table, so to speak, so that they are full partners in setting the campaign direction?

You may come into coalition with people who agree on the goal but differ in their values and approach. The Asset-Framing approach often makes it easier to build strong, diverse coalitions across identity, culture, experience

and political lines because you first focus on your common aspirations and contributions. This leads to an integrative process rather than a divisive one. And with ever more extreme polarization, having an in- and out-group on issues may lead to short-term wins and long-term losses. Each potential partner will be a decision to make carefully with your core team.

**After answering the questions above, you now have a full list of potential partners to engage and potential ways to do that. Write down the list.**

**Where do you need to practice opposition management?** When you evaluated the campaign climate, you assessed existing and potential opposition.

- ✦ What narratives and messages do you need to get the upper hand on, and what do you need to focus public conversations about to win?
- ✦ Which allies can you recruit that take the sting out of some of their strongest points?
- ✦ What facts and figures can you socialize that blunt their power?

**This is a good chance to check in with your campaign leadership, input givers and hard truth squad to confirm potential partners and agree on your plan to manage opposition. Write it down.**



## 7. Craft Your Campaign Messaging

### Narrative and Messages That Mobilizes

Strong campaigns build upon, reframe or shift narratives that catch on. They break through the noise, are shareable on social media and organically infiltrate culture. These narratives require compelling messages that clearly tell your campaign story and deliver it through engaging messengers.

Once you have crafted your message, you'll need to align all staff, partners and supporters on the core messaging concepts, your tone of voice and the values you lead with. This consistency will make it easier for folks to quickly understand what you're doing and why. Unified messaging will also help the decision-maker to understand who is onboard even when they are from different organizations. While it's great when everyone lifts up the same call to action, they don't need to memorize the messaging word for word. To bring the concept to life, we'll pull out concepts from the [\*\*Banned Books Week Coalition's\*\*](#) public materials to imagine its overarching messaging. The coalition is an international alliance of diverse organizations committed to ending censorship attempts and encouraging people to defend their freedom to read.

The message platform has four main points:

**1. The Need or Opportunity.** This point explains the challenge, need or problem that currently prevents you from achieving your higher aspiration. It is the situation to which your campaign is responding with its actions.

- Prompt: What is the big issue that you're trying to solve as a result of this campaign? Why does it matter to the audiences you're trying to reach?

*Example: Removing and banning books from public libraries is a slippery slope to government censorship and the erosion of our country's commitment to freedom of expression.*

**2. What We Are Doing.** This sentence delineates what the campaign is working to accomplish.

- Prompt: In a broad sense, what is the campaign seeking to positively change or accomplish? What aspiration does it want to achieve?

*Example: The Banned Books Week Coalition celebrates the power of literature to bring people together and protects the First Amendment.*

**3. How We Do It.** This point describes the specific steps that you recommend to address the need or problem.

- Prompt: Now, think about the specific requests you're asking of your decision-makers throughout the campaign's duration. In reality, you might have a different request and decision-maker responsible for each milestone.

*Example: We combat book bans in schools and public libraries through advocacy and coordinated activations with communities.*

**4. Vision.** This point is both aspirational and inspirational. It explains what the campaign victory will bring about.

- Prompt: For your vision statement, think ahead to when you've won your campaign — how will you have changed your community, state or country for the better?

*Example: We envision a world where everyone has access to all books and the freedom and knowledge to read and grow from them.*

Consider phrasing your messaging in a manner that focuses on the goal without vilifying the opposition, which is another aspect of Asset-Framing. This approach allows you to see what you genuinely share in common with some of those you may have logically determined to be your opposition. And it often allows your position to be seen as credible in the opposing camp, thereby adding momentum to the effort from unexpected places. If part of your course is majority-making, then you'll need to think about how you will tailor messaging to attract more support.

**Write down your draft messages then invite your full planning team to review them and share edits or comments.** Also consider testing your messages with a wider group to see whether they are landing the way you intend. Need a refresher on creating compelling messaging? Check out Spitfire's [\*\*SMART Chart\*\*](#) and [\*\*Mindful Messaging\*\*](#) guides.

## Campaign Name/Identity

Your campaign name may be people's first encounter with you, so it needs to quickly, accurately and memorably convey your intention and values. This is most important in highly visible campaigns. If your campaign is entirely behind the scenes, you might not need a campaign name at all.

With a name or not, the campaign needs a clear identity. This will include language about who you are and what you are about, top emotions you want to elicit, the tone you want to strike and visuals that reinforce these strategic decisions.

Look at your message platform. What might resonate in just a few words? Here are some potential approaches to spark ideas along with some names that caught our attention:

### ✦ **Play on the decision-maker's name.**

- **Make Amazon Pay** is a global campaign to make Amazon pay fair wages, its taxes and for its impact on the planet

### ✦ **Reframe the challenge.**

- The Campaign of the **CROWN Act**, led by the CROWN Coalition, is Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair by passing laws that prohibit race-based hair discrimination.
- **Smartphone Free Childhood**, shared earlier, is a growing movement of parents choosing to delay, or forgo, smartphones and social media for kids, and getting others to make the same commitment.

