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Guerilla Advocacy: Using Aggressive Marketing Techniques for Health Policy Change

Regina A. Galer-Unti, PhD, CHES

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Successful advocacy can educate and motivate people to advocate for policy and program change. In the past, health advocates have relied on techniques such as letter writing campaigns, visits with policy makers, and vote counting. Formulaic advocacy efforts have followed a pattern of heightening awareness through the media and the population and then pushing for legislative initiatives and/or individual change. The Mothers Against Drunk Driving campaigns, Susan G. Komen's Race for the Cure in support of breast cancer awareness and research, and grassroots efforts to remove junk food from vending machines all have been educational advocacy efforts with great societal impact. As Beatrix Hoffman (2003) reflects, change

comes from social movements at the grassroots level. The effect of social activism styles of the past cannot be discounted, but increasing competition for money and resources makes it imperative that health educators retool their advocacy efforts.

Jay Conrad Levinson wrote *Guerilla Marketing* (1984) to aid small companies in their competition with Madison Avenue firms. Levinson's book was groundbreaking in that it provided suggestions for keeping advertising costs down while increasing profits. The basic tactics of guerilla marketing are to substitute innovation and creativity for the staid and status quo methods of advertising. Since 1984, Levinson's ideas have been reworked to illustrate how those in a variety of occupations (e.g., authors) can translate the principles of low-budget, aggressive marketing to aid in selling their products (Levinson, Frishman, &

Larsen, 2001). Applying this type of cost-benefit approach to health advocacy can assist us in working for health policy change. In the following paragraphs, some of the principles of guerilla marketing have been configured to aid in health advocacy efforts:

1. Use sound psychological principles in your advocacy efforts. Do not try to infuse information where it is not wanted or needed. Many diseases have long-term consequences, but most individuals think in the short term. Therefore, advocacy efforts must focus on concerns that are more immediate. For example, a group advocating for physical education programs in a school would not focus on the long-term occurrence of disease that might result from physical inactivity. Instead, the advocates would focus on short-term

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results of increased physical activity, such as improved fitness, higher concentration levels, and reduced behavioral problems.

2. Investment and commitment. Be certain that what you do has payoff, so volunteer burnout does not become an issue. Create investment opportunities for your volunteers by lauding small victories to enhance motivation. As always, use the principles of community organizing, training, and empowerment to ensure that investment is made in people. If you want additional training (for staff or volunteers) on community organizing and empowerment, consider some of the programs offered by the Midwest Academy (www.midwestacademy.com). In addition, commit to a plan to regularly evaluate your advocacy strategies and campaign plans.
3. Use creativity, energy, and amazement. There is energy in numbers, and bringing together large groups of people becomes even more feasible with the Internet as a vehicle for community organizing. Individuals are easily called to rallies and events, and quick-time gatherings are possible through the use of the "electronic town herald." Consider, too, something unexpected and outlandish for a media grab. For instance, to kick off a stop-smoking campaign, build a bonfire of cigarettes—singles, packs, and cartons.
4. Build Relationships. Successful advocates work to not only expand their networks but to galvanize new and old allies as well. The Internet opens new networking possibilities through e-mail and social media and provides enhanced capabilities for

melding one's network. So grow your contact list whenever and whenever possible. Mackay (1997) aptly describes his approach to building and maintaining networks in *Dig Your Well Before You're Thirsty*, and some of his networking techniques might be described as guerrilla in nature.

Another component of relationship building is collaboration. Guerilla advocacy takes a different approach to collaboration. To maximize your efforts, you should eschew working hard to curry favor with the opposition as they "cost" too much time. Instead, work to align with a variety of individuals as someone in your network might have a member of the opposition in their network. During the Obama presidential campaign, politicians changed endorsements as they noticed the network growing and the momentum shifting. So concentrate on your grassroots and collaborative efforts so that policy makers will come to you.

5. Focus. Sharpen the focus of your advocacy efforts by choosing an appropriate content area and then limiting the diversification of your advocacy endeavors. Choose a topic that is ripe for your campaign and keep your discussion simple. A very complicated health issue or one that is not well known to the public will require a great deal more education. After choosing this manageable content area, select one message for your advocacy efforts. Too many causes make you and your agency or organization difficult to follow. Remember to always be consistent and stay on message. The message could be a

home base for all other messages as in "Change we can believe in," "Got milk?" and "This is your brain on drugs."

6. Vary your methods. Perfect simple, consistent, focused messages and then develop a variety of methods for distribution. As we know, different groups of people respond to different media sources and forms of communication. Therefore, bring variety into your advocacy campaigns and use a ladder marketing approach to achieve success. For example, send an e-mail (or postcard) to your volunteer network in which you invite them to aid in creating awareness around traffic safety. Ask individuals to "twitter" (or tweet) photographs of automobile accidents taken during a week-long period. Decide on a common caption prior to the event. If you also have people strategically place letters to the editor and feature pieces during the week prior to the photographic event, a collective excitement will build around the topic. You might want to pick a date with relevance (i.e., high traffic accident season in your community or state) or link your efforts to begin immediately prior to the introduction of a bill in Congress or your state legislature. You can keep the momentum going by sending clippings to policy makers and community leaders. The result is a very simple, inexpensive, and effective advocacy campaign. For more information about twitter, visit the Web site <http://twitter.com>. For more marketing ideas that you can convert to advocacy opportunities, see the section on the guerilla marketing tip of the day at <http://www.gmarketing.com>.

7. Use current technology. The Internet has changed the way we live and we need to stay attuned to trends in Web 2.0. See Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, and McKenzie (2008) for an up-to-date discussion of the use of 2.0 in social marketing. Examples of the use of social media and the Internet in a political effort can be found in the most recent U.S. presidential election. The particulars of the campaign will no doubt be discussed for many years to come (Anderson, 2008). For those of us in health, there are profound lessons in understanding how we can use the Internet to mobilize for health policy change.

For many years, the concepts of guerilla marketing have been applied to sales and small-business growth. Using the principles of guerilla marketing in the area of health advocacy should bring new successes in health education, health policy, and social change.

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