

Social Sector



Activists, Pundits, and Quiet Followers

Engaging the public in social issues

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Engaging the public in social issues

Many nonprofit and advocacy organizations across the United States, representing an enormous diversity of causes, count on the engagement and involvement of the public to help them achieve their objectives. Nonmonetary public support—such as volunteer work, in-kind donations, attendance at events, or participation in letter-writing campaigns and other cause-related activities—is crucial to their success.

In soliciting the public's support, most nonprofits rely on a single communications and advocacy approach, casting as wide a net as they can and trying to win "everyone" to their cause. This one-size-fits-all approach may seem simple to execute, but it is not always effective—it often results in wasted marketing dollars, missed opportunities, and poor alignment between what an organization needs and the kinds of support it gets. Other nonprofits use the "ladder of engagement" approach, in which they initially ask people to take on "small" activities (such as signing online petitions) before inviting them to participate in more demanding activities such as organizing community events. Still other nonprofits use one or two demographic or behavioral criteria such as age, education level, or annual donation amount to tailor their outreach. But none of these approaches get at the public's attitudes and motivations—why they behave as they do when it comes to supporting social issues. And understanding the "why" is critical in tailoring communications and shaping messages that will resonate with current and potential supporters.

In the commercial world, leading companies use a technique called "needs-based segmentation" to develop a more nuanced view of the general public. The technique helps companies generate insights into the needs, motivations, and attitudes of consumers; classify people into distinct segments based on these insights; and tailor marketing and communications strategies to the needs and preferences of specific target segments. Because a needs-based segmentation is a better predictor of future behavior than even past behavior, it provides organizations with a forward-looking fact base for decision making. Successful needs-based segmentation has had significant impact in the corporate realm—turning around businesses, revitalizing brands, and driving market leadership for new entrants.

Needs-based segmentation would seem equally applicable and valuable in the nonprofit arena, but it has not been widely adopted by nonprofits either because of lack of awareness or limited resources. In this paper, we share a needs-based segmentation that nonprofits can use to develop targeted communications and advocacy approaches. The segmentation is one outcome of a yearlong research effort focused on US adults who supported at least one of a dozen or so major social issues through more than just a monetary donation (see sidebar, "Our research methodology," p.4). The research validated our hypothesis that needs and attitudes (for example, how much an individual agrees with the statements "I need to see tangible results" and "I can't do much to solve big issues") are significant differentiators—more so than demographics or behaviors—for how individuals engage in social issues. These insights into supporters' needs can help nonprofit and advocacy organizations take their outreach to the next level, by better prioritizing their target audiences and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of their communications and advocacy efforts.



Our research methodology

To develop a needs-based segmentation of supporters of social issues in the United States—individuals who contribute their time, voice, or influence to one or more social causes—we used a two-phase research approach. The first phase was qualitative and the second was quantitative. Our research began in late 2008 and concluded in summer 2009.

Our main objective during the qualitative phase was to develop hypotheses on how people engage in social issues. We began with semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine individuals actively involved in social issues, in three US geographic regions. We also conducted three focus groups with a total of 30 people from a variety of demographic and ethnic backgrounds across the country. These discussions shaped our early perspective on “archetypes” of people who engage in social issues and helped us formulate the questions in the proprietary survey we used in the quantitative phase.

The quantitative phase had two stages. First, we conducted a preliminary online survey with a general representative sample of 1,500 adults living in the United States, seeking to understand the extent of their involvement in social issues in the past 12 months. The results of this survey helped us optimize our definition of involvement (for example, we decided that individuals who claimed to have supported “social issues in general” but could not name a specific issue did not meet our bar), quantify the overall population of involved individuals in the United States, and adjust the language for the main survey.

We then administered another online survey to a representative sample of more than 1,500 adults living in the United States who had taken action in support of a specific social issue in the past 12 months. The objectives of this main survey were to test the initial archetypes and better understand various needs and attitudes. (We excluded individuals who had supported only political campaigns or made only monetary donations, as our research was not political in nature and a significant amount of research already exists on fund-raising behaviors alone. Although we did collect data on the political and donating behavior of survey respondents, that information was not our primary focus.)

In addition to a range of basic demographic and behavioral questions, the main survey included an extensive list of needs-based or attitudinal statements such as “I feel the need to give back to society,” “I need to see regular indicators of progress,” or “I don’t hesitate to take the lead.” We asked respondents to rate, on a scale of 1 to 6, how much they agreed with each of the statements. We then analyzed the data using two types of multivariate statistical techniques: factor analysis, whereby we studied survey responses to identify a number of underlying themes, and cluster analysis, whereby we grouped individuals around those themes based on their response patterns.

