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# “We Really Have to Hit Them Where it Hurts”: Analyzing Activists’ Corporate Campaigns

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### Abstract

Despite a surge in activism efforts directed at corporations, extant research largely overlooks how activist organizations craft and implement their campaigns. To address this gap, this article applies issues management to examine the process used by activist organizations to pressure target corporations into altering practices and policies that they perceive to be problematic. Using a qualitative approach, this study draws from interviews with 21 activist practitioners, which are supplemented by organizational documents and news articles. This study introduces the Corporate Pressure Process Model, which depicts and describes the various phases of activists’ corporate campaigns, including how these groups determine what threat is most appropriate and select coordinating tactics. Based on the findings, this article also outlines implications for activist organizations and their target corporations.

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## Introduction

Campaigns targeting corporations are increasingly prevalent as activists seek to hold these entities to higher standards of social performance (Coombs, 1998), leading John and Thomson (2003) to declare that “capitalism and corporations are under more pressure now than at any time since the Great Depression” (p. 1). The challengers have also become more diverse, representing various issues ranging from detrimental environmental practices and genetically modified foods to exploitation of retail employees and gun control. Although the issues vary, activist organizations share a mission to identify a problem, unite to address it, and doggedly pursue it

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(Deegan, 2001). Manheim (2001) explained that “every well—conceived corporate campaign will probe for a potential weakness in the target company and then systematically exploit that weakness until the benefit of doing so declines” (p. 85). What is lacking is an examination of how activist organizations identify these weaknesses and then design strategies, allocate resources, and implement tactics to exploit them.

Traditionally, research favored the perspective of legitimized, for-profit corporations, positioning activists “as barriers to overcome or challenges to meet” even though these groups began “developing and utilizing many of the modern tools of public relations” by the 1960s (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 63). Although scholars shifted their attention from focusing solely on the corporate perspective to better understand how activist organizations develop and operate (Smith & Ferguson, 2018), research on these unique organizations, their communication practices, and their activities trails behind practice (Jaques, 2013).

To expand our knowledge about the process of activists’ campaigns, this study analyzes data collected through interviews with activist practitioners, along with organizational documents and news articles, to outline how these campaigns progress, and introduces the Corporate Pressure Process Model. Following an overview of relevant literature on activists’ corporate campaigns and issues management, the qualitative methods used to investigate this process are described. Analysis then details how activist organizations construct these campaigns, from analyzing their target to selecting specific tactics while considering their strengths and characteristics as an organization, to increase our understanding of how these groups seek to inflict corporate change from the activist perspective.

## Literature review

### Activist organizations and their campaigns

Activism “arises from moral outrage and leads to attempts to create and exploit power resources to change offending practices and policies” (Heath, 1997, p. 189) as “groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions the activists find problematic” (Smith, 2005, p. 5). To alter these activities, like-minded individuals with “shared ideals, concerns, or grievances” coordinate, mobilizing individuals into an organized effort (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007, p. 903). Also called issue groups, grassroots organizations, or social movement organizations, an activist organization is “a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action” (L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 504). Activist organizations aim to contribute to the greater social good (Smith & Ferguson, 2010) by elevating “a society’s value standards” (Smith & Ferguson, 2018, p. 440) while also emphasizing failure to meet these values (Heath & Waymer, 2009). Such efforts entail promoting or resisting change on behalf of a target company or industry, invoking public policy or regulatory changes, or altering social norms (L. A. Grunig, 1992; Karagianni &

Cornelissen, 2006; Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Many groups pursue all three goals (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). While research has explored the strategies and tactics used by activists in pursuit of these objectives (e.g., Jaques, 2013; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Stokes & Atkins-Sayre, 2018; Veil, Reno, Freihaut, & Oldham, 2015; Woods, 2018), this study examines how activist organizations try to produce change at the individual company level.

In recent decades, activist organizations shifted from using “the most established ways” of indirectly challenging corporations through public policy to engaging organizational-level efforts that directly pressure corporations (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007, p. 918; Waldron, Navis, & Fisher, 2013). Recognizing corporations are often susceptible to reputational attacks (Hart & Sharma, 2004), activists adapted approaches pioneered by religious entities and labor groups. Manheim (2001) referred to the targeting of corporations by activist organizations as “corporate campaigns,” which he defined as “a coordinated, often long-term, and wide-ranging program of economic, political, legal, and psychological warfare” fought in the media, marketplace, and courts (p. xiii). By applying “systematic and unrelenting pressure,” activists endeavor “to cause so much pain and disruption that management is forced to yield to their will” (Manheim, 2001, p. xiii).

To persuade corporations to alter their activities, activist organizations strive to hurt corporate reputations in addition to disrupting organizational routines (Luders, 2006), damaging pertinent stakeholder relationships (Waldron et al., 2013), and diverting revenue from the targets (Friedman, 1999). To attract managerial attention, activists must effectively promote and advance their issues and rely on issues management.

