

Preparing for a Campaign

A framework for winning

by Mary O'Brien

The following is a presentation made by Mary O'Brien at the Nineteenth National Pesticide Forum, Healthy Ecosystems, Healthy Children in Boulder, Colorado, May 18-20, 2001. Dr. O'Brien is the author of Making Better Environmental Decisions (MIT Press, 2000) and the ecosystems project director at the Science and Environmental Health Network in Eugene, Oregon. For a videotape of Preparing for a Campaign or any presentation from the Forum, contact Beyond Pesticides.

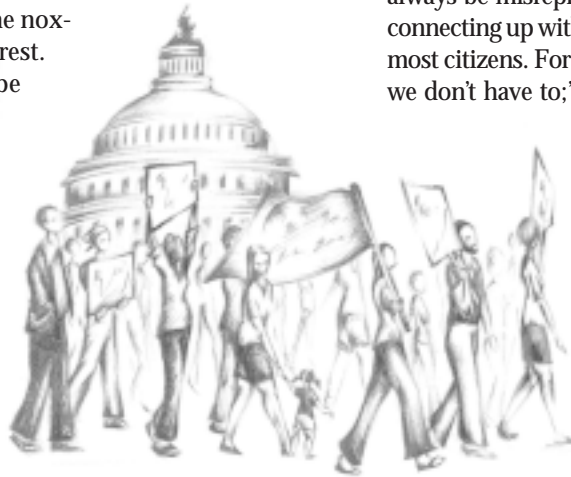
There isn't anybody here who hasn't prepared for and engaged in a campaign; and many of you have led and/or been part of highly successful campaigns. So all I can share on the topic of preparing for a campaign are some reflections drawn from campaigns I've participated in, helped lead, or watched.

I'm going to list 15 suggestions for campaigns and some of them necessarily cannot apply in particular circumstances, but they are general ideas that pass through my mind when planning a campaign:

1. Our campaigns need to be large in scope.

They can be intensely local, as in one's school district, or regarding one noxious weed in one national forest. But each campaign should be large in vision: that is, we need to try to contribute to solving very large, systemic, national and global problems through our campaigns, even if they are local. For instance, a campaign about pesticides in schools needs to contribute to solving the larger problems of how our public educational institutions are organized; how children see their bodies in relation to toxics (e.g., one third of the girls in an elementary school in which pesticides are halted will be smoking by the time they are in high school); how corporations influence what happens in our schools; our right to know; the problem of our whole society using toxics which don't have to be used.

It isn't that we need to talk about all those problems in our campaign, but the language we use in our campaigns, the methods we use, and the outcomes we're seeking, should fit in with what needs to be done globally. "Think globally, act locally."



2. Whenever possible, our campaigns should focus on changing the rules.

For instance, we can try to get pesticides like the sulfonylureas, or atrazine banned or highly restricted, but those are almost fruitless campaigns within the current cost-benefit rules which EPA developed and operates under. Pesticides are registered for use under a cost-benefit analysis - that is, if company profits exceed the value of our lives, then the pesticide must be registered. That is an immoral and scientifically bankrupt rule - and it needs to be changed.

A coalition campaign within Massachusetts, for instance, is working to install the precautionary principle as state policy for children's health (and hopefully, eventually, for the health of all ages and species).

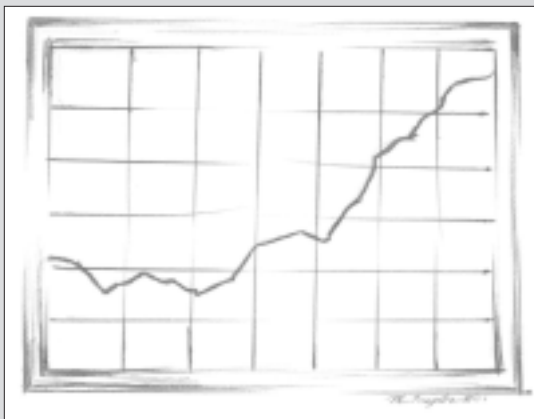
3. Our campaigns should have positive, feasible goals that connect up with the way almost all people believe.

We will always be outspent in our campaigns, and we will always be misrepresented. Therefore, to win, we need to be connecting up with something that runs strong and deep with most citizens. For instance, "We shouldn't pollute children if we don't have to;" or "We shouldn't use our streams as industrial wastebaskets if the companies don't have to."

When Eugene, Oregon citizens undertook an initiative campaign to establish a comprehensive reporting system by manufacturers regarding all their inputs and outputs of hazardous chemicals, we knew that in survey after survey (locally, nationally), 90% of American citizens believe they should have the right to know what toxics are being used and released in their community. Our campaign hooked up with that simple message, and though we were outspent and the mayor, City Council, newspaper, and business groups opposed us, we won 55% to 45% (see www.ci.eugene.or.us/toxics).

