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The public affairs plan: Seven steps to success rooted in science and practice

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This article argues that a public affairs plan is essential for any organisation to prevail in their competitive struggles for policy influence. We propose a seven-step approach to devising a public affairs plan based on scientific findings and practical experience. The article maintains that any public affairs plan should be rooted in scientific, evidence-based and practical insights. The different components of the plan—situation analysis, goals, alliances, audiences, messages, channels and impact measurement—should all be attuned to one another and to the context of the policy file. Each SMART objective should serve as a red thread throughout the different components of the plan. The plan should be realistic in terms of goals, time and costs. It should be flexible enough to withstand exogenous shocks and crises. Those who fail to start with a written plan will bounce around and be driven by the moment. An evidence-based public affairs plan, in contrast, provides purpose and direction and will increase the chances of securing policy success.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Movies give lobbying a bad name. "Miss Sloane" or "Thank you for Smoking" reflect a negative image of the public affairs industry in which intrigue and favouritism are the tools of the profession. Lobbying is often seen as an art rather than a science, as an intuitive process based on ad hoc improvising and mobilising informal political connections. Reality is far different. In this article, we argue that a successful public affairs campaign is organised, structured, systematic and data-driven. Rather than being spontaneous, a successful public affairs campaign is meticulously planned. This article outlines how various public affairs activities can be embedded into a thoughtful plan. Based on best practices and scientific insights, we offer a blueprint of essential ingredients and strategic decisions that need to be considered. We focus on the European Union (EU) context, but the proposed outline can be applied in other legislatures.

A public affairs plan is the key to have any positive policy impact. To quote the famous political advisor Karl Rove "Over the years, I've seen, more often, that people fail in a campaign because they don't have a plan than they do have a plan and don't execute it. [...] I love to run against people who don't seemingly have a good idea of what they're trying to do."[1] But where does one have to start for devising such a plan?

A good plan is always on paper. Good writing is good thinking, and the words on paper reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the case and the robustness of the plan. Most plans fail because they are not in writing. They are sitting in an individual or a group's collective memory. If that is the case, there is no real plan.

An advantage of a written plan is that it provides an objective analysis of the likelihood of success. It serves as a tool to avoid confirmation bias. It forces the author to confront political reality. Putting a plan down on paper provides a sobering prognosis of the state of play and what can be achieved. The circulation of the plan is limited. Only a small group of people need to see it. The more people who see it, the greater the chance that the plan will be leaked to the press or opponents. You need to expect this will happen. You need to follow EU GDPR rules.

Delivering successful lobbying and public affairs campaigns is the art of the possible. There are a few useful manuals publicly in print. Rose (2012), in "How to Win Campaigns," provides definitive guide

for running a successful NGO campaign. Alan Hardacre's (2020) "How to Work with the EU institutions," looks at managing a successful EU lobbying or public affairs campaign.

While a wealth of templates for communication plans exist online, public affairs come with many particularities, restraints and sensitivities. This article presents a roadmap, which takes account of the particularities that characterise public affairs and which can serve as a base for professionals or engaged citizens to design their own public affairs plan. Our outline consists of seven steps: (1) situation and context analysis, (2) define objectives, (3) build coalitions and alliances, (4) define key audiences, (5) identify key messages, (6) determine channels of communication and (7) impact assessment. It draws from empirical studies and the authors' academic and public affairs experience. It mirrors an evidence-based thinking in a "public affairs methodology" (see Hardacre & McLoughlin, 2020).

2 | STEP 1: SITUATION ANALYSIS

A good plan stands or falls with the quality of its research and information. This is why public affairs professionals spend the lion share of their time monitoring policy processes, conducting research and sourcing relevant information from their networks (Hanegraaff, 2015). The situation analysis gives an overview of what is at stake in a policy dossier. It is grounded in facts and data that are relevant for the execution and outcome of the campaign. While not necessarily exhaustive, the situation analysis brings together data on (i) the characteristics of the policy file, (ii) key decision-makers and (iii) other relevant stakeholders.