### The role of issues management in activists’ campaigns

The identification, promotion, and resolution of issues is central to activism research and practice (Smith & Ferguson, 2018), and issues management is perhaps the most prominent theory applied in this area (e.g., Coombs, 1992, 1998; Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Heath, 1998, 2002; Jaques, 2013; Jones & Chase, 1979; Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003; Veil et al., 2015). Issues management is a long-term strategic process that entails monitoring, identifying, and responding to issues, which arise when “one or more human agents attaches significance to a situation or perceived ‘problem’” (Crable & Vibbert, 1985, p. 5). Initially intended as a mechanism to help corporations deflect activists while proactively shaping matters of public concern, Jones and Chase’s (1979) process model outlined five steps: issue identification, issue analysis, issue change strategy options, issue action programming, and evaluation. First, organizations scan their environments to identify issues of relevant concern. Second, management researches an issue to evaluate its impact. Next, the organization crafts a response strategy to appropriately address the issue. Fourth, management adopts the policy to support the plan and commit to it. Finally, the organization evaluates the results by determining whether the actual outcome matches the intended outcome.

Although issues management was originally intended for corporations, every organization must be proactive in addressing relevant issues and influencing the public agenda (Heath, 2002). As activists unite around perceived problems (J. E. Grunig, 1989), they adopt issues management to establish their roles, legitimacy, and value to society (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2006). Years ago, Crable and Vibbert (1985) suggested that activist groups were often more adept than their corporate opponents in employing issues management as they seek to define, advance, and resolve issues to their benefit (Jones & Chase, 1979; Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

Activists often are considered secondary stakeholders because they “lack control over firm resources, implying that they are less relevant to firm consideration” (King, 2008, p. 24), and companies do not rely on their support for survival (Clarkson, 1995). Thus, activists and their issues must gain traction and legitimacy to demonstrate that the issue, the organization, and the proposed solution align with societal expectations and have public support (Coombs, 1992). Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) conjectured that management evaluates a stakeholder group’s importance based on its possession of legitimacy, power, and/or urgency. The more attributes held by the group, the greater its saliency and likelihood of claiming the target’s attention.

To build legitimacy, activist organizations rely on their own publics. The catalytic model (Crable & Vibbert, 1985) empowered publics as the key component to identifying, defining, and promoting issues and recognized the role of communication in elevating an issue. The model outlined how issues advance throughout five different stages through gaining attention and urgency: potential, imminent, current, critical, and dormant. First, an issue obtains *potential* status when stakeholders begin to pay attention to it and generate support for activists’ perception of the problem. Second, the issue progresses to *imminent* status by gaining legitimacy when select stakeholders acknowledge its relevancy and importance, accepting the issue. Third, *current* status “signals the point when a large number of stakeholders know about an issue” (Coombs, 2002, p. 217), often resulting from media or Internet coverage. If the issue gains enough attention and support, it escalates to *critical* status (Crable & Vibbert, 1985). At this phase, the issue may generate a crisis or “a violation of societal norms/expectations” for the target company (Coombs, 2006, p. 249), forcing a response. Finally, an issue goes *dormant* if it is resolved or if interest wanes. An issue can also fall dormant early on if it fails to attract attention or gain legitimacy.

Issues do not always move in a linear direction, leading to a resolution (Jaques, 2009). Rather, they skip steps, never reach a step, or revert to earlier stages. Additionally, activist organizations’ campaigns carry on for years or even decades. Smith and Ferguson (2018) posited, “While the avowed aim of many activists is to work themselves out of a job. . . in reality the struggle for social change is a long-term, ongoing process” (p. 444). To increase their chances of gaining management’s attention, activist organizations must adapt their tactics to ensure their issues remain at the forefront of public thought.

Case studies outlining how a particular activist organization challenges its opponent(s) abound (e.g., Anderson, 1992; Henderson, 2005; Jaques, 2013; Knight & Greenberg, 2002; Madden, Janoske, Winkler, & Harpole, 2018; Stokes & Atkins-Sayre, 2018; Veil et al., 2015;

Woods, 2018), and offer insight into how a group can effectively employ rhetoric or harness a channel to command a corporation’s attention. However, den Hond and de Bakker (2007) claimed “it remains unclear *how* different activist groups try to get their claims attended to” (p. 902), adding that “looking at the development of campaigns over time could provide insight into the different tactics that are applied at different stages of the institutional change process” (p. 919). This study answers this call by describing the various stages of activist organizations’ corporate campaigns from the activist perspective. Following an overview of the methods employed, this study introduces the Corporate Pressure Process Model, outlining the progression of these campaigns and describing the various tactics used by activist organizations when challenging corporate behavior. To gain an understanding of how the corporate campaign process works, the following research questions were posed to guide the study:

*RQ1a:* What characteristics about the target corporation do activist organizations consider when planning a corporate campaign?

*RQ1b:* How do the target corporation’s characteristics shape the corporate campaign plan?

*RQ2a:* What communication tactics do activist organizations use during corporate campaigns to pressure target corporations and advance their issue(s)?

*RQ2b:* How do activist organizations select certain communication tactics during corporate campaigns to pressure target corporations and advance their issue(s)?

## Methods

Grounded in issues management, this study was part of a larger research project that aimed to understand how activist organizations use communication to incite corporations to change practices and policies. It employed a qualitative approach to understand the process fashioned by activist organizations and described by activist practitioners to construct their corporate campaigns. By providing descriptions and explanations, qualitative research seeks to understand how a process works (Stake, 2010), including discovering and describing communication and interaction patterns (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

## Data

Twenty-one individuals representing 21 activist organizations participated in the study. Listed in Table 1, these participants represented “issue-specific” groups that are “organized around issues like the environment, human rights, and fair trade” (Karagianni & Cornelissen, 2006, p. 169). Two organizations asked not to be named because of ongoing corporate negotiations.

