

TAKE FIVE...

Advocacy Made Easy for Busy People

Just like the famous Duke Ellington refrain, here's something deceptively simple – and as likely to stay with you.

Experienced advocates know three things.

(1) Phone and letter campaigns remain effective. Elected officials (and their staff) note the issues that generate the most letters and calls; they are a useful gauge of community support for/against an issue. But,

(2) Broad appeals for action don't work. Alerts that sound too general, or too complicated, get set aside.

(3) The competition for attention is very keen. By now, there are so many groups sending out emails and “snail mails” requesting action that readers ignore much of what comes their way. And groups with tight budgets can't afford to waste scarce staff time or resources on maintaining lists, postage, paper/emails, for long alerts that don't get results.

If you want your appeals to produce results: make taking action easy; make it time-limited; & design it to fit into busy lives. Here's one version that gets results.

A few years ago U of Washington social work students tried to get other students to write letters about legislative proposals they thought might harm children, but the answers they got just seemed like excuses. In response to their pleas, people said:

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| -- I don't have time | -- I don't know what to say |
| -- I don't know my legislator | -- I don't know the address |
| -- I don't have any envelopes/paper/stamps | -- I can't. |

To their credit, the students took the “excuses” seriously, treating them as real barriers to be eliminated. In the process they developed “TAKE FIVE FOR KIDS” -- a way to be an advocate for children in just five minutes or less.

At a strategically located table, during lunch hour, they provided answers to all the “excuses:” sample letters, brief fact sheets, people to answer questions, blank paper/envelopes/stamps, plus the names and addresses of all the legislators. Visible to all was a big sign reading: **TAKE FIVE FOR KIDS.**

Right off the bat, they generated a couple dozen letters. A week later they were back at their table with new information – and this time they got twice as many letters. Before long, people were referring to the “take five tables” and inventing variations.

Some advocates have adapted the idea by renaming and re-formatting their legislative alerts, with a section for “actions you can take in 5 minutes or less,” or, “TAKE FIVE FOR ... (HOUSING, or WHALES, or ...).” Like the students at their table, these alerts include all the key ingredients, in a simple, easy-to-accomplish format that enables concerned citizens to fit advocacy into busy lives.

On a single page, usually within a “box,” are brief information, brief messages, and the information needed to contact a legislator by mail, email, or phone. “Clip art” can supply a clock.

People who get **TAKE FIVE** alerts in written form say they prop them on their telephones or computer keyboards every week until they’ve made their calls or written letters. (Guilt, they admit, is part of what makes it work: “you mean I couldn’t take 5 *minutes a week* to help out?”) Those who work for public agencies get their TAKE FIVE alerts at home; they cannot lobby while on the public payroll, but on their own time they are citizens like anybody else, and lobbying is allowed.

“**TAKE FIVE TABLES**” are popping up everywhere: in the lobbies of social agencies and hospitals, after services on Sunday, at PTA or professional group meetings.

One group set up a “Take Five Table” at the beginning of the cross-Iowa bike ride, hoping to expand their network in support of a new bicycle helmet law; they got 400 members signed up in just a couple of hours.

Women eager to see the Violence Against Women Act renewed in 2000 set up Take Five Tables beside the “Silent Witness” silhouettes of women murdered in domestic violence: over 400 letters resulted.

Psychology students at the University of Utah set up tables in the cafeteria, seeking letters in support of higher education for foster children; they got over seven hundred during the course of a week. As one participant reported later,

With only 2 days (4 hours each) at the tables, we got 271 letters signed in support of the bill!! I am so thrilled at this success not only for the bill, but for the amazing number of students that wanted to get involved and learn a little more about the legislative process (not to mention learning who their legislator was!).”

“Take Five” alerts and tables work to: *generate letters, ... sign up members for a grassroots network, ... win involvement in a community education campaign.* People on the receiving end say that just knowing they can be advocates for something they care about, **in five minutes or less**, is empowering.

Tips: because they get so much computer-generated mail, many legislative offices make a distinction between “astro turf messages” (i.e., identical cards or letters that might all be signed by the same person using different pens) and “real grass roots messages.” Both are noticed, but real grass roots communications get more attention.

To make sure the letters generated by your Take Five Tables fall in the “real” category, even when the heart of the letter is identical, have senders do three things;

- ⇒ sign and print their names
- ⇒ put their home address
- ⇒ add a personal note – even something as brief as “I really care” or, “this means a lot to me,” sends a message to the staff opening the mail.

The possibilities are endless....

Distribution is encouraged with appropriate acknowledgement to the author, Nancy Amidei.