First, ample research shows that the characteristics of a policy issue are decisive in determining the outcome of a public affairs campaign (Klüver, 2013). It is therefore paramount to anticipate contextual dynamics. An obvious starting point is to identify what sub-issues are at stake in a policy file and which controversies will come to the surface. Other relevant aspects include: the policymaking stage, the salience of the file and the degree of partisan conflict. A dossier, which is newsworthy and can easily spill over to the public arena, requires a different approach than a campaign taking place behind the scenes. To monitor the context of a file, a continuous involvement in relevant networks and intense monitoring and analysis of social media and news media debates is essential.

Second, effective advocacy requires knowledge about who has the power to change policy for better or worse. To identify the decision-makers who are "holding the pen," an obvious starting point would be the institutions' official websites. Finding out who is working on a dossier in the EU institutions is relatively easy. The who-is-who directory[2] is online. This lists the people working in the European Commission, European Parliament (EP) and Council. Commercial service providers like Dods EU, Fiscal Note and Quorum provide granular information with the name of the lead official(s) and the state of the play on the file (see Hardacre & McLoughlin, 2020).

Third, other stakeholders will probably devise a plan to steer the dossier in the opposite direction. Like a chess player who ponders the potential moves of her opponents, this should be foreseen in the public affairs plan. Who are potential allies and opponents? What are their financial and organisational capacities? What strategies and political contacts do they typically mobilise? What are they saying about you and your position? If you know their game plan, you can anticipate it and make contingency plans. To answer these questions, public affairs professionals can consult their networks, perform desk research or conduct short interviews. Lobbying registers are useful databases to consult, often providing information about the resources and priorities of other stakeholders. Scientific databases based on survey research can provide generic information about other group's strategies (see De Bruycker, 2019a).

The situation analysis is the most laborious and extensive part of the public affairs plan. It provides structure in the chaos that defines any advocacy environment. Since the situation analysis needs to separate the main points from supporting facts, it cannot be overly extensive. The situation analysis should be systematically structured and accessible, so that it can serve as a reference point throughout the campaign.

Checklist for the situation analysis:

- Include a short description of the issue.
- Why is it important for you (e.g., policy impact, financial impact)?
- What priority is this issue?
- Background on the development of the file. What is driving the issue? Where is the file in the policy cycle?
- What type of legislation is it? Ordinary or secondary legislation (Regulatory Procedure with Scrutiny, Delegated Act, Implementing Act).
- What is the schedule for adoption of the file (e.g., initial debate in Committee, schedule of Council Working Group discussions, EP Draft report, deadline for amendments, deadline for compromises, vote in Committee, vote in plenary)?
- How many votes do you need to win? What are the implications of previous or similar votes? Look at VoteWatch.
- Who is your public affairs team leading work on the issue? What are their roles?
- Who is paying for the work?
- Who are your opponents? What are their positions? What are they saying about you/ your positions? List their contact details.
- Identify key journalists, academics, think tanks and issue experts on your file. List them, their position and contact details.
- Who are the key decision-makers working on the file? List them, their position and contact details.
- Key decision-makers in the *Commission*: Drafting or negotiating team, Inter-Service Steering Group, Inter-Service Group (service and cabinet).
- Key decision-makers in the *Council*: Council Working Group, COREPER, Member State issue expert.
- Key decision-makers in the *EP*: Lead Committee—members, substitutes, and political advisers, coordinators for Groups and national groups, Committee officials, Opinion Committee—Rapporteurs and Shadows.

3 | STEP 2: DEFINE OBJECTIVES

A common mistake made in public affairs campaigns is the lack of concrete policy and other objectives. Vague objectives include: secure a favourable outcome to "X" EU legislation, improve our reputation or stop Delegated Act "X." These goals are both unrealistic and unspecific. For example, the chances of stopping a delegated act are statistically low (around 1%).[3] Realistic goals are time measured and granular. For example, "secure a specific amendment to the final adopted Directive" or "amend the draft delegated act with specific text during inter-service consultation."