Organizations were identified in two steps. First, an initial list of activist organizations was acquired using a Google search for the term “activist” along with “campaign,” “boycott,” “petition,” or “protest.” Second, additional organizations were identified during interviews by asking respondents if they collaborate with other activist groups. These groups then were invited to participate in the study.

Table 1. List of participating activist organizations and their issues

<b>Activist Organization</b>	<b>Issue(s)</b>	<b>Target Corporations</b>
18 Million Rising	Asian-American and Pacific Islander community issues	The American Girl Doll Company; Facebook; Gap; Marvel Comics; Netflix
2nd Vote	Corporate funding of “liberal advocacy”	Macy’s; Target
Action on Smoking and Health	Tobacco-related issues	Philip Morris
Appalachian Voices	Appalachian environmental issues	Duke Energy
As You Sow	Health and environmental issues	McDonalds; Starbucks; Trader Joe’s
Campus Pride	LGBTQ issues	Chick-fil-A
Center for Food Safety	Food safety issues	Bayer; In-N-Out Burger; McDonald’s; Orville Redenbacher
Collectively Free	Animal and human rights	Chick-fil-A; Hershey’s; Nathan’s Famous Hot Dogs; Nestle; Starbucks
DeFund DAPL	Bank investment in the Dakota Access Pipeline	Wells Fargo
Environmental Working Group	Health and environmental issues	Johnson & Johnson; L’Oréal
Gays Against Guns	Gun reform	BlackRock; FedEx; Hertz; Wyndham Worldwide
Greenpeace USA	Environmental issues	Kimberly Clark; Procter & Gamble
Life Decisions International	Anti-abortion	Starbucks
Making Change at Walmart	Responsible employer practices	Walmart
Moms Demand Action	Gun reform	Albertsons; Chipotle; Facebook; Fresh Market;

		Kroger; Starbucks; Target; Trader Joe’s
Other 98	Issues pertaining to big banks, big oil, and big money in politics	ExxonMobil; Facebook; Mylan; Shell; Wells Fargo
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals	Animal rights	Armani; Ben & Jerry’s; Land O’Lakes; Ringling Brothers; SeaWorld
The Sierra Club - Beyond Coal	Environmental issues	Colstrip coal plant; Duke Energy; Puget Sound Energy
US Right to Know	Health issues	Coca-Cola; Disney
Unnamed environmental organization	Human rights and environmental issues	International clothing retailer; multinational food and beverage corporation
Unnamed progressive organization	Economic, health, and environmental issues	Multinational technology company; transnational food and beverage company

Qualitative interviews permit researchers to better understand the world from another’s perspective through stories and explanations of respondents’ behaviors that help “inform the researcher about key features and processes” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 176). After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, telephone interviews were conducted. These focused interviews employed questions grounded in issues management and corporate campaign literature (How does your organization monitor issues; who are your prime targets; what factors do you take into consideration when confronting your targets; what types of resources do you use to gain support for your issues; what communication strategies have you found to be most successful for challenging your targets’ policies or behaviors; how do target organizations respond to your messages; and have you ever engaged with your targets). Interviews were audio recorded with participant permission. Interviews were scheduled to last approximately 60 minutes but ranged in length from 21 minutes to 78 minutes, depending on participant availability. Participants with time constraints agreed to answer follow-up questions via email.

This study reflects analysis of 60 activist campaigns (Table 1). These campaigns were identified in two stages. First, at least one campaign per activist organization was identified as part of the initial Google search. Second, additional campaigns were included after the practitioner discussed them during the interview. All 60 campaigns were exclusive, meaning that although 2nd Vote, Collectively Free, Life Decisions International, and Moms Demand Action pressured Starbucks, these four campaigns were independent of one another. In total, these 60 campaigns targeted 48 corporations. Organizational documents ( $n = 473$ ), including news releases, reports, and blog posts were collected by going to the activist organization’s website and searching for the campaigns. News articles ( $n = 613$ ) were gleaned from LexisNexis and Google News using the name of the activist organization (e.g., “DeFund DAPL”) and the corporate campaign target (e.g., “Wells Fargo”). These additional sources supplemented the

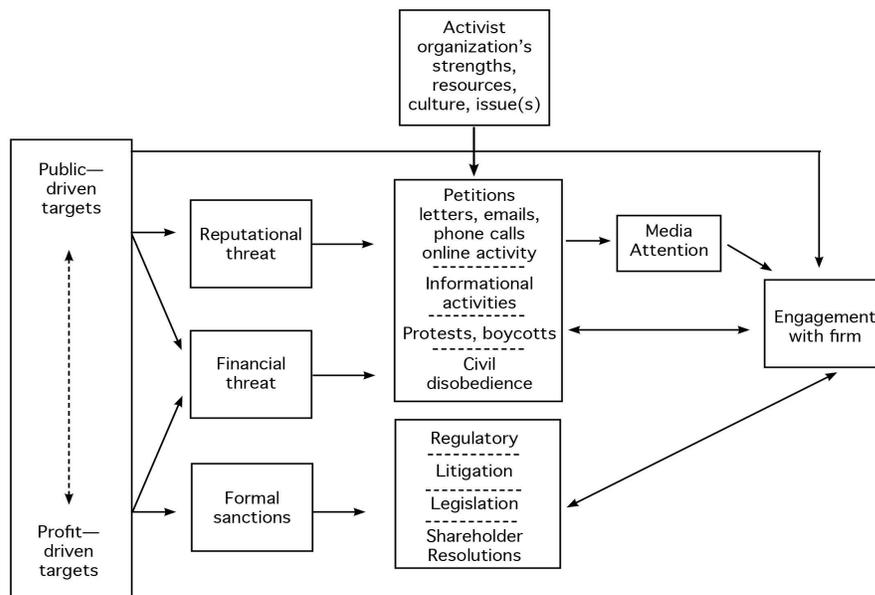
interviews, and using information from the activist organizations and external sources permitted data triangulation, helping the researcher to “test for consistency” among accounts by comparing internal and external explanations to verify themes (Patton, 2002, p. 248).