In sum, our research is distinctive in two ways. First, whereas previously published studies and academic research in the nonprofit arena have focused on demographics (for example, the social issues in which college graduates are most interested) or behaviors (such as the amount of money people donate to certain causes each year)—essentially, who supports social causes and what choices they currently make—our research homes in on the “why.” Second, it is not confined to a single social issue but rather captures the US adult population’s overall involvement in a range of social issues. The insights can thus be useful to any nonprofit or advocacy organization regardless of its focus area.

What we found

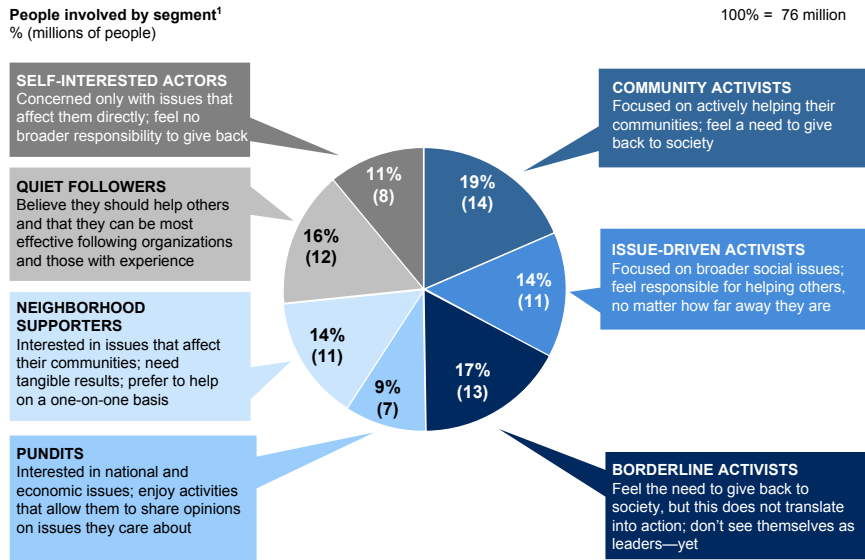
In our first survey, of a general representative sample of US adults, only one in three said they were active in one or more social issues during the previous 12 months—suggesting that nonprofits aiming to get the support of “everyone” are pursuing an unattainable goal. In any given year, there will be slightly more than 150 million adults in the United States who will choose not to engage in any social cause. Nonprofits therefore ought to take a more targeted approach as they seek to attract potential supporters.

Our research also showed that the involved population—the one in three adults who do support at least one social cause—is differentiated most strongly based on needs and attitudes, not demographics or behaviors. For instance, the difference between the amount donated by the most and least generous needs-based segments is more than twice the difference between the most and least generous demographic groups. (In addition to the segment-related findings, our research also generated a number of insights that can be useful to any organization regardless of the segments it aims to attract. See sidebar, “Insights that apply across all segments,” p. 10).

Based on our research findings, we identified seven distinct needs-based segments within the involved population. We call these segments Community Activists, Issue-driven Activists, Borderline Activists, Pundits, Neighborhood Supporters, Quiet Followers, and Self-interested Actors (Exhibit 1). Each of the segments prefers to play specific roles and presents unique opportunities for organizations interested in attracting and engaging them. Our survey data allowed us to develop a detailed understanding of each of these segments, including the issues they care about, the messages they respond to, the types of activities in which they participate, their main sources of information, their demographic profiles, and how organizations can best engage them (Exhibit 2).

The Community Activists segment, for example, is particularly valuable to nonprofits. It is one of two (the other is Issue-driven Activists) with the broadest participation in nonprofit activities, scoring above average in almost all the activities assessed in the survey—such as inviting friends and family to get involved, making noncash donations, and attending community events. Most important, members of this segment perceive themselves as leaders and are willing to take on leadership roles

Exhibit 1: The seven segments



¹ Total population based on 2008 US Census estimate.

Source: US Census Bureau; 2009 McKinsey public will survey (n = 1,540)

for the issues they believe in. They tend to learn about issues from people who work at organizations or by attending events, and they are motivated to help their local community and people who haven't benefited from the same opportunities that they themselves have. They are more likely than other segments to support nonprofits focused on local issues, including education and hunger. They look for opportunities to meet new people and interact with others, and they tend to get bored with solitary or routine activities. Nonprofits should be most interested in this segment if they need visible leaders or committed volunteers to engage in local community issues.

