

Honing the Message in Washington DC



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The public messages about refugees and migrants have been a battle ground in the policy debate on both sides of the Atlantic. A Migration Learning Exchange was hosted by America's Voice to tap into the US experience. This was an exercise in two halves – hearing from people affected by existing policies and sharing the concerns of advocates who are engaging with decision-makers. The conclusion? Well the message is important, but so also are the messengers.



PUTTING THE MESSAGE IN CONTEXT

Frank Sharry, CEO America's Voice, reflected on the experiences of the modern immigrant rights movement in the US. It flip-flopped through periods of legislative break-throughs, underpinned by advocacy and coalition-building, to periods of fear and retrenchment. The roller-coaster from 9/11 to the defeat of the Kennedy-McCain reform bill in 2007 is still remembered with a shudder. Sharry fingered the importance of a reflective seminar after the 2007 defeat to allow activists and advocates to acknowledge the hurt and take stock. The result was six key take-aways –

- (i) The importance of appropriate research and 'killer facts';
- (ii) The crucial contribution of grassroots organizing and authentic voices from the refugee and migrant community;
- (iii) Effective voter mobilization to win power;
- (iv) The need to identify and recruit 'unusual allies';
- (v) Strategic litigation to stop anti-immigration State laws; and
- (vi) Effective communications strategies



America's Voice (www.americasvoice.org) focused on communications strategy, working with other organizations to position immigration reform as a vote winner. The Latino vote was recognized in the 2012 Presidential election, just as young undocumented refugees were mobilizing to put their case loud and clear to President Obama. Two years earlier, 2010, activists had rallied over 250,000 on the streets calling for reform. Six years later immigration is one of the key issues in the current presidential election.

IT'S ALL ABOUT POWER, STUPID!

Communications, the MLE delegates were told is 'the tip of the spear, not the silver bullet'. It is essential to speak to people who are the waverers - uncertain where they stand on the issue - while simultaneously rebutting the arguments of opponents and reinforcing the commitment of advocates. This requires building power – both political and moral. Americans are up front about building power. Todd Schulte, President, FWD.us (www.fwd.us), which links new technology with immigration reform, is upfront in saying – (a) We do politics; (b) We pick fights where we can make a big impact; (c) We seize opportunities; and (d) We work with allies from both sides of Congress. No weasly words there! The question Todd poses is 'What's going to move the voters?'



Angie Kelley, Executive Director, Center for American Progress Action Fund/Center for American Progress (www.americanprogress.org) agreed. It is important to build trust and confidence with policy makers in order to achieve an alignment between political power and policy debate. The approaches adopted are eclectic, including seminars, research papers, one-to-one engagement and the essential flow of regular press statements. Timing can be everything if the aim is to influence the accepted narrative. Engaging with political decision-makers needs an understanding of power and its deliberate cultivation; but equally, the immigration reform movement needs to believe in, and foster, its own power to effect change.



*‘What’s going to
move the voters?’*

GET THE BASICS RIGHT


“If your advocates don’t carry the message then you don’t have a message”, declared Celinda Lake, a leading Democratic Party strategist (www.lakeresearch.com). In framing messages attention has to be paid to the activist base; the persuadables; the shifters and the opposition. Remember the activists, she stressed – *“Our side has lots of places to go – like home!”* Celinda recommended listening to immigration advocates, but also ensuring that the message resonated. When an advocate was asked to explain immigration to a child their response was that ‘people move’. That chimes with US culture and experience.