## Analysis

Inductive textual analysis was used to identify patterns, themes, and categories present in the data through locating and defining key phrases, terms, and practices (Patton, 2002), which were used to construct the model. Analysis occurred across all data (interviews, organizational documents, and news articles) but was organized by campaign. To meld the information gleaned from interviews with that taken from organizational documents and news articles, a document was created for each activist organization. Information within each document was organized according to each campaign. If information did not pertain to a specific campaign but reflected the activist organization’s general communication efforts, it was placed under “general campaign information.” First, all data were read to gain a general understanding of the contents. Then, the data were re-read and all descriptions of activists’ corporate campaigns were highlighted and placed in a separate document. Third, this selected text was read word by word to obtain codes, which are often captured using the exact words from the text. For instance, for RQ1b, which focused on how the target corporations’ priorities shape campaigns, codes included “create a PR nightmare,” “brand scrutiny,” “legal measures,” and “some threat to their bottom line.”

Next, these codes were sorted into themes based on the relationships between the codes, and a label was crafted for each theme. For example, the codes for RQ1b were organized according to their relationships and formed the themes “reputational threat,” “financial threat,” and “formal sanctions.” Fifth, once the categories were established, the “final, confirmatory” stage of analysis entailed “carefully examining deviant cases or data that don’t fit the categories developed” (Patton, 2002, p. 454). Sixth, the final themes were recorded and supported using thick, rich description drawn from the data. Finally, these themes composed the primary model elements described in the following section (corporation priorities, tactics, activist organization characteristics, target response, and engagement) and were organized into the proposed model (Figure 1) based on participant descriptions.

Figure 1. The corporate pressure process model



## The corporate pressure process model

Anderson (1992) contended that “the trouble with pressure campaigns is that they are irregular” (p. 153). Although the specific tactics used by these groups may vary, this study identified patterns in activist organizations’ corporate campaigns. The Corporate Pressure Process Model (Figure 1) presents this progression from the standpoint of these activist organizations, outlining how activist organizations analyze corporate priorities, determine what threat is most likely to provoke a response from the targets, and select supporting tactics while considering their own characteristics and the issues.

### Corporation priorities

Participants explained that campaigns differ according to whether the targets appear to value their reputations or bottom lines<sup>1</sup>. According to interviewees, a public-driven corporation is concerned about its reputation and social impact. Examples of public-driven targets identified by participants included Ben & Jerry’s, Johnson & Johnson, Procter & Gamble, Target, and Trader Joe’s. Given the company’s focus on both social responsibility and reputation, participants claimed the corporation is often more likely to engage with the activist organization and even

<sup>1</sup> These characterizations reflect participants’ assessments of target companies.

establish some sort of a relationship. However, such interaction is rarely immediate; rather, the target usually experiences a degree of public pressure before it engages.

On the other end of the spectrum, participants explained that profit-driven targets often engender public hostility. A representative from Greenpeace USA explained a target in this category is often “so powerful it doesn’t need to negotiate” because it is “insulated from any kind of market impact that we might have on them. . . They’re like a cosmic foe. You’re never going to be sitting at the table with them.” Examples of profit-driven entities named by participants included companies in the oil and gas (ExxonMobil, Shell), energy (Duke Energy, Puget Sound Energy), pharmaceutical (Mylan), and tobacco industries (Phillip Morris).

Activist organizations analyze the apparent values and culture of the targets as part of the research stage. This investigation includes the activist organization’s determining whether the corporation has taken stances on social issues previously, what types of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs the company engages in, and how the corporation previously responded to activists. Because all corporations must be profitable, targets range on a continuum and can be driven by desires to increase profits and build a strong reputation. Therefore, companies fall at various points along the spectrum rather than solely embodying a profit-driven or public-driven mentality.

#### Identifying an appropriate threat

Based on what it perceives to be the target corporation’s apparent values, an activist organization then identifies what threat(s) will be most effective. One participant noted the challenging nature of this task, explaining that “we really have to hit them where it hurts” but “there are very few levers that are available to advocates” (18 Million Rising). After determining whether the target is more profit-driven or public-driven, the activist organization decides whether to focus on challenging the company’s reputation, harming its bottom-line, or initiating more formal sanctions, such as government regulation.

While tactics challenging the bottom-line are effective for both types of targets, participants explained that reputational damage is more effective with public-driven companies. When pressuring public-driven corporations, activist groups target the corporations’ public relations efforts to “make a PR nightmare” because “it takes up their resources and distracts them” (The Other 98%). Because corporations often respond through CSR initiatives, these programs can easily become new fronts for activist groups to attack, generally because such efforts are symbolic as companies “show you the things they’re doing and just hope that’s good enough to shut you up” (Appalachian Voices). Groups pressuring profit-driven corporations focus on attacking the bottom line (e.g., boycotts) or engaging in regulatory measures (e.g., legal activities, legislation). A member of The Other 98% argued these targets will remain indifferent “as long as they don’t start losing money.”