In contrast, Quiet Followers are not looking for leadership roles; they are content to follow others with more experience. They prefer supporting issues in a less visible manner and engaging in activities that do not require social interaction, such as signing online petitions or changing their personal behaviors (for example, recycling). They are more likely than other segments to rely on direct mail for information, and they tend to support nonprofits focused on environmental and animal-rights issues. In contrast to Community Activists who talk to almost everyone they meet about the social causes they support, Quiet Followers carefully choose whom they talk to about social issues. Nonprofits should be most interested in attracting Quiet Followers if they are looking for people to execute tasks that can be done from home, such as sending letters to members of Congress.

As these two brief examples illustrate, by tailoring their messages and requests nonprofits can give supporters opportunities to contribute in ways that best fit their individual skills and preferences—which in turn results in better-deployed and more

Exhibit 2: Comparing the segments

▲ Segment over- or under-indexes compared with total

	Community Activists	Issue-driven Activists	Borderline Activists	Pundits	Neighborhood Supporters	Quiet Followers	Self-interested Actors
Segment size	19%	14%	17%	9%	14%	16%	11%
Key attitudes¹							
I am most interested in issues that affect me personally	▲	▼	▲		▲	▼	▲
It is my responsibility to find ways to help others	▲	▲	▲	▼			▼
I concentrate my energy on my local community first	▲	▼	▼	▼	▲		
I prefer to support social issues from home	▼				▼	▲	▲
I need to see tangible results to support a cause		▼		▲	▲		
I would be willing to lead a public debate	▲	▲	▼	▲	▼	▼	▼
Issues where they over-index²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Hunger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cure for diseases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Domestic economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environment Animal rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Domestic economy
Involvement triggers where they over-index²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personally affected Grew up in contact with issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read something in the news 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighbor affected Natural disaster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life event changed perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family member affected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heard from a religious leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue discussed in Congress
Annual donation to social issues (median)	▪ \$146	▪ \$162	▪ \$138	▪ \$158	▪ \$103	▪ \$89	▪ \$113

1 Selected statements. The survey included around 50 statements to define the segments.

2 Top one or two over-indexing issues/triggers shown; these are not necessarily the issues/triggers with the highest %.

Source: 2009 McKinsey public will survey

satisfied supporters. Community Activists will probably not be enticed by requests that Quiet Followers will happily fulfill, and Quiet Followers would be put off by requests that would excite and engage Community Activists.

How nonprofits can use the research

Organizations should view the segmentation not just as an interesting piece of research that sits in the marketing department, but as a starting point for driving important strategic decisions related to issues such as brand positioning, communication strategy, and the portfolio of engagement activities. What follows are some recommendations for how nonprofits can use needs-based segmentation. The first two—developing an issue-specific segmentation and surveying the current supporter base—require investments in additional research but can yield powerful results. The last two—targeting “asks” based on the segments and embedding the segmentation into the organization—are basic but essential steps for putting needs-based segmentation to work.

Create a segmentation for your particular issue

Our segmentation, by design, is broad in scope and encompasses supporters of a wide range of social issues. Nonprofits can generate more detailed, issue-specific insights by conducting additional research to build their own needs-based segmentation. We believe that, for organizations that rely heavily on public engagement to achieve their mission, the payoff from such an exercise would be well worth the investment.

A nonprofit's leaders must first agree on their specific objectives for the segmentation—for example, ensure high turnout at a lobbying day, get a critical mass of participants to join a letter-writing campaign, or expand the supporter base. The objectives will then determine the target population for the segmentation. An organization might survey only its current supporters if its objective is to get as many of them to participate in an activity as possible; on the other hand, if its objective is to attract more supporters, it might select a sampling of individuals who identify themselves as being interested or already involved in its issue of focus.

Figure out who you've got

Once it has a segmentation in place, a nonprofit could administer a short survey to its current supporters to determine which segment each supporter belongs to. (We have developed a ten-question survey that we have found to be 80 percent accurate in assigning individuals to one of our seven segments). The organization can then tag the individuals in its database and tailor messages and requests to each individual based on his or her segment.

