

Campaigning During the Covid Crisis

The Small Change Fund

This short document is for environmental leaders who run campaigns and know that the Covid Crisis has changed almost everything. I hope it will help provoke you to think through a “Covid lens” as you consider how to adapt existing campaigns and develop new ones during these extremely uncertain times.

What has Changed:

In the Community:

- People will continue being anxious, on edge and worried about their **physical health** until a vaccine has been developed and widely distributed. This will make them less likely to engage in activities which they perceive might threaten their physical health and that might increase their anxiety levels.
- People will continue being anxious, on edge and worried about their **economic health** for the foreseeable future. Whole sectors of the economy will be changed (retail, restaurant, travel, tourism, entertainment, arts and culture) in ways we can't predict.
- People already in marginal circumstances will experience these health and economic anxieties much more than others.
- Community priorities are in flux. In mid May, people continue focusing on the needs of “front line” workers and at-risk communities (eg. people in retirement homes, in homeless shelters, victims of abuse, financially precarious). As restrictions ease, this may change.

Media:

- Covid will continue being the frame through which media will be reporting over the next year or so. In other words, stories with a Covid angle have a better chance of being covered.
- Small local media may go out of business because of financial reasons.

Governments:

- Governments will be focusing on public safety and economic recovery (probably in that order). Everything else will be on the back burner unless something extraordinary happens (eg. mass shooting in Nova Scotia leads to gun legislation).
- Money will not be an issue as long as it is seen as directly addressing the Covid crisis and the economic crisis facing people.
- Municipal governments are in an extremely precarious situation; losing revenues while costs go up. They will need the Provincial and Federal Governments to help them. This fiscal crisis will affect every decision they make.
- In the medium term (3-12 months), expect lots of announcements designed to promote an economic recovery. The big policy question will be “which sectors of the economy should be helped?”
- The next federal election could be about various visions for an economic recovery.

Implications for Campaigning:

The words we use to communicate with the public about our campaigns have to change. Here are some general thoughts:

- Louise Comeau's work provides a good overview of the frames and specific language we can use.
- Language that evokes anxiety will likely turn off people. Language that evokes hope will likely inspire people.
- Context is everything. Remember, people are dealing with life and death concerns and their economic survival. We have to be careful to use the appropriate language to describe the urgency of our issues within this context.

How we engage with the public is different:

- Physical distancing and fear of a second wave will likely make people very reluctant to engage in any activities that bring them together.
- Virtual communications are both a blessing and a curse because it's so easy. We're spending even more time online reading emails, checking social media, etc.. and may not be interested in additional campaign communications.
- It may be worth experimenting with videos to replace written electronic communications, given that people are more likely to watch a video than read another blog post/email blast/social media post.

The "Take Action" may have to change. For example, is it still appropriate to ask the public to "demand" their elected officials make our issue/our proposed policy a priority when they're dealing with life and death concerns? Can we expect elected officials to respond the way we want them to, given their current priorities?

What we ask of governments may have to change. With a focus on an economic recovery, elected officials may be more open to an idea that is framed as a good way to promote economic recovery. They may have no time for an idea that isn't focused on Covid.

What hasn't changed is the importance of reinforcing and building community support.

Successful campaigns almost always require community support. Anything you can do to continue building your connections to the community will pay off in the future. For example, if your campaign has to go "on ice" for now, perhaps consider building trust with new community influencers who could help you in the future. Perhaps you could redeploy your volunteers to help promote a community activity being championed by a community influencer. Or, think about holding a "virtual potluck" where participants order from a loved local restaurant that needs support.

Take time to clean up your campaign. Every campaign has a list of "TO DOs" that you never seem to get around to doing. Use any spare time to work through this list. It may actually help you deliver a better campaign.