Concrete goals allow for designing a tailor-made campaign. Broad, vague or overly ambitious goals nurture chaos and stimulate lobbyists to improvise wildly. This is exactly what the public affairs plan tries to avoid. A meaningful guideline is to formulate SMART objectives, which are specific, measurable, achievable and time-focused. These objectives will serve as the most important test when making strategic decisions along the way. Importantly, they will allow for measuring the impact of the campaign (Step 7).

Public affairs practitioners sometimes stray away from state-of-the-art SMART objectives, to cater to members' or clients' concerns. If the SMART objectives are fudged at will, it is likely that defeat is around the corner. Members may not agree with too specific goals because they serve one type of members more than others. It may, therefore, be tempting to phrase the goals very broadly, but it is self-destructive for the campaign. At the same time, it is important to keep the members at bay. Involving them in the process of setting goals can strengthen members' and supporters' approval, but it may also significantly slow down the campaign (De Bruycker, Berkhout, & Hanegraaff, 2019).

Setting objectives for the campaign involves balancing between SMART goals, members' interests and moving forward as quickly as possible. There are always major risks to achieving campaign goals. It is helpful to describe what they are and how likely they are to occur in advance and take steps in advance to mitigate against these risks.

Checklist for defining objectives:

- What are your SMART objectives?
- What are the short-term, mid-term and long-term objectives?
- Are these acceptable to members or clients?
- What are major risks to achieving campaign goals. How to mitigate against them?

4 | STEP 3: BUILD COALITIONS AND ALLIANCES

Building advocacy coalitions and alliances is recognised by practitioners and academics alike as one of the most important strategies to impact policy decisions. An advocacy coalition involves issuing joint statements on the same issue, coordinating advocacy work and an exchange of resources and staff. Typically, coalitions do not limit themselves to one issue, but mobilise on a range of policy issues where the interests of

the coalition partners converge. One example of such a multi-issue coalition in the EU context is The Green 10, which is generally considered as one of the most influential coalitions in Brussels. Advocacy alliances can take the form of a loosely connected network, a formal advocacy union and anything in between. The most appropriate form can be identified by weighing their up- and downsides.

Campaigning in a more formal advocacy coalition apparently has many advantages. Coalitions convey a stronger signal of support and provide more political weight. To put it in the words of a senior lobbyist "coalitions make life easier for the policymakers, as they do not need to meet with all the different organisations separately." Coalitions allow for a more efficient campaign as the campaign costs and workload are shared among the coalition members. Research shows that mostly the smaller partners benefit from these efficiency gains when lobbying in a coalition (Junk, 2019).

Advocacy coalitions also come with important downsides. Any organisation has its own unique identity and may need to compromise when working together with others (Hula, 1999). Members and donors might see such an advocacy alliance as sleeping with the enemy, since it involves working together with competitors or previous opponents. Coalitions also bring about coordination costs. The lobbyists involved are usually based in different buildings and are accustomed to different workflows and procedures. Each statement of the coalitions often needs to be endorsed by the secretary general or even the board of each coalition member. Coalitions can fling a campaign back to step 2 and the challenges that come with developing a policy position. Particularly coalitions with strange bedfellows—including both NGOs and business associations—face these challenges, but such coalitions are generally also considered more successful (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019). The Energy Savings Coalition, including NGOs like Friends of the Earth—as well as business associations such as the Association of the European Heating Industry—is an example of such a coalition, which has been very successful in affecting EU energy policy (De Bruycker & Arras, 2019).

Checklist for building coalitions and alliances:

- Will you lobby alone or in a coalition? What are the costs and benefits? Who to include?
- Will you take a leading role in the coalition?
- How will you mobilize your allies?
- How will you leverage your network?