4. Our campaigns should simultaneously address environmental care, social care, and democracy.

When we plan our campaigns, we need to consider people, workers, children, trees, birds, fish, and participant de-



The Precautionary Principle

The most comprehensive definition of the precautionary principle was spelled out in a January 1998 meeting of scientists, lawyers, policy makers and environmentalists at Wingspread, headquarters of the Johnson Foundation in Racine, Wisconsin.

“When an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.”

Key elements of the principle include taking precaution in the face of scientific uncertainty; exploring alternatives to possibly harmful actions; placing the burden of proof on proponents of an activity rather than on victims or potential victims of the activity; and using democratic processes to carry out and enforce the principle - including the public right to informed consent.

mocracy in both our processes and campaign goals. If we take care of people and not our other relations, we are simply digging ourselves into more alienation from the world in which we are embedded. If we take care of fish and birds and little children, but don't pay attention to people who are trying to make a living, we end up at cross-purposes with a basic need in our society to work. If we are not inclusive in our campaign, and if we want to direct the campaign without input from lots of people - we contribute to a crippling of democracy.

5. We need to intend to win.

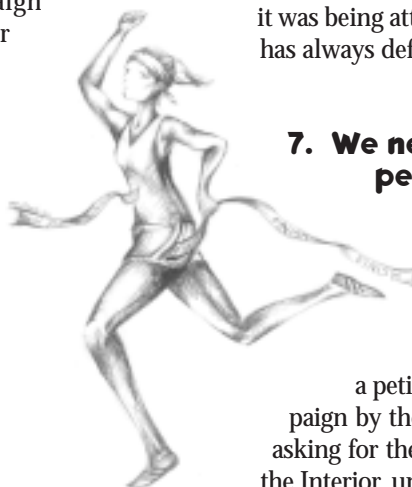
We will design our campaigns very differently if we are absolutely determined to win than if we half expect to lose. We have an obligation to win, because our campaigns are for health and democracy and nature,

not for ourselves alone. So we need to do everything possible to win, including careful strategy, accuracy in all information, ambitious fundraising, strong participation by people with all kinds of skills (more about that later), never coasting, etc. We basically have to plan our campaign in such a way that we are addressing the question, “What will it take to be certain to win?”

6. We need to involve unlikely people.

We need to involve youth, business people, city councilors, church leaders, old people, artists, writers, media, local prisoners, whomever. We absolutely HAVE to leave our comfortable, warm circle of environmental activists, and contact others who may care about the issue, but who haven't thought about it; or haven't been approached for how they could help.

We also have to go talk to people who will never support us, but who, after talking with us, will be not likely to demonize us. Let me give an example from that Eugene right-to-know campaign. Near the start of our campaign, I knew that the frontrunner candidate for Mayor, closely aligned with the Chamber of Commerce, was not going to support our campaign. But I phoned him up to ask if we could talk about it. We met for lunch, and he listened to our plans for the law. He surprised me when he said, “Five years ago I would have thought this law was too strict. I don't think so now. We have too many toxics in our environment.” He indicated that he was not going to support it, however, for a technical reason: We were campaigning to have this as part of the city's constitution (charter) rather than as an ordinance. This is because if it were passed as an ordinance, the City Council could alter it, but if it were passed as a charter amendment, the City Council could not change it without taking it back to the public for a vote. However, this candidate said that if he became mayor (which he did), and if our right-to-know law passed (which it did), he would always defend it. He has been true to his word: He has twice testified on behalf of it in the state legislature when it was being attacked by industry lobby groups, and he has always defended it to detractors.



7. We need to have a bazillion ways people can pitch in to help.

The best campaigns are those that can be pitched in to by people we hardly know. The first time I ever helped with any political action (other than protesting the Vietnam War) was when I saw a petition printed in a magazine. It was a campaign by the Sierra Club to get a million signatures asking for the resignation of James Watt, Secretary of the Interior, under President Reagan. I lived in Los Angeles; I didn't belong to the Sierra Club or any other advocacy group; and I had never taken any environmental action. However, this one seemed simple enough, so I set up a card table in front of Safeway (I didn't even know if this

was allowed). While I was setting it up, a man in a car parked nearby was watching me. It seemed to me he was glaring at me. When I finally got my card table and sign and petition and chair set up, he opened his car door, shuffled over in bedroom slippers, and gruffly said to me, "Give me that petition. I'll sign it."

"All right!" I thought. "I can do this!"

We need to NOT burn out people. If we're burning people out, then we're not running our campaign right, because we're not involving enough people to share jobs.

We need to give people very specific jobs that they can feel comfortable doing, and then not ask them to do twenty other things. This is a major failing of campaigns: we often don't figure out a whole hierarchy of tasks - from tasks that take 20 hours a week to tasks that take 20 minutes a week.



8. Thank everyone all the time.

In my town of Eugene, Oregon, I am active with an all-volunteer group, Citizens for Public Accountability. This is an extraordinary group: we have met every week since June 1995; that's six years. That's a lot of meetings, and we do a lot of activities. But we also constantly thank each other, report what each other has done, are grateful for whatever people do. It (and winning our campaigns) keeps us going.

It takes so little time to thank people, and it keeps morale so high.