It could, for instance, invite all the people it has identified as Issue-driven Activists to help organize a lobbying day and recruit others to join—tapping into this segment's interest in taking leadership roles. Requests to individuals it has designated Quiet Followers, on the other hand, would be lower-key—perhaps suggesting participation in the lobbying effort by signing petitions or writing letters to elected officials.

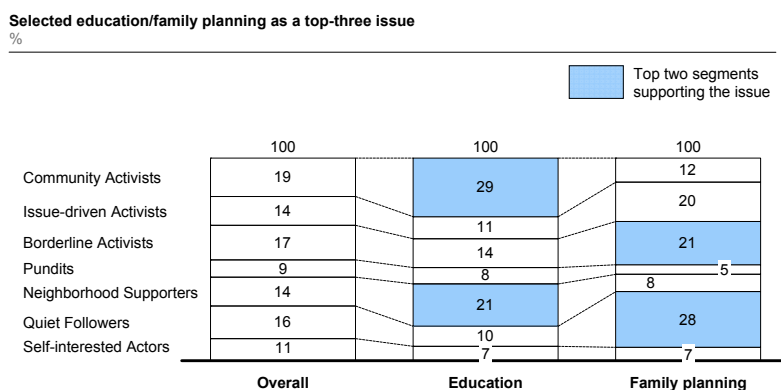
Alternatively, instead of tagging all individuals in their membership database, nonprofits could conduct periodic surveys of a sample of their supporter base. The targeting will be less precise, but the survey results will still be useful in helping the organization shape its communications and advocacy strategy. Administering the surveys regularly (every year, for example) will also help the organization understand how the segments within its supporter base evolve over time.

Study the segments and target your 'asks'

Nonprofits should analyze the research data (either from our broad-based research or their own issue-specific research) to gain insights into the segments that are most likely to support their issues and engage the segments to play particular roles in their organizations.

Take the case of a nonprofit focusing on education issues. Our research shows that such an organization is more likely to attract the segments interested in helping their own communities: Community Activists and Neighborhood Supporters (Exhibit 3). In fact, these two segments make up more than half of individuals active in education. Education nonprofits should therefore tailor their communications and advocacy messages and vehicles to cater to the preferences of these segments: they should host or participate in local events, make clear in their communications exactly how their work helps the local community, and organize activities that incorporate social interaction. For example, they might host letter-writing sessions at local venues instead of simply asking people to independently write letters to members of Congress.

Exhibit 3: Who is most likely to support what issues?



Source: 2009 McKinsey public will survey

In contrast, supporters of organizations focused on family planning are more likely to be Borderline Activists or Quiet Followers. Most people in these two segments are willing to participate in a range of activities but are hesitant to take the lead. Family-planning organizations should therefore ensure a steady presence in various media channels (including e-mail, the Web, and in-person events) to give Borderline Activists and Quiet Followers multiple ways to get involved and educate themselves. They should also provide engagement opportunities that don't require heavy interaction. At the same time, they should encourage supporters to spread the word and share information with friends and family.

By targeting messages and requests to the needs and preferences of the various segments, nonprofits can increase the likelihood that people will become—and remain—engaged. A segmented approach represents a major departure from the “ladder of engagement” approach that some organizations use. Our segmentation shows that many individuals may be interested in bigger and more demanding activities, such as attending lobbying days or organizing events, but not in smaller ones such as signing petitions. While some people will of course follow the typical progression of the ladder, we believe nonprofits miss out on potential supporters simply because those individuals lose interest before reaching a rung of the ladder that motivates and excites them.

Embed the segmentation into the organization

For a segmentation to have full impact, the entire organization should understand and embrace it. Leaders should communicate the insights generated from the segmentation to the whole staff, particularly to those teams that interact with potential supporters, to avoid misaligned objectives and inefficient contact with the supporter base. To get the staff to understand how to approach and engage with each segment, using creative techniques to bring the segments to life can be very helpful. A nonprofit could, for example, develop a handbook that describes each segment in detail. It could engage in role-playing exercises, in which staffers portray

the various segments in short skits. It could invite supporters from each segment to speak to the staff or show videos of individuals from the various segments talking about their attitudes and preferences.

Nonprofits should note that, in the private sector, a common pitfall in undertaking a segmentation exercise is lack of involvement from senior leadership. A nonprofit's top leaders must believe in and champion the segmentation, resolve any internal conflicts (for example, disagreement between the advocacy team and the fund-raising team about which segments are most important), and be involved in defining an implementation plan.