5 | STEP 4: DEFINE KEY AUDIENCES

Who is targeted with the public affairs campaign can make the difference between failure and success. In our experience, the key decision-makers on a policy dossier are often only a handful of people. These people and their political profile have already been identified in the situation analysis. This fourth section of the public affairs plan outlines which of these decision-makers or other stakeholders will be targeted and when. At least three criteria need to be considered: influence, political alignments and timing.

First, *influential* policymakers should be prioritised. Influence is, however, a very complex and multifaceted concept. Formal decision-making influence should be considered. From this perspective, it is desirable to contact policymakers who are in office or part of the ruling majority. Moreover, policymakers holding key formal positions in the policy process, such as a committee chair or rapporteur should be prioritised. Group and national group coordinators and advisors need to be met.

Second, *political alignments* need to be considered when identifying campaign targets. On the one hand, it is useful to target allied policymakers because they can serve as opinion leaders and intermediaries to convince other relevant decision-makers and stakeholders. (Awad, 2020; Lucas, Hanegraaff, & De Bruycker, 2019). From this perspective, the public affairs campaign is geared at strengthening allied decision-makers (Hall & Deardorff, 2006). On the other hand, the so-called fence-sitters who did not yet make up their mind about a policy issue and can swing one way or the other need to be met. Trying to convince heavily opposing decision-makers will likely be a waste of time. The prospects of persuading undecided legislators are much more realistic.

Third, *timing* is of the essence when targeting decision-makers. First, to get a first-mover advantage, the public affairs campaign should kick off as soon as possible. Initiating the campaign when the institutions already started consulting stakeholders is generally too late. In an ideal situation your campaign is planting the first seeds of potential policy initiatives or nipping potential harmful measures in the bud. Second, campaigning comes down at approaching the right policymakers at the right moment in time. In the EU, you need first to focus on influencing the Commission. This is simply because whatever the Commission proposes is hard to over-turn. For secondary legislation, it is incredibly hard to over-turn what the Commission tables. If you step in early during the policy preparation process, with well-reasoned suggestions, supported by robust and compelling evidence, there is a good chance that what comes out the Commission's door is positive. Indeed, as a rule of thumb, it is likely that 90% of most Commission's proposals pass through the legislative dialogue substantively unchanged.[4] When the Commission proposes legislation, you need to shift quickly to meet with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and Member State representatives, both in Brussels and back home in the national capitals. As first reading agreements are normal, you need to get your position taken up early. If there is no second reading, and you wake up late in the day, your issue just cannot be taken up.

Timing is everything. This is why every public affairs plan should incorporate a timetable and an overview of which policymakers will be contacted when and how (steps 5 and 6). Too many public affairs campaigns are not focused on speaking to the right people, at the right time, with the right material and evidence. This oversight can be remedied by a plan.

Checklist for identifying key audiences:

- Who will be targeted when and why?
- How to balance targeting friends and foes?

6 | STEP 5: IDENTIFY KEY MESSAGES

The fifth section of the plan specifies the content, arguments and information to be conveyed in the campaign. Each campaign should carry one overarching message to which all the campaign goals (step 1) relate. This message can serve as the slogan of the campaign and must be clear and unambiguous. At the same time, this message cannot be overly simplistic and should radiate authenticity and expertise. It should appeal to all relevant audiences, including policymakers, the broader public and members and supporters.

Key to identifying a campaign message is looking beyond self-interest. Aim instead at aligning the core messages with the common good. The message should convince relevant decision-makers that your proposed course of action is in everybody's best interest. Research shows that when lobbyists emphasize the public interest in their messaging strategy, their campaign is significantly more successful (De Bruycker, 2019b). At the same time, it is important not to exaggerate or sensationalize campaign messages as EU decision-makers have "high functioning bullshit detectors" (Shields, 2020, p. 25).