9. Provide the public with simple answers to every argument the opposition has or might make.

If you can anticipate the arguments that will be used against you, ahead of time, give the public the answers before they even hear the arguments.

Go talk to the opposition and find out what they think of your proposal. Most people cannot help themselves from answering a question, so you will find out valuable information if they answer. And if they WON'T answer your question, you can tell the media they won't answer your question. Asking questions is a win-win strategy. You get answers you can work with; or you don't get answers, and you can work with that.

10. Spread out power.

Have a steering committee; have lots of spokespersons; encourage people to figure out ways to help. Avoid even using your group's name as leader, if the campaign will be more powerful that way. In that Eugene, Oregon

right-to-know campaign, which involved gathering 11,000 signatures, being in public debates, running a six-months' long campaign, we never indicated that Citizens for Public Accountability (CPA) was a leader. We had spokespersons who were CPA members, and some who weren't. We never mentioned CPA; we simply referred to "citizens" working on this campaign, and so that's how the newspapers, and radio and TV talked about the campaign. Likewise, many citizens pitched in who were not at all involved with CPA, because they understood that this was a campaign "by citizens," so they could identify with it.

Why do you need credit, if the point is to win?

11. Be funny.

Your humor should avoid being nasty. Make sure some of the humor is on you; have the humor be a signal to people out there that this is a grand undertaking.

I remember in the 1980s when Greenpeace was part of an extensive campaign in the Great Lakes region regarding persistent bioaccumulative toxics. In their campaign to get the International Joint Commission on Great Lakes Water Quality to address the issue of how chlorine was the root of most persistent bioaccumulative toxics in the Great Lakes, they used a huge banner, which read, "Dow shall not kill."

Once in Australia, I watched a news conference regarding Antarctica put on by Greenpeace. They conducted the entire news conference in penguin costumes, and relayed their message regarding the need for an Antarctic protection treaty from the point of view of penguins.

Both of these instances have remained etched in my mind long after I have forgotten so many other messages and news conferences. It is probably the same with you, if you think back over the years: You probably remember humor.

12. Be accessible so that all kinds of people can see themselves joining your campaign.

The Wilderness Society of Australia once undertook a massive, year-long blockade against the construction of a dam on the Franklin River. It was ultimately successful, even though road construction began during their campaign, even though hundreds of citizens were jailed. But one thing The Wilderness Society insisted on for their spokespersons: Always wear a suit. Hold news conferences in a suit; get thrown into the river in a suit; get carted away in a suit. Why? They wanted people who watched the campaign to identify with the campaigners, to understand that these were people like them. They

wanted to make it easy for people to join the blockade. And it worked. Old women were being thrown in the river, business people were being thrown in the river. Ultimately, the party in federal power fell over the Franklin Dam issue, and the dam was never built.

Thus, I would suggest that you never isolate yourselves by your clothes, or knowledge, or righteousness. You want to be seen for what you are: a person who cares about the future, children, etc. Act on the assumption that everyone cares, and more of them will believe that they, too, can help.

13. Have great art.



Never underestimate the power of superb art, superb posters. A campaign to end nuclear power in Oregon had a poster I still see on people's walls – it was great art.

The logo for our Eugene right-to-know campaign was roughly a fish with a human face with a downturned mouth and an "X" for its eye. It was a black fish on a yellow background. The simple

slogan was "Ignorance is toxic." We used that art and slogan on everything - bumper stickers, lawn signs, buttons, and ads. Thus, with not much money, we looked like we were everywhere, and the art became immediately recognizable.

Some months after we won, a lobbyist that had been hired by the Chamber of Commerce to oppose our campaign confided to one of our activists that when she saw our logo, she knew she was going to lose.

14. Do your whole campaign without ego.

The point is not your organization or you. The point is winning for the Earth and its living beings. So ego should have exactly zero to do with our campaigns. To the extent that it helps to be essentially invisible, do it. Who cares if some politician who jumped on the bandwagon at the last minute gets credit? Just make a big deal of thanking the politician. The Bamako Convention of African countries, which forbids other countries to pay (bribe) African countries to accept their hazardous waste for disposal, was largely written by Greenpeace. Their name never appeared in connection with it.

If the campaign depends on you being recognized, you're doing it for the wrong reason, and it isn't being run right.

15 Steps to Winning a Campaign

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4. Our campaigns should simultaneously address environmental care, social care, and democracy.
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7. We need to have a bazillion ways people can pitch in to help.
8. Thank everyone all the time.
9. Provide the public with simple answers to every argument the opposition has or might make.
10. Spread out power.
11. Be funny.
12. Be accessible so that all kinds of people can see themselves joining your campaign.
13. Have great art.
14. Do your whole campaign without ego.
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Life is too short to be all wound up in anger and tightness and finger-pointing. If you lose a round, but have had fun, then you'll be around for the next round. If your campaign plan sounds like drudgery, re-do it until it has some grand fun in it. Your campaign then will not only add years to your life, it will be attractive to others.

And that's 15 points, and so I'll stop there. Have fun. Win!