It was argued that people are rarely moved by ‘the facts’ if the evidence presented doesn’t fit what they already believe. Speaking to values and the heart is more effective. This means double-checking words and labels used. ‘Undocumented workers’ (bad) can also be ‘aspiring citizens’ (good); ‘Illegal aliens’ (bad) can be ‘New Americans’ (good); ‘Reform the immigration system’ (bad – because it suggests that something needs to be reformed) can be ‘Create an immigration process’ (good); and ‘Rule of law’ (bad) can be ‘Freedom’ (good). In the USA, the term ‘refugees’ tested worse than that



of ‘immigrants’. Segmenting the public audience resulted in a framing that immigrants ‘Do jobs no one wants’ tested particularly negatively with African Americans, who responded positively to ‘Contribute to our culture’. Celinda warned communicators to avoid words based on water – floods; waves; a tide; swamp; streaming; etc. The idea of people running to the USA for freedom and protection was acceptable, as were ‘new citizens’ rather than ‘illegals’. There is a need to describe real lived experience and highlight shared values.

The idea of ‘message discipline’ was held to be outdated. Instead message research needs to draw on the insights of a range of different people with the objective of identifying narrative themes that can then be adopted, and adapted, by a variety of organizations. As Celinda concluded – *“Don’t master the message, but find your voice and use your power . . . Figure out what the messages are and here’s the campaign.”*



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Celinda Lake



MAKING THE CAMPAIGN PERSONAL

United We Dream (www.unitedwedream.org) is the largest immigrant youth-led organization in the USA, described as *“The face, voice, heart and soul of the movement”*. Made up of over 100,000 Immigrant youth and allies, UWD has 55 affiliate organizations in 26 states, advocating for the dignity and fair treatment of immigrant youth and their families regardless of their immigration status. David Chung, UWD Field Organizer, explained how in a situation where some 400,000 people are deported every year, there is an urgent need to build solidarity and deploy it in collective action. *“Organizing”,* he suggested *“Is about the journey, it is a process”*. Initial contact is made through schools, local meetings and advice sessions. Relationships are forged, and youth leadership is recognized and supported. United We Dream adopted in your face actions in response to years of being silenced. It played a major role in convincing President Obama to adopt DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), which offered concessions to some 1.2 million young people.

Recognizing that young undocumented people often feel frightened, traumatized and lonely, United We Dream have developed *‘The Story of Self’*, an approach that uses individual personal stories as a means of connection. Greisa Martinez described

the ‘ladder of engagement’, which started with a personal story; invited others to form a collective story; and then identified collective action to effect change. She reminded the MLE delegates that – *“If you don’t tell your own story someone’s going to tell it for you”*. She also suggested that – *“Leadership is taking responsibility for enabling others to achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty. . . stories bring others in”*.

The amplification of immigrant voices has also inspired the Center for Community Change (www.communitychange.org) to support FIRM – Fair Immigration Reform Movement. Jeff Parcher, Director of Communications, explained – *“We had more power in reality than we were actually expressing”*. The trick, however, was to shift from describing problems to proposing solutions. Martin Luther King, Jeff pointed out, spoke of having a dream not a problem. The importance of authentic voices was again emphasized in order to confront community narratives that often distinguished between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants. The work to encourage public understanding of why people move is underpinned by an organizational appreciation of the importance of communication and the use of digital technologies (such as those adopted by RI4A – Reform Immigration for America) to support broad coalition building and advocacy.





BIBLES, BADGES AND BUSINESS

The 'persuadable middle', an estimated 60% of the population, focused the mind of the National Immigration Forum (www.immigrationforum.org) when considering how to win support for progressive immigration reforms. Mark Felzone, Deputy Director, noted the sense of '*Oh my God, what's happening to my world?*' that is evident in many white communities that are facing a loss in political power and socio-economic standing. Coalition politics is supported by the identification and creation of 'unusual suspects' as messengers through the small 'c' conservative networks of police officers, pastors and business people. A combination of enlightened self-interest (*i.e.* "*who will be sitting in the pews in 75 years' time given demographic change?*") and moral persuasion is used to support the Bibles, Badges and

Business for Immigration Concern platform within the Forum, with the Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force being the most active. Consultants are retained to act as 'mobilizers' on an outreach basis, with the Forum offering follow-up training and support. Much of the programme budget for this initiative is dedicated to buying local radio ads for religious leaders to advocate for immigration policy solutions that will help new Americans reach their full potential in contributing to society. Moral compassion, respect for the rule of law and economic growth are the main drivers of message. On the other side of the proverbial fence is the work on voter registration with new Americans; the point was made that every month some 50,000 Latino 18 year olds become eligible to vote, but few are registered.