Key messages should be backed with credible and detailed *evidence*. This evidence ranges from detailed technical, legal or economic input to political information about the preferences of citizens and stakeholders (Flöthe, 2019). When deciding what evidence to communicate, it is important to know that different policymakers have information demands at different moments in time. In an EU context, the European Commission is generally more open to detailed technical and legal input. MEPs are generally more open to political information about constituencies and the Council and member state delegates mostly seek information related to their territorial interests (Bouwen, 2004). It is important to gear the information communicated to the audiences addressed (step 4), while communicating consistently throughout the campaign. It is useful to incorporate what information and messages will be communicated to whom and when in the timetable mentioned before.

Finally, the plan needs to propose policy alternatives. The alternatives need to be concrete and tangible, and make suggestions for improvement. The solutions need to be evidence-based and grounded in research. They are presented in a way policymakers can use them. In meetings with MEPs and Perm Reps, it is common to be asked for suggested legislative text for an amendment, explanatory memorandum and supporting evidence in a one pager, in case they support your position. It is necessary to have this information ready.

Checklist for identifying key messages:

- What are your key messages?
- What is the evidence to support your key messages?
- What policy alternatives will be proposed?
- What are your key materials (one pager, key messages, Q&A, amendments, standard letters, emails, evidence, studies and data)?
- Which content will be sent to whom, when and how?

7 | STEP 6: IDENTIFY COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

A sixth section of the lobby plan outlines which communication channels will be used. Communication channels are physical or online media, venues or fora through which key messages and expertise can be conveyed to relevant audiences. One of the most critical decisions to be made here is whether or not the campaign will go public. Going public involves using communication channels that reach the broader public, such as press releases, social media, press conferences, editorials and public statements. Using these public channels can mobilize the public and other relevant stakeholders and pressure decision-makers. At the same time, public campaigning can aggravate and burn bridges with decision-makers if they are too antagonistic. Staying behind the scenes is the more common and diplomatic approach. It involves the use of private communication channels, which are not easily accessible to journalists or the broader public. Think of direct face-to-face meetings, lunches, Skype meetings, emails, telephone calls, and so forth. Gaining direct access to policymakers in more exclusive fora (such as expert committees) is evidently preferable over access to more inclusive settings (such as open consultations).

Juggling between public and private communication channels is a difficult balancing exercise. A key principle is to select communication channels that align with the campaign's goals, audiences and messages. Drawing from empirical research, we already know quite a bit about when and why it is desirable to pursue a public campaign:

- Going public is risky when popular opinion opposes your goals (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019).
- Public campaigns tend to be more influential when the goals are phrased in the media as if they are in the public interest (De Bruycker, 2019b).
- Public campaigns are more successful when supported by an advocacy coalition rather than one single organization (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019).
- Going public can help gaining the attention of your customers and supporters and signals to them that you are actively advocating their interests (Hanegraaff, Beyers, & De Bruycker, 2016).
- The use and impact of public campaigns vary depending on the issue's stage in the policymaking cycle. Going public helps in getting an issue on the agenda but may hinder or delay change later on in the policy cycle (De Bruycker & Arras, 2019; Kollman, 1998).

Checklist for Identifying communication channels:

- Identify your plan of action: Which channels will be used to contact whom, when, with what content and for achieving what goal? Include this in a timetable or flowchart.
- Make an overview of the cost of each item in your plan of action.
- Adjust your plan of action in light of your available budget.

8 | STEP 7: IMPACT MONITORING

To understand if you are meeting your objectives, you need to evaluate your objectives, this should be done in three steps: pre-mortem, continuously and post-evaluation. A pre-mortem involves stress testing your objectives. It helps identify if they are realistic and refines your SMART goals. You will also benefit from constant evaluation. This helps identify if your assumptions, like the political allies, opponents, and undecided, are correct. If not, you can adjust your plan. At the end of the campaign, a post-evaluation identifies important lessons learned.

The real value is to make sure the process is objective. Some elements of the plan will have gone well and other parts not. It is useful to know if your political intelligence is out of kilter with political reality. If it is, you are making decisions based on shallow foundations. If MEPs and the Member States voted against you, it is useful to know why. If you continue with a message that only has minority support, you may well guarantee political defeat.