A participant from 18 Million Rising compared a campaign for a more public-driven corporation to a campaign for a more profit-driven company, citing Gap and Walmart as examples. The individual explained that Gap had “sort of built a reputation on being the most

ethical of the fast fashion companies” whereas “a company like Walmart, they really don’t care how ethical you think they are. They’ve realized that’s not why people come to them.” Although the group sought to “leverage brand damage” in its Gap campaign, the participant expressed that such actions would only be “footholds” in a campaign against a target such as Walmart. Thus, for corporations toward the profit-driven end of the spectrum, activist groups must often engage “other decision makers, like national policy or state policy makers” as “tactics that are effective with [public-driven targets] generally don’t have anything to do with them” (Greenpeace USA). Given many companies exist on the continuum between profit-driven and public-driven, activist organizations often must spark a combination of public criticism and financial threats (Appalachian Voices), requiring several tactics.

### Tactics

Activist organizations use a variety of tactics (Jackson, 1982). When selecting specific tactics, these groups consider the priorities of the target corporations, characteristics of their own organizations, the specific issue, and the targets’ responses. All tactics identified in the data are listed with an example in Table 2<sup>2</sup>.

Table 2. Activist tactics applied during corporate campaigns

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Example</b>
<i>Organizing Activities</i>	
Town Hall/ Public Hearings	Appalachian Voices held public hearings about coal ash pits
Leafleting	CFS distributes literature at events
<i>Informational Activities</i>	
Reports	EWG uses reports to have a “major impact in the media”
Advertising	PETA posts controversial ads
Websites	2 <sup>nd</sup> Vote publishes corporate donations
Social Media	All groups used social media to amplify their messages and establish relationships with supporters
Films	Appalachian Voices showed a series of films on the effects of coal
<i>Symbolic Activities</i>	
Email Campaigns	EWG emails representatives (“When they get emails, a large number of emails about a particular issue, they notice.”)

<sup>2</sup> Typology of activist activities derives from Jackson (1982).

Letter Writing	PETA mailed letters and copies of <i>Blackfish</i> to members of Congress
Call-Ins	DeFund DAPL encouraged supporters to call banks financing the Dakota Access Pipeline
Hijacking	PETA hijacked the #AskSeaWorld campaign
Guerilla Activism	An environmental organization placed stickers on a retailer’s price tags containing information about the firm’s practices
Petition Deliveries	A progressive organization delivered a petition at a firm’s headquarters
Protest	Held in a storefront (Collectively Free), at the location of corporate partners (Greenpeace), industry conventions (unnamed environmental organization), or CEO homes (PETA)
Performances	Involves flash mobs (Action on Smoking and Health) or die-ins (Gays Against Guns)
Boycotts	Moms Demand Action initiated a “Skip Starbucks Saturday” boycott
<i>Civil Disobedience</i>	
Blockades	The Other 98 staged a blockade using kayaks to delay an oil rig
Illegal Activities	Greenpeace broke into Procter & Gamble’s headquarters to hang banners
Hoaxes	18 Million Rising created a faux website and Twitter account, impersonating Gap
<i>Legalistic Activities</i>	
Petitions	Moms Demand Action posted a petition for Chipotle, which quickly accumulated more than 10,000 signatures, forcing Chipotle to respond within 24 hours
Stakeholder Resolutions	As You Sow proposed at resolution for McDonald’s to eliminate Styrofoam packaging
Regulatory Agencies	PETA filed a petition with OSHA to prohibit humans from physically interacting with animals at SeaWorld
Legislation	The Sierra Club pushed a Washington State bill encouraging Puget Sound Energy to phase out Colstrip
Lawsuits	PETA sued SeaWorld, claiming that five wild-caught orcas performing is a violation of the 13th Amendment
Information Requests	U.S. Right to Know files Freedom of Information Act requests

While the specific tactics employed vary by type of activist organization, all groups begin with lower impact informational, formal, and symbolic activities. Informational activities help activist organizations disseminate messages, enabling them to generate awareness about their issues, issue stances, and proposed solutions. Examples in this stage include social media posts,

reports, or websites. Formal activities include petitions and filing information requests. Finally, symbolic activities also seek to advance an issue by enabling an activist organization to demonstrate the magnitude of its conviction "how strongly it feels" (Jackson, 1982) while embarrassing the target. During this stage, symbolic activities include email campaigns, letter writing, or call-ins. If activist groups do not receive the response they desire, they progress to less invasive offline informational activities (e.g., leafleting, press releases, advertising).

The third step is more invasive offline tactics, including protests, petition deliveries, or performances. For some activist organizations (e.g., As You Sow, Campus Pride, Moms Demand Action), these activities are more subdued. For others (e.g., Gays Against Guns, PETA, The Other 98%), these actions are more pronounced, entailing the use of die-ins and flash mobs. Some groups embrace civil disobedience actions, such as blockades, during which individuals are "showing courage, showing bravery, showing the power of creativity and willingness to stand for something" (Greenpeace USA). One participant noted that "things like that are much harder to do, they're harder to get activists to do, and they take more staff to make sure they're done properly, but I think they get more attention" (unnamed progressive organization). During the fifth step, some organizations turn to formal approaches, including legislation, regulatory pressure, or litigation. Maintaining the ability to escalate is necessary because "you don't want to go all out in your first couple of steps. . . We need to plan for room for escalation" because reaching a resolution with the target early in the campaign is unlikely (PETA).

