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Advocacy 101

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is defined as *activities by individuals, groups, or organizations that aim to influence public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy*. Within that definition there are many ways to think about advocacy: from a legislative or policy approach; for a particular cause; to raise resources for an event or organization; to create awareness. The applications of advocacy are endless. However there are a few principles that apply regardless of the subject matter:

- **Mobilization**: Advocacy efforts need people, or advocates, to be effective. Most of your fellow advocates will come from within your direct community. However, to be successful, you may need additional people from outside your circles with goals that align with yours.
- **Relationships**: Developing and maintaining strong diverse relationships, across a spectrum of stakeholders and decision makers, and well before you need them is one of the most important key components to any advocacy effort. Knowing how to manage, motivate, and when to mobilize will maximize your effectiveness.
- **Research**: While this principle seems straightforward, ignore at your own peril. Educating your advocacy network on the history of the issue, local policies, key decision makers, budgets, among many other topics is another key to success. An educated populace, armed with facts and relatable stories will be more effective at expanding and echoing your message.
- **Message**: Now that you have a good base of knowledge you can begin to craft the campaign message. The best messages are easy to understand, fact based, positive, and contain a solution to the problem. Be clear what you are asking for. Don't point out problems and fail to offer solutions.
- **Outreach**: Once the message has been crafted, it's time for outreach or marketing of your issue to build a coalition of support. This coordinated effort can be targeted toward key decision makers, other diverse community members, media, etc. Your campaign may be focused on just one of these, or a combination thereof.
- **Visibility**: Now that the plan is coming together, you will want to increase the campaign's profile by participating in public events, social media, and official meetings. This increased visibility will force decision makers to take notice, and your efforts, seriously.



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- **Authenticity:** Tell individual stories of why the issue is important and reasons you're engaged in this effort. Human emotions naturally respond to personal stories better than statistics...have a spectrum of relatable stories ready but backed up by statistics as needed.

Why is it Important?

The concept of advocacy is not something new to the mountain bike community, we've been doing it for decades. IMBA was founded in 1988 on the need for successful advocacy. Yet there are times when we dismiss or forget just how effective and impactful it can be when used properly. A well planned advocacy strategy can make the difference of whether your campaign is a success or a failure.

What are different types of Advocacy?

Generally speaking there are two types of advocacy: grassroots and grasstops. However, the definition of advocacy is considered a broad term and is often divided into many different specific applications. Regardless, the below definitions will be applicable in most cases.

- **Grassroots:** This is best defined as building your base of supporters. Who will you need to recruit in the mountain bike community, and what other organizations or people align with your goals. Once this base has been identified and contacted, it is then time to put them into action by contacting their key decision makers on the issue at hand. Tools used for outreach include petitions, phone calls, sign on letters, social media, and digital ads
- **Grasstops:** This type of advocacy is used to narrow in on a specific decision maker and employ personal connections such as donors, friends, community members, etc. to connect with that decision maker. Similar tactics are used for both types of advocacy, with in-person meetings as the goal of a grasstops effort.

Proactive vs. Reactive Advocacy

While proactive advocacy is a logical goal, it is not always possible, nor is it problematic to avoid reactive advocacy. With proactive advocacy, the planning is more in your control and can be more positive. Proactive=Positive. These are the steps you take when you have time to plan. Steps are often more strategic and timed how you intend. However, sometimes (oftentimes) issues unexpectedly arise that challenge or compete against your goals and you must react. Reactive advocacy can have benefits but only if you are generally prepared with strong relationships ready to



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be activated and have undergone the proactive planning to pivot from. Without preparation, reactive advocacy = negative advocacy and often results in losses. Yet when planned and prepared for, reactive advocacy can provide emotional motivation for your community of advocates from a fight or flight standpoint. But again, if all the baseline steps above are not in place, it will likely be messy and negative, yielding poor outcomes.

Who can become and advocate?

Simple answer is...anyone can become an advocate! Most mountain bike advocates are riders themselves, but that may not always be the case. Parents and family members can be advocates, business owners can be advocates, city officials can be advocates. Our trail networks serve so many users and impact so many communities, advocates can come from many different places.

How and when do we become advocates?

The path of advocacy begins at that first mountain bike purchase, and that first trail ride. Questions often arise: who built and maintains this trail, or where does the money come from? Those questions are often answered through your local mountain bike advocacy organization, and by joining you have just become part of an enormous group of mountain bike advocates!