One can draw from different measures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of a public affairs campaign. A common measure is newspaper column inches and social media coverage. It is questionable how much this influences political decision-makers in the Commission, EP and the Council.

In academic research, three measurement methods are typically used to assess the impact of lobby campaigns: preference attainment, process tracing and influence reputation (see Dür, 2008). First, *preference attainment* involves comparing the initial campaign goals with the state of affairs or outcome of the policy file in question. Drawing on objective data helps this process. Did you get the votes you wanted or not? This is easy to do with services like VoteWatch. Did your preferred legislative text get adopted in the final legal text? A simple check of the final legal text published in the Official Journal will confirm. Second, *process tracing* can help link the identified outcomes with the campaign activities. Was the outcome of that vote or adoption of that legal text the result of your campaign? To answer this question, you can carefully map the complex causal chain of events that led to that vote or legal text and pinpoint the role the lobby campaign played in the process. Perhaps the outcome had nothing to do with the lobby campaign? Finally, *influence reputation* involves surveying relevant internal and external experts. Internally, you can ask the campaign collaborators whether they think the goals were achieved and whether or not this was the result of the campaign. Externally, you can ask relevant decision-makers and other public affairs professionals whether they think your campaign was impactful and why (not). Ideally, you rely on a multitude of both internal and external experts.

At the end of the file, such as around the adoption of a piece of legislation, it is useful to consider in advance whether and what action(s) will be taken, based on the impact assessment. It is helpful to communicate this internally from the start and certainly at the end.

Checklist for impact monitoring:

FIGURE 1 Seven steps to success rooted in science and practice

- Establish pre-mortem, continuously, and post-evaluation impact assessments.
- Where the SMART objectives achieved?
- Was the achievement of a SMART objective the result of your campaign?
- How do internal and external stakeholders assess your campaign's impact?
- What lessons can be drawn for future campaigns? Communicate these.

9 | CONCLUSION

If you do not start with a written public affairs plan, you will bounce around and be driven by the moment. A public affairs plan provides purpose and direction and will result in a greater chance of success. The aim of this article was to offer guidelines and advice to public affairs professionals in designing a public affairs plan. In doing so, we relied on both practical and scientific insights. This led us to identify seven steps to success that should be considered in any public affairs plan (Figure 1). These steps should not necessarily be executed in the order that we presented them, and they cannot always be neatly separated from each other.

Three principles are key throughout this seven-step process. First, all the components of the lobby plan are interrelated and should all be attuned to one other. For achieving a particular SMART goal, specific audiences will have to be targeted via carefully selected communication channels through a customized yet authentic messaging strategy. Each objective serves as a red thread throughout the different components of the plan. All strategic decisions in the plan are interconnected and coupled to at least one of the objectives.

Second, the plan should be *realistic* in terms of goals, time and costs. It should be carefully designed with all relevant exogenous, budgetary and time constraints in mind. If you have not worked out a good estimate of the resources in advance, in terms of human resources, costs for reports, websites and material, it makes winning a lot harder.

Third, the plan should be *flexible*. Available resources, costs and time constraints are in constant flux and the plan may turn out to be unfeasible or too expensive due to unanticipated circumstances. Crisis can emerge, opponents may gain in strength and new foes may pop up on the horizon. The public affairs plan should therefore be considered as a living document, which should more often than not be fine-tuned along the way.

Planning is everything. A public affairs plan rooted in scientific, evidence-based and practical insights is essential for any organisation to prevail in their competitive battles for policy influence.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Masterclass, David Axelrod and Karl Rove Teach Campaign Strategy and Messaging – episode 6, the Campaign Plan, https://www.masterclass.com/.

[2] https://op.europa.eu/en/web/who-is-who

[3] https://www.aaronmcloughlin.com/a-survey-of-20-years-of-successful-challenges-to-secondary-legislation/

[4] Estimate based on interview with high-level Commission official.

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