#### Public-driven targets

As the model depicts, activists are more likely to target public-driven targets with highly-visible tactics (e.g., protests) that foster imagery and symbolism, appealing to the news media. For Greenpeace USA, "the public face of everything that we do is thought out to be appealing to the media." Making Change at Walmart will often "hold a rally or have something happen where media want to cover us as an organization" while an unnamed progressive organization will take popular petitions or protests and "package it up together and tell a story of a national movement" to gain coverage. The goal for many of these tactics is to shame the target companies. Many groups seek to draw attention to irresponsible behavior when they "shame and blame" targets (Gays Against Guns) by using public actions to humiliate the corporations. Some publish lists of companies engaging in improper behavior, such as Life Decisions International's (LDI) "Boycott List" that identifies corporations funding Planned Parenthood. Others use more dramatic approaches. A Greenpeace USA participant noted that it "was a huge embarrassment for Proctor & Gamble to have a banner dropped in their headquarters by people wearing tiger costumes." A second strategy entails "lifting up the work of the forward-thinking" targets (Sierra Club). Greenpeace USA provided a list of responsible tissue producers to "recognize the more progressive members of the industry who are making change" (Brooks, 2009, p. A9). Often, this praise is combined with a reprimand for the target.

### Activist organization characteristics and issues

Activist organizations also consider their own characteristics, including perceived strengths, resources, organizational cultures, and their issues when identifying appropriate and feasible tactics. First, some participants noted their organizations perceive certain tactics as their “strengths.” A member of Greenpeace USA explained that “We’re just really good at actions. That’s what we do.” These large organizations stage elaborate actions, including blockades or scaling buildings. Second, resource access also influences tactic selection as resource-rich organizations are generally better equipped to occupy oil rigs, enact legislation, and pay for extensive legal services. Greenpeace has deep pockets, raising more than \$344 million in donations in 2012 alone (Pilcher & Hunt, 2014). Activist organizations with access to financial pools regularly use advertising. After gaining financial support from Michael Bloomberg’s \$50 million Everytown movement (O’Connor, 2014), Moms Demand Action launched an advertising campaign against Kroger (Moms Demand Action, 2014). Alternately, smaller groups rely heavily on the internet, news media, email, letter writing, call-in events, and protests. A member of Gays Against Guns mentioned the organization’s focus on small costs, such as printing collateral materials because “when you’re a grassroots organization, copies are expensive.”

Third, tactics also depend on the activist organization’s culture. Some organizations engage in controversial behaviors. Several groups included in this study demonstrated willingness to engage in illegal activity and risk arrest. Other actions may be legal but not widely accepted. Collectively Free activists disrupted Easter Mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City as part of its anti-chocolate campaign (Chia, 2016), Gays Against Guns prides itself on adopting “visceral” actions that are “in your face” (Neate, 2017, para. 16), and PETA often employs provocative advertising (Quach, 2016).

Finally, tactics also depend on the issue that the activist organization seeks to remedy. Organizations addressing health-related concerns, such as tobacco and cosmetics, employ formal tactics and generate reports rather than using symbolic actions. Environmental groups use formal tactics, hearings, reports, protests, and guerilla activism. Animal rights organizations gravitate toward actions that generate high amounts of visibility and face-to-face contact. Progressive organizations prefer to build a strong social media presence and are more willing to embrace civil disobedience whereas conservative organizations depend on boycotts and informational tactics. Throughout the campaigns’ lifespans, groups “switch up the styles of our actions” (Collectively Free). This variety also keeps supporters interested since repeating the same actions would “get kind of boring” (unnamed environmental organization).

### Target response

Finally, the corporation’s response to the activist organization influences tactics, including whether campaign efforts intensify. An unnamed environmental activist explained they “match the tone,” using informational tactics if discussions appear to “be going well” but escalate efforts if the target is “resistant to change.” Resistance may manifest in several ways from not responding to meeting invitations (CFS) to meeting with groups where “they’re just going to say

what they think you want to hear” (unnamed progressive organization). If activist organizations do move on to more public actions, conversations can continue behind the scenes (Appalachian Voices). One participant explained, “You create a public face, you create a corporate villain, you go at them really hard. But you’re sitting at the table with them behind the scenes, working on their corporate policy” (Greenpeace USA).

### Creating a media frenzy

Activist organizations regularly involve the media by disseminating information or using dramatic actions to generate publicity, particularly when pressuring public-driven companies, making the media “a really important partner in holding institutions accountable” (U.S. Right to Know). A representative for U.S. Right to Know, who worked in a coalition with Environmental Working Group (EWG) challenging Johnson & Johnson over chemicals in the company’s baby products, explained media attention was a catalyst for the campaign. After years of pressure, the company finally responded to the coalition “within one hour” after “they heard from a reporter from the Associated Press about our report.” As noted, several participants use what PETA calls “colorful” activities to gain this attention. One individual explained that “creative direct action” is “a way to get eyes on a story.” Even if the action “doesn’t necessarily effect change in the immediate, if you can get media attention on it, then you raise the profile of the issue and build the groundwork for changing whatever it is that you’re trying to change” (The Other 98%).

