

Integrating Acts of Protest

Imagine you're walking downtown when you come upon a small group of protestors outside a building. As you walk by they start waving picket signs and hurling abuse. One of the protestors aggressively tries to block a woman from entering the building. Another chains himself to the front door.

If these types of tactics alienate you, you're not alone. In fact, the picture of Randall Terry, the founder of Operation Rescue, was originally attached to an article entitled, "Randall Terry is Driving Vermont Republicans into the Arms of Liberals." In other words, Randall Terry's protests were so extreme and "embarrassing," that even would-be supporters were starting to think twice. Social protests may get media coverage, but they don't always get *good* media coverage.

Here's the rub. All too commonly, advocates believe that this negative reaction only applies to protests from "the other side." It doesn't. When LGBT rights advocates appear militant and conflict-oriented, it can reinforce the idea that LGBT people don't share mainstream values (see *Mindset of the Moveable Middle*). This doesn't apply to all forms of protest, of course. Acts of social protest have their place and can be effective. For example, they can:

- Put pressure on key power holders
- Allow people to engage in a social issue
- Bring awareness to the issue

If you want to integrate social protest into your campaign, consider the following ideas.

Protests should be nonviolent. Violence turns people off rather than wins them over. This includes verbal as well as physical violence. For example, engaging in a shouting match makes most people defensive and discourages a change of heart.

Use extreme forms of protest carefully. Only extreme situations warrant extreme tactics. For example, it's widely agreed that ACT UP played a significant role in forcing the government to address the AIDS crisis, and that much of its success came through some fairly extreme tactics (such as storming the floor of the New York Stock Exchange). The AIDS crisis needed urgent attention and extreme acts brought that attention. Additionally, the situation was so egregious that the protests didn't seem so out of place by comparison. However, what works in one situation won't necessarily work in

another. It's one thing to protest government inaction when tens of thousands of people are dying of AIDS. It's another to use similarly extreme tactics to protest a lack of marriage (an issue which one would be hard pressed to argue suffers from a lack of attention).

Don't forget the target audience. Social protest should complement or reinforce your messaging—not work against it. In other words, your messaging should help Americans want to be fair-minded and accepting of LGBT people. Protests that position LGBT people as angry, flagrantly disrespectful, demanding, and belligerent may do the opposite.

OPERATION RESCUE PROTESTS CREATE BACKLASH

"Operation Rescue... is best known for placing demonstrators in the entrances of abortion clinics to... make it difficult and embarrassing for women to enter the clinic. Operation Rescue certainly arouses public resentment. People... easily sympathize with the clinics, the doctors, and the women who are being harassed. Rescuers become identified with the general lawlessness in our country, or with the disruptiveness of many "rights" organizations. The result is special legal protections for abortionists and more "pro-choice" politicians being elected and appointed to high office. Less dramatic activity may be more effective in the long run."

—John Frame, pro-life supporter and journalist

"Civil disobedience is more persuasive when enacted in clearly nonviolent/non-threatening ways, and when participants demonstrate not only a willingness to suffer for their beliefs, but also an interest in communicating that suffering to onlookers."

—Courtney L. Dillard, from *Civil Disobedience: A Case Study in Factors of Effectiveness*, March 2002

One way to illustrate this effect is to think about flag burning. Flag burning has long been a form of protest guaranteed to grab people's attention. However, the act of flag burning is so incendiary (no pun intended) that the message of the protest (say, ending human rights abuses) is largely ignored because of the audience's rage at seeing a burning flag. Even those who agree that flag burning should remain a constitutionally protected form of protest still react negatively when someone desecrates a flag. Rather than taking time to consider the issue being protested, public and political response turns to outrage and condemnation of the protestors, who are painted as extreme and radical.

Protests should be worth the effort. Earlier in this section we said that protests could put pressure on politicians, garner media coverage, and mobilize the base. Unfortunately, this is becoming less true over time. Politicians, the media, and the public all have protest fatigue. Protests have become so common that they've lost much of their power to persuade. Today, few protests get coverage—unless they're very large, very extreme, or conducted by the rich and famous. Will it take you days to organize a small group to picket city hall? Your efforts might be better spent elsewhere. That said, protests can be an effective political tool if used wisely (e.g., a rally before a key vote). It certainly won't look good if your opponents are the only ones showing up at the state Capitol. If you do go ahead with a protest, use a media advisory (as opposed to a press release) to let the media know that the event is taking place.

Sorry, but the icing matters. On a more mundane level, you'll get more respect from your target audience if you dress like a professional. If you show up in a rainbow sweater, a conservative audience might be too distracted by your attire to focus on what you're saying.

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Case Study: Earth First!

“Earth First! built itself on logging protests with people in torn-up jeans carrying an Earth First! banner. However, the community energy dissipated. People didn’t want to be associated with that idiom. It was very frustrating.

In contrast, there is a remarkable group called the Western Endangered Species Alliance (WESA). These are passionate, aggressive activists, but they are strategically savvy, and they are humble, and they want to do what’s going to most help the forest. Fifteen people got arrested, mostly WESA activists, all wearing formal business clothes. A group of elders of the Audubon Society led the charge and what we got out of that was incomparable. Front page press, prime time coverage, that emphasized the community aspect, emphasized the forest, and nowhere did you see the radical image that would distract support from those messages. It really confirmed to me that this sort of thing can be done, if we can get around the need to always have the radical situation.

We need to correct some perceptions and evolve to be more effective.

- First, the idea that “there’s no such thing as bad press.” That’s an old Richard Nixon adage. Didn’t work for him, won’t work for you.
- Second, the idea that nobody’s doing anything, so let’s do something! Then the same five people go climb a tree, or lock down to a bulldozer, or conduct a puke-in. The question that follows the action is, “Did we get press?” instead of the more important question, “Did we get good press?”
- Next, the idea that nobody is keeping score. Whenever something happens such as a disrespectful action or even activists acting self-righteously at the gas station, residents get feedback about it. Mistakes may last for years. I wish like hell that we had not laid siege to the Okanogan National Forest Headquarters in 1988. Since that fateful day, the whole movement in that area has had to work very hard to get past obstacles to alliances and public support. We gave people an excuse to hate us.
- Another observation is that, “It isn’t only what’s in your heart that counts, but your hairstyle.” I know I’m going to get a lot of heat for that, but it’s damn important. We need to find effective messengers, not just effective messages. Most people will respect your message if they believe that you’re respecting them. Why should they listen to you when your appearance tells them (at least they think it does) that you don’t respect them?

Opinion research has found that environmental protests often turn people against our issues because they cannot relate to our persona or tactic, even if they share our concern. We sometimes alienate even our allies. The only way that we are going to make progress on these issues is if everything we do is infused with a spirit of dignity and respect. The audience we need to reach has to be greeted on their own terms. They are receptive to the things we say, but only if we come to them in ways that don’t cause them to close the door in our face before we say it. If we can do that, we can win. But if we get caught up in ourselves and fail to do things right, we will isolate ourselves from the public, and we will lose.

Too much is at stake to allow that.”

—Mitch Friedman, ED of Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, taken from a February 1996 speech addressing the Ancient Forest Activist Conference in Ashland, Oregon

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