Effective communications remain high on the National Immigration Forum agenda with acute consciousness of the question – *“What is going to move voters?”* Messages need to be clear with the immigration reform argument broken down into manageable solution-focused demands. Cathleen Farrell, Director of Communications, suggested that there needed to be an awareness about what the political market place will permit at any particular time – *“We don’t want a politician to lose because they support immigration”*, she warned, leading to the argument – *“Fight the fight where you can win it... Pick winnable, but difficult campaigns”*.

The Center for American Progress shared an example of a campaign to convince white dominated trade unions of their self-interest in supporting immigration reform. With the core question of – *“How do you get them to say yes?”* the communications team developed links with the trade union communications officers in order to connect with their audience; took on board the concerns of trade union members; identified bridging messages to the audience in question; marshalled supporting arguments and materials; and engaged in persistent and regular communication. The importance of being proactive rather than simply reactive was stressed, so that in effect – *“We become our own pro-immigration channel”*. Whether seeking to influence trade unionists or politicians, the need for clarity on the questions asked and the solutions proposed is clear.

“You don’t Win if you’re not on the Field!”

Advocacy requires leadership with the ability to communicate a clear message. Christopher Dorval, Dorval Strategies (cdorval@dorvalstrategies.com), held that the public expects leaders to have the confidence and conviction to own an issue. This provides a sense of direction and re-assurance. It is essential to be able to paint a picture of the future; to be able to speak in terms of – *“Where were we? Where are we? Where are we going?”*. Christopher was adamant that leaders had to ‘lean into’ communications in order to establish a vision that invites support rather than resistance and that offers a clear course of action. One meeting should deliver one result, just as each interview should deliver a message that can anticipate people’s fears, driving the positive while rebutting the negative. Timing and sequencing are important as well as knowing the audience, and re-iterating earlier insights, the overall aim was described as to – *“Nail down your base; isolate critics and fight for the middle”*.

It was accepted that leadership will not be crisis free and that in situations of crisis management it is essential to be ahead of the curve. The ostrich head in the sand approach was seen as the worst option. Instead there is a need to identify a proportionate response delivered in a quick, measured and

factual manner on the media (eg. social media, etc.) where the issue emerged. On a good day crises can actually offer opportunities to communicate further by demonstrating that it was an isolated event; providing facts and a clear process to deliver a resolution; and reaching out to stakeholders in an affirmative manner. Whether in a crisis situation or not, a good message is characterized by being forceful, credible, memorable, durable and undeniable. The strongest messages speak both to the heart and the mind, combining subjective benefits with factual details that tap into the values of various audiences. This combines rational and emotional appeals.

And so to message delivery. Get to the point early in the message; use the power of one or two examples to paint a picture; use quotable catch-phrases and repeat them; conclude with a strong and reinforcing finish; and answer questions that are to the point rather than speculative. Care needs to be taken that body language does not distract from delivery. A leader is always on the offensive and takes the time to rehearse repeatedly. It is their sense of conviction, however, that drives message delivery. As Christopher emphasized – *“Optimism and the future beats fear and the past”*.



SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

With the US Congress in the background it is impossible to visit Washington DC without a sense of the importance of politics and the exercise of power. The immigration reform movement jostles with a plethora of lobbyists for other issues to attract attention and mobilize proponents for progressive change. Effective communications is accepted as the sine que non of the movement toolkit, but within a coalition of forces that include activists, advocacy groups, policy thinkers, sympathetic political staffers and immigrant voices. Ben Johnson, Executive Director, American Immigration Lawyers Association (www.aila.org) shared his experience of the importance of different organizations being clear about their specific focus and priorities, while building the trust and relationships necessary to come together to reflect on overall objectives. Time spent with new organizational leaders is an essential investment in helping them to find their place in the change spectrum. Reflection and communication has to be internal to the movement, in order to be coherent and impactful externally. While allowing for diversity of approach the key thread needs to speak to the US public – *“At our best...this is who we are and we should live up to it”*.

LEARNING EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS

Steve Ballinger – *Director of Communications, British Future* – an independent, non-partisan think tank engaging people’s hopes and fears about integration, migration, opportunity and identity.

Fiona Bawdon – *Director Communications/Campaigns, Just for Kids Law* – involved in the Let Us Learn campaign for undocumented young people.

Tim Finch – *Founding Director, Migration Communications Hub* – a newly established initiative to support communications around the positive case for migration in the UK.

Tatiano Garavito – *Migrant Rights Organizer/Activist, HOPE* – currently based in Bristol building capacity amongst young people of colour as part of the creation of a youth-led national network.

Marchu Girma – *Grassroots Coordinator, Women for Refugee Women* – based in London and coordinating the organization’s work with refugee and asylum seeking women.

Saira Grant – *Chief Executive, Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants* – A qualified solicitor with over 15 years of experience in asylum, immigration and human rights law.

Jasper Kuipers – *Deputy Director, Dutch Council for Refugees* – with responsibility for advocacy. Currently Vice Chairperson of ECRE (European Council on Refugees and Exiles), a pan-European alliance of 90 NGOs protecting and advancing the rights of refugees.



Jerry O’Connor – *Communications and Advocacy Manager, Immigrant Council of Ireland* – overseeing a pro-active engagement with the Irish media, political parties and the social media.

Ursula O’Hare – *Assistant Director, Law Centre, Northern Ireland* – currently Chair an immigration sub-group established by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister and representative to the EU Civil Society Platform on Trafficking in Human Beings.

Lilian Seenoi – *Founder Director, North West Migrants Forum* – based in Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland the Forum offers advice and support to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Andrew Stroehlein – *European Media Director, Human Rights Watch* – based in Brussels overseeing the media outreach and strategy in Europe, Central Asia and West Africa as well as advising on public advocacy via social media across the organization.

In addition, the delegation was joined by foundation representatives from Unbound Philanthropy, The Atlantic Philanthropies, Barrow Cadbury Trust, EPIM (Brussels), Migration Exchange and The Social Change Initiative.

PARTICIPATING RESOURCE ORGANIZATIONS IN WASHINGTON DC

- ▶ America's Voice
www.americasvoice.org
Represented by Frank Sharry and Gina Gerson, Washington DC 20005

- ▶ Lake Research Partners
www.lakeresearch.com
Represented by Celinda Lake,
Washington DC 20036

- ▶ United We Dream
www.unitedwedream.org
Represented by David Chung and Greisa Martinez, Washington DC 20036

- ▶ Center for Community Change
www.communitychange.org
Represented by Jeff Parcher,
Washington DC 20009

- ▶ National Immigration Forum
www.immigrationforum.org
Represented by Mark Felzone
and Cathleen Farrell,
Washington DC 20001

- ▶ FWD.us
www.fwd.us
Represented by Todd Schulte

- ▶ Center for American Progress
www.americanprogress.org
Represented by Angie Kelley,
Washington DC 20005

- ▶ American Immigration Lawyers' Association
www.aila.org
Represented by Ben Johnson,
Washington DC 20005

- ▶ Dorval Strategies
cdorval@dorvalstrategies.com
Represented by Christopher Dorval

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The Social Change Initiative
1 Lanyon Quay, Belfast, BT1 3LG
T. +44 (0)28 9023 1310
info@thesocialchangeinitiative.org
www.thesocialchangeinitiative.org