Insights that apply across all segments

Some of the following insights are intuitive; others are less so. In any case, our research provides a solid fact base that can help build consensus among the leaders of an organization as to how to craft the most effective communications and advocacy approaches.

- **Recruit supporters at political events.** Compared with individuals who aren't involved in social issues, people active in social issues are twice as likely to have made a donation to a political campaign in the past 12 months, three times more likely to have participated in another type of political activity (such as attending a town hall), and 20 percent more likely to vote. Nonprofits would do well to treat political events as rich recruiting venues for potential supporters. Also, when highlighting their issues in political contexts or at political events, nonprofits should make clear how the public can get involved.
- **Harness the power of word of mouth.** Not surprisingly, a significant percentage of survey respondents across segments said they first got involved in an issue because it had a direct impact either on them (28 percent) or on a family member (23 percent). But an almost equally influential trigger for involvement is word of mouth: many survey respondents said they first became involved after hearing about an issue directly from someone from an advocacy organization (26 percent), friends (23 percent), or family (18 percent). These findings suggest nonprofits' investments in both paid and volunteer organizers—those who engage directly with potential supporters, whether in person or online, to help turn supporters into effective messengers—are well worth it. Nonprofits should also encourage and equip current supporters (for instance, by providing easy-to-remember talking points) to get their friends and family involved.

- **Make smart use of celebrity spokespersons.** Only 3 percent of individuals active in social issues said that a celebrity endorsement triggered their awareness of an issue or moved them to get involved. That said, using celebrities as spokespersons can of course lead to more “buzz” either in terms of media coverage (an awareness trigger for 31 percent of survey respondents) or discussions among friends (an awareness trigger for 28 percent), and it can help a nonprofit gain access to decision makers. But simply having a celebrity spokesperson does not guarantee success in raising public awareness and involvement. To ensure that a celebrity endorsement makes a significant impact on the public, nonprofits should secure the celebrity’s long-term commitment to the cause (as opposed to an appearance at one or two events) and make sure he or she participates in cause-related activities that are interesting enough to make the news or get people talking. Nonprofits should also weigh the risk of negative publicity in the event that the celebrity becomes involved in a scandal.
- **Don’t equate declining involvement with declining interest.** Interest in a given issue appears to be quite “sticky.” While roughly a third of supporters had decreased their involvement over the 12-month period covered in our survey, only 4 percent reported that their interest in the social issue in question had declined. Supporters’ declining involvement may simply indicate that an organization should refresh its “ask” or approach. Nonprofits should also make the effort to re-engage lapsed supporters at regular intervals.
- **Ask for money, but highlight the larger strategy.** Only 5 percent of active supporters believed that raising enough funds is the single most important step to solving a social problem—compared with the 28 percent who believed that increasing general knowledge about the issue is most critical, or the 20 percent who thought legislative changes make the most difference. But even though only 1 in 20 put their faith in fund-raising as the best answer to a social problem, a much larger fraction, 39 percent, believed that making cash donations is the single activity they themselves can take on that will yield the greatest impact. All other activities rank lower: 29 percent said educating themselves will have the most impact, 21 percent believed volunteering is most important, and 13 percent said they can help the most by contacting an elected official. For nonprofit organizations, these findings suggest that soliciting cash donations can be quite effective, but promising that more money will solve everything is futile; supporters are not likely to believe that claim. Instead, organizations should explain how cash donations will support activities that can lead to increased knowledge about the issue or legislative change.
- **Don’t dismiss direct mail.** Even in the age of proliferating media channels and social networking, old-fashioned direct mail still works. A surprising 31 percent of active supporters said they get their information from direct mail, putting it solidly in the top ten sources of information for all segments. Direct mail falls behind sources such as friends and family (46 percent) and e-mail alerts/newsletters (36 percent) but ahead of local newspapers (30 percent), local news broadcasts (23 percent), cable news (20 percent), and social-networking sites (17 percent).

Conclusion

We hope that our research proves to be a useful resource for nonprofit and advocacy organizations seeking greater and more sustained support from the public. To emphasize a point raised earlier, we encourage foundations and other funders of nonprofit groups to consider investing in an issue-specific needs-based segmentation. They can then share the results with all their grantees working on a given social issue, thus improving and aligning the efforts of many organizations. We believe such an investment would help nonprofits engage and mobilize supporters much more effectively, and result in a stronger and more unified constituency in support of social change.

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