### Engagement

Nineteen of the 21 activist practitioners interviewed for this study claimed their organizations want to parley with the target *before* enacting public campaigns, and that engagement is a central campaign objective because it can engender change. Greenpeace USA sends letters to the organization to request a face-to-face meeting to ensure the conflict is “over questionable policies or actions, not a lack of information” (Linaweaver & Bate, 2009, para. 18). PETA claims it would prefer to solve concerns “before we even print signs” because “Then we can put our funds, our very limited funds, toward more obstinate targets.” Moms Demand Action is “happy to talk with them before we go public” and believes reaching out “is a good faith effort.” 2nd Vote will ask the target to “clarify your position on this issue” to “be open and fair.”

However, participants claimed that “the hardest part is getting them to the bargaining table in the first place. A lot of them will just see an email from us and think ‘Maybe if I ignore it, it will go away’” (PETA). Only a handful of participants noted that corporations respond to these requests and meet with the groups. In some cases, the target meets with the group and addresses the concern. In most instances, participants explained that the companies issue what they consider a perfunctory response, making halfhearted promises to change or offering empty talk in response to the activist organizations’ concerns. Failure to engage with the activist group in accordance with the group’s expectations, or stalled conversations, results in the group reloading its ammunition and reviving the campaign.

According to participants, engagement rarely occurs until after the campaigns go public. Often, “there’s an initial period of engagement where we kind of reach out to those companies, we kind of bring them to the table to talk to us, and that can last anywhere from a year to several years” before the two sides are able to engage “in a dialogue” (unnamed environmental organization). Corporations are often publicly challenged before they even agree to meet. Chick-Fil-A reached out to Campus Pride shortly after the group publicly applied pressure while other corporations, including Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson, responded only after demonstrations generated media involvement and inflicted reputational damage.

## Discussion

Using data collected through interviews with practitioners from activist organizations, along with organizational documents and news articles, this article contributes to research on activist campaigns by presenting the Corporate Pressure Process Model, which explains how activist organizations design corporate campaigns from the activist perspective. This model extends our knowledge of how activists engage in issues management by offering details on how these groups analyze targets, plan, and implement communication efforts (Jones & Chase, 1979). After providing a summation of the model and its connections to theory and previous research, this section offers implications for target corporations.

The Corporate Pressure Process Model begins by describing the factors that activists consider about their targets. Participants differentiate among targets based on the companies’ perceived priorities. Activist groups begin the process by researching and analyzing each target company to determine whether it appears to be more public or profit-driven. Research suggests corporate stances on social issues are often driven by stakeholders (Dodd & Supa, 2015). Waldron et al. (2013) also postulated that stakeholder culture shapes corporate responses to activists and theorized that stakeholder cultures range from moralist to egoist. Moralistic cultures reflect public-driven companies as they “view the broader interests of society as their primary obligation” and “emphasize organizational integrity over short-term profit maximization” (p. 403) while egoist cultures “tend to view economically interested external stakeholders as their primary obligation” (p. 402), mirroring profit-driven corporations. Following this step, organizations identify the most likely effective threats, proposing that corporations identified as profit-driven are more likely to respond to formal sanctions or financial threats whereas reputational threats are more effective with public-driven targets. While an activist organization may begin targeting a public-driven firm using a reputational threat, any combination of threats can be used. Some groups even rely on a variety of threats over the course of a campaign to advance their issues to the critical phase (Crale & Vibbert, 1985).

Next, this model described the tactics that activist organizations employ to induce these threats, outlining that they often begin with lower impact, less—invasive, and simpler tactics, leaving room to escalate to more complicated tactics later on, if necessary. An organization’s

strengths, resources, culture, and issue also influence tactic selection. The activist organization then employs these tactics to increase media coverage and amplify its messages to promote, build legitimacy for, and elevate the issue to achieve current status by ensuring it touches a large segment of the target's stakeholders (Cralle & Vibbert, 1985) and demands management's attention. Finally, this model proposes that for many activist organizations, engagement with the target is a key objective for a campaign so the group can meet and discuss its concerns with corporate management to propose and identify solutions.

In addition to offering an overview of the corporate campaign process from the activist perspective, the findings offer suggestions for targets, particularly regarding the engagement element of the Corporate Pressure Process Model. More recent research positioned issues management as "a strategic planning and response option that organizations can use to create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships" (Heath, 1997, p. 301), offering opportunities for both sides to "reduce friction and increase harmony" (Heath, 2005, p. 460; Taylor et al., 2003). This section provides five implications for target firms: (1) investigate the claim, (2) consider the activist organization, (3) cautiously use CSR as a response mechanism, (4) judiciously engage in corporate activism, and (5) recognize the ongoing nature of activism.

First, management should analyze the accuracy of the activist organization's claim, engaging in issue analysis (Jones & Chase, 1979). In some cases, an activist organization is misinformed and the company must be prepared to offer information and supporting evidence to correct the misperception. At other times, the group is correct, requiring the corporation to analyze the extent of the alleged wrongdoing and adopt a process of adaptation and change. Deegan (2001) declared that many targets avoid engagement. Corporate practitioners may believe acknowledging the activists legitimizes their claims (McDonnell & King, 2013) or perceive the activist organizations pose no threat (L. A. Grunig, 1992). However, study participants maintained ignoring them would do the targets no favors because groups would simply initiate or intensify their public efforts, recommending companies should respond earlier rather than later. Representatives of Kimberly-Clark advised other corporations to not "ignore the fair warning. Take that phone call and just have the conversation" (Gies, 2014, para. 13). Similarly, Heath (1997) suggested that early involvement in issue discussions has a greater impact since these issues have yet to become fixed in publics' minds and generate significant media attention.