### ✦ **Build upon a statistic or relevant number.**

- **Vote NO on All 4** campaign encouraged Louisiana voters to not support the governor's four proposed constitutional amendments on the March 2025 ballot.

### ✦ **Use an alliteration.**

- **Ban the Box** is a national campaign focused on getting states, municipalities and employers to remove questions about past conviction records from job applications and delay background checks until later in the hiring process.

As you start brainstorming, remember:

- ✦ The name should build public support. Don't be so creative that people don't understand or "get" the name.
- ✦ Acronyms are OK if they naturally work well, as in the CROWN example, but they are often overrated and take long to explain. Don't spend a lot of time trying to be too clever to force an acronym.
- ✦ The name should be most compelling for the audiences you want to reach.

**Once you have a draft name, write it down. Then run it by your planning team and test it with others in your network who are in your priority audiences.**

## Level of Visibility

Depending on your issue, the only way to get momentum may be to go all out — grassroots organizing, petitions, media coverage and rallies. Or, to see the change you want, you may need to reach out quietly to decision-makers who will only act if your issue stays off the radar. You can be successful either way, so long as you make a strategic, informed decision.

Here are some situations that may lead you to act quietly:

- ✦ You are working with a coalition of organizations or people whose ideologies and/or values differ from yours, but you all agree on the goal. Still, partnering with these groups could draw criticism or distrust among your core base of supporters.
- ✦ You know the decision-makers will dig in to their current position if faced with public pressure. However, there are specific groups or community leaders who may successfully make the case in private.
- ✦ Your decision-makers only trust grassroots efforts that emerge from community members as opposed to those that a national or high-profile group is driving.

## Campaign Visuals

The visuals for your campaign website, paid ads and/or rally posters are all signals about your values and approach. The visuals should reflect your tone of voice and the emotions that you intend to evoke. Choose them with intention and care.

Throughout the campaign, those working on communications should be in discussion with the rest of the team, including the doers and personally impacted staff to confirm that the style not only matches your intention but also resonates with the desired audience.

**Nostalgic images can shortcut messaging and motivate people to act.** In early 2025, congressional Republicans again proposed to defund public media, such as NPR and PBS. These outlets have a wide reach, but the media market is noisy. Nowadays people receive their media from a multitude of companies in different formats, including attention-dominating social media. It could have been difficult to show public media's unique value and range, in particular to social media natives who are not loyal to specific outlets. Images of "Sesame Street" characters and the "Reading Rainbow" logos on posters and sweaters and in art made the case. While neither program was on PBS at that moment, people had fond childhood memories of the shows and, now as adults, shared stories of how programming aided their development. Some became donors for the first time. Despite widespread public opposition, Congress stripped already-approved funding for public media. Donations surged, and still there are calls for Congress to restore funding. **Protect My Public Media** is an action network of Americans who are dedicated to this mission, advancing the cause. As PBS says, public media is "defunded, not defeated."

## Testing Messages

With new technology, artificial intelligence and low-cost ways to test messages, all campaigns should invest energy in doing this. Here are simple ways to test:

- ✦ Start internally. Discuss with your team whether these messages stand up against your opposition. If not, decide whether and how you may need to pivot.
- ✦ Expand to allies and experts on the dream campaign planning team who have insights about the audiences you want to motivate. Take these messages and talk through them with some close partners and allies. Ask them to listen to them as if they are the decision-maker you're trying to reach. Is anything reinforcing a "no" response? Should you tap into a different belief or value?
- ✦ Use social media networks that reach audiences you want to motivate to do some quick A/B testing. If you are torn between these messages and some alternatives, test them through focus groups or polling among your audiences. The benefit of this approach is that you can scale the

testing to be as robust as you'd like, though it is a significant investment. Alternatively, you can use the social media platform that your audience or decision-maker is most likely to use or by using your email lists to see whether messaging resonates more than others.

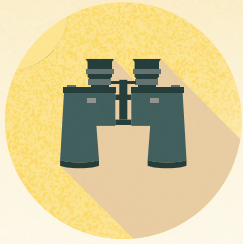
**In concert with your communications staff and campaign leadership, decide how you will test your messages. Write down your plan and socialize it among your campaign team as needed.**

## Tailoring Messaging by Audience

When you are majority-making by getting people beyond the choir to activate, you may need to tailor your messaging to reflect new audience values. [Edesia](#) offers a smart example. In July 2025, the [government officially dismantled USAID](#). Edesia, which offers life-saving food for malnourished children, went into action as soon as news started circulating about the possibility. In the midst of receiving stop work orders and seeing pallets of food stacked in its warehouse rather than getting to children, CEO Navyn Salem launched an all-hands-on-deck effort to get funding restored and food moving again. Salem knew that the U.S. Department of State was a likely decision-maker, so she reviewed Secretary of State Marco Rubio's stated priorities and highlighted how Edesia fit in.

*“Every year, we make up to 88 million pounds of life-saving food at our factory in Rhode Island—using peanuts from Georgia, milk from Wisconsin, soy from Iowa, and other commodities from 15 states. When we fight hunger abroad, we strengthen American jobs, American agriculture and American security. As Ronald Reagan reminds us, ‘We are a global power, with global interests and global responsibilities.’”*

As a result of strong messaging and campaigning, in early August, Edesia's funding was restored, contracts reactivated and all production lines turned back on as [Edesia received support](#) from the Department of State.



## 8. Manage the Campaign

You know what you want to accomplish, and you know when you want to get it done. You have a plan to get there, and you know whom you need to engage along the way. You've determined the main tactics to pursue to achieve success.

Now you need to identify and plan the day-to-day details to get it done. This section will help you manage assignments and identify metrics to track — such as whether you're moving in the right direction or need a course correction.

**Create a master strategy chart.** Now that you've determined your milestones, decision-makers, influencers and major tactics, you can systematically match assignments, timelines, metrics and resources to each of the campaign milestones and activities you picked. Start with the milestone you chose for your influencer step and fill in each of the following:

- ✦ Assignments
- ✦ Deadline/timeline
- ✦ Metrics — including outputs (your activities) and outcomes (the changes that occur as a result of your activities)
- ✦ Result of your outputs
- ✦ Budget or other resources

We want to bring you back to the Asset-Framing framework. Measurement is crucial, but make sure that you are measuring the right things. Have you understood and communicated your affected community's aspirations and contributions? Did you engage them as leaders, not just beneficiaries? Did you challenge negative biases? These questions will ensure you don't make short-term gains at the expense of long-term gains.

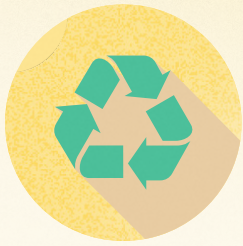
**Manage the team.** Check-in meetings are critical to ensure you're staying ahead of a shifting landscape and taking advantage of opportunities. Here are several questions to review at every campaign meeting:

- ✦ Have we executed all the activities we planned since our last meeting? Are we closer to our milestones as a result? If not, how can we shift strategies?
- ✦ Have there been any shifts, positive or negative, among our key decision-makers or influencers? Why or why not?
- ✦ Have any new vulnerabilities surfaced? How can we address them?
- ✦ Have we had any recent successes or failures that we can learn from? Should we adjust strategies accordingly?
- ✦ Are we moving forward at the pace we expected? If not, what strategies might lead to better traction?

Every quarter — or when a major shift happens — ask these questions:

- ✦ **Overarching strategy.** Is it still realistic? Have there been any recent changes in the landscape, such as a change in legislature, new opposition or an unplanned event, that require us to pivot?
- ✦ **Partner participation.** Have our partner organizations been effective? Is it worth the time and resource investment? If we are operating in a formal coalition, should we add any other partners to make the coalition more successful?

**Don't forget!** When your campaign is underway, you are tracking more than a collection of goals, milestones and deadlines. You are stewarding a living, breathing team of people united in their commitment to the cause, working hard and making personal sacrifices every day to get it done. As a campaign leader, don't pass up opportunities to recognize the small victories at every meeting to keep your campaign and your coalition motivated. The people are just as important as the purpose.



## 9. After the Campaign

You started this campaign-planning process with a clear vision of victory. Inspired by that goal, you've put a lot of hard work into planning how to get there, and you've built an organization to make it happen. Someday, you'll reach that moment of truth — either you'll achieve your campaign win or you'll fall short.

Successful campaigners consistently do five things at the end of a campaign:

- ✦ Thank supporters.
- ✦ Make space to celebrate with teammates and partners.
- ✦ Understand the lessons learned and write them down.
- ✦ Share honest and encouraging stories and lessons with funders and key stakeholders.
- ✦ Start planning the next effort.

**If you don't win, there is always space to lose well.** As we noted earlier, there are some factors out of your control that can result in a loss. There are always opportunities to learn from loss to inform a stronger strategy. In a loss, you should always:

- ✦ **Thank the supporters who stood by you.** Do this both publicly and privately (social media followers, donors, partner organizations, etc.).
- ✦ **Find glimmers of hope to celebrate.** Maybe you lost the policy win you were aiming for but you increased your number of supporters and a pipeline of future leaders or secured strong media coverage. Compile these wins and share them internally and with key stakeholders.
- ✦ **Consider your most strategic next move.** You will have learned a lot about how the world received the campaign and why it did or didn't work. Knowing what messaging or tactics didn't land will help inform what makes

the most sense to do next. For example, a policy loss could have furthered the belief that politicians are out of touch with what their constituents want and need, which you can use to mobilize your audience toward action.

**Write down exactly what you will do. Plan for various scenarios: win, loss or partial win.**

**WE'RE ROOTING FOR YOU.**



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## Stay in Touch

### LET'S SPARK CHANGE TOGETHER!

**Spitfire** is a strategic communication and advocacy firm rooted in the core principles that everyone belongs and has the power to spark change. We believe in human rights for everyone. Everywhere. We believe it takes all of us. We're driven by social justice, and that doesn't stop when we leave. If you share our vision for a better world, we'd love to stay in touch.

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