Second, the corporation should research the activist organization(s) behind the claims as the profile of the activist group could shape the response. Some participants indicated they had no desire to work with a specific target because their group fundamentally opposed the company's existence rather than a specific policy or practice. A member of The Other 98% claimed that conversations with Exxon would be futile because "Exxon can't do a thing to make us like them. There's not a thing they can do to make anything about their business model acceptable to us."

While some scholars (e.g., Deegan, 2001) suggest corporations must respond to all activist groups, select participants explained they do not expect an invitation and may not accept it if offered. Dialogue can only occur if publics "are willing and able to articulate their demands to

organizations" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 26). Such relationships also must begin with a desire to interact (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). In such cases, the issue stances of activist organizations and their targets are too far apart, providing no ability for these parties to identify areas of shared significance and prohibiting them from building "mutually beneficial relationships" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2012). Companies cannot respond to every issue or potential issue (Wang, Wezel & Forgues, 2016), forcing management to prioritize issues (Jones & Chase, 1979). In some circumstances, targets are arguably better served to meet with groups that have a genuine interest in posing solutions that generate feasible and sustainable organizational and societal change. Although activists can refuse to compromise on their issues or objectives (Stokes & Rubin, 2010), these groups should be prepared to offer practical solutions to the corporations.

A target also should research the activist organization to learn if it has worked with other corporations in the past and the results of such efforts. Companies can employ vicarious learning (Smith & Elliott, 2007), examining previous cases to identify effective and ineffective responses. Importantly, while prominent and resource-rich activist organizations receive more attention, targets should not dismiss activist groups they perceive to be small (Deegan, 2001) or slacktivists (Veil et al., 2015). Small organizations can effectively challenge corporations. Using tactics such as petitions, boycotts, and social media posts, Moms Demand Action convinced Starbucks to issue a no guns policy at its locations in less than two years after the group's establishment. Similarly, corporations should also not ignore slacktivists. Moms Demand Action later prompted Chipotle to follow Starbucks' lead. Because the group's online petition generated substantial online chatter, the chain responded within 24 hours.

Third, corporations commonly react to activism, or even attempt to prevent activism, by engaging in CSR (King & McDonnell, 2012). However, a company should be careful when employing CSR as a bandage for the activist organization's issue. Study participants quickly disparaged this response as greenwashing (Appalachian Voices). Although CSR initiatives generate financial and reputational perks, such efforts should not be implemented lightly in an attempt to gloss over concerns. Activist organizations monitor CSR activities and will attack programs to expose the hypocritical nature of the corporation that fails to deliver on its rhetoric.

Fourth, corporations increasingly surpass CSR by engaging in corporate activism, which invites risks and rewards. Corporate participation in socio-political issues can be polarizing, isolate stakeholders, and inflict financial damage. Further, taking a stand also can make the company an enticing target to other activists (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Amid the controversy surrounding the North Carolina "Bathroom Bill," Target's decision to publicize its long-standing practice of permitting individuals to use restrooms and fitting rooms that reflect their gender identities "became an expensive and distracting lesson about the perils of combining the web's megaphone with touchy social issues" (Safdar, 2017, para. 2) and attracted groups such as 2nd Vote. However, corporate advocacy also can offer competitive advantages and foster brand loyalty among issue supporters (Dodd & Supa, 2015), particularly for companies that lean toward the public-driven end of the spectrum. As stakeholders appear to trend toward favoring the involvement of business in these issues (Weber Shandwick, 2018), it would behoove a

company to consider its stakeholder culture (Waldron et al., 2013), reflect on its values, and evaluate if it is well-positioned to be a credible leader on the issue.

Finally, corporations must recognize the ongoing nature of activism. If an agreement is met with any activist organization, the company should remain committed to this resolution. Issues “are never solved in the sense of a final answer” (Cralle & Vibbert, 1985, p. 5) as an activist organization may revive defunct campaigns (Veil et al., 2015) and will continue to monitor corporate behavior after negotiations end. Should these targets fail to adhere to the agreed-upon terms, a group will not hesitate to reignite public campaign and challenge the corporation based on its original misbehavior and broken promises.

## Limitations, future directions, and conclusion

A few limitations should be noted. The data collected for this study favor the activist organization perspective. Future research should incorporate data from the target corporation to provide a more holistic view, including the engagement process. Additionally, analysis reflects on the practices of multiple environmental groups and organizations addressing health and human safety issues while including fewer examples of campaigns focused on animal rights, gun control, employee rights, and LGBTQ rights, even though other organizations were invited to participate. Interviews with activist groups in these areas may offer additional insight into the campaign process. In addition to understanding how these activist organizations use communication to pursue their goals, future studies should continue to explore how corporations differ in their responses to activist organizations (McDonnell & King, 2013). These studies should consider the variables that influence corporate responses (e.g., activist organization size and reputation) along with how targets and non-targets react to activists (Waldron et al., 2013).

This study extended our knowledge of activist organizations’ communication practices by introducing the Corporate Pressure Process Model, which outlines how these groups seek to resolve their issues by waging campaigns against corporate targets. Focusing on this process from the activist perspective, this study extends our knowledge of how activist organizations invoke issues management and offers implications for these groups and their targets. As stakeholders continue to elevate their expectations for the corporate sector, managing and responding to these issues present new risks and new opportunities for businesses while also expanding the potential for activist organizations to influence the public agenda and incite change.

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