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Nonprofits and Data: A How-To Series #3 - Using Data to Disseminate Information to Engage Community and Policymakers, 2006

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Community Research Institute

Empowering communities with quality research and data

Nonprofits and Data: A How-To Series

3

Using Data to Disseminate
Information to Engage
Community and Policymakers



Johnson Center
at Grand Valley State University

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Community Research Institute (CRI) provides innovative applied research to West Michigan communities. It empowers communities with quality research and data, it generates information that will improve their decision-making process, it forecasts trends for effective problem solving, it measures results and reports outcomes of investments in community change.

CRI gathers, analyzes, interprets and shares national and local data through partnerships with nonprofit and neighborhood groups, and assists local and regional nonprofit leaders with decision making, grant writing, and program evaluation. This is research that makes a difference through a distinctly valuable blend of university rigor and community relevance.

Research for this guide was provided by Cori Scholtens and Korrie Ottenwess.

For additional information visit our website at www.cridata.org or contact us directly by calling (616)331-7585.

Nonprofits and Data: A How-To Series is available to download at no cost at www.cridata.org/publications.



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3

Using data to disseminate information to engage community and policymakers

INTRODUCTION

This How-To Series is designed to demonstrate six ways in which data can be used to enhance the work of nonprofit organizations and community groups. These include using data to:

- 1 Support Grant Applications and Other Funding Opportunities
- 2 Monitor Trends and Identify Emerging Problems
- 3 **Disseminate Information to Engage Community and Policymakers**
- 4 Evaluate Progress in Meeting Goals
- 5 Establish Priorities and Plan Programs
- 6 Characterize Disparities Across Sub Populations/Communities

The information contained within each guide has been developed by combining our community knowledge with that of a variety of grant writing and data experts. More specifically, within each series installment, you will find an introduction to the topic, guidelines for using data to achieve the specified outcome, good practices and pitfalls with corresponding examples, and resources to find data.

HOW DOES DATA HELP TO ENGAGE PEOPLE?

Data is a powerful asset in any advocacy effort to promote your cause or make the case for policy change. Data is objective information that creates significant authority for your argument. Thus, data collection and analysis are the keys to effective advocacy.

When you understand how to use and interpret data properly, it:

- Helps persuade others to your point of view
- Guides people to a better understanding of why your issue is relevant
- Describes your issue in a new way
- Convinces others of your solution to the problem ¹

Any advocacy effort must be based on reliable data that supports your case. Once a solid foundation of data has been established, it can be used in various ways, including written reports, in testimony prepared for policy makers, or for news releases. With very few exceptions, the advocacy statements prepared by the twelve most influential organizations in 1997, as rated by Congress and the presidential administration, had a foundation of facts and data drawn from sources such as government agencies, universities, and studies by other nonprofits.² These groups understood that using sound data was critical for advocating their case.

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING, ANALYZING, AND PRESENTING DATA IN SUPPORT OF ADVOCACY EFFORTS

“Data is a powerful ally to any advocacy effort because data is viewed as objective information...numbers add powerful clout to your argument.”³ Before your organization begins the task of data collection, there are some basic questions you need to ask.

What is the specific issue towards which you are directing your advocacy efforts? Over 20 years ago, Stan Holt, the director of People Acting through Community Effort (PACE), gave three criteria for determining if a problem is a good issue. “It should be immediate, specific, and realizable.”⁴

- ✓ *Immediate* asks you to look at the pressing benefit or harm from victory or inaction.
- ✓ *Specific* encourages you to look at the most explicit examples of both the problem and the solution.
- ✓ *Realizable* refers to calculating your odds at successfully advocating your case.

Who is your target audience? The second question deals with identifying the target audience of your advocacy campaign. Knowing the audience you are trying to reach and their motivations are crucial in understanding what data to collect and how to present it so as best to reach them.

Most often, different arguments are needed for different audiences. For example, the general public may best be moved by a few facts coupled with a “personal interest story” while politicians want a clean, concise argument that contains data with sources and recommendations for change. Service providers, on the other hand, want reliable data that helps them in program planning, budgeting, and evaluation. Remember, no matter your audience, you want data that is understandable, citable to its original source, and directly relevant to those you are trying to influence.

What do you want your data to accomplish? Listed below are some possible outcomes of your advocacy efforts. You may want your data to:

Increase general awareness of an issue. To increase general awareness, choose data that is simple to present and can quickly catch your audience’s attention.

Direct attention to a specific problem. To focus on a specific issue, choose more in-depth data that shows the relevance and implications of your issue and how it is connected to other important topics.

Generate support. When generating support, you want to include data that proves how your suggested solutions will be helpful.

Motivate involvement in the issue. To motivate your audience to get involved, include understandable and relevant data while providing them with ways they can take action.

How do I choose the best data? After you choose your issue, understand your audience, and decide what you want the data to accomplish, you will need to determine how to choose the best data for your advocacy efforts.

First, think about what areas of the issue you want to cover. If you are advocating around education, possible data may include test scores, graduation rates, per-pupil expenditures, and special education enrollments.

Second, determine what data is available in your area of interest. You may not be able to find data at the specific geographic level you are interested in or about your specific population of interest. However, helpful data is most likely available if you are willing to dig.

Third, choose data that creates a persuasive argument to show that intervention will make a difference. Including examples of where such interventions have been successful will strengthen your case and show that the problem or situation is manageable.

What Can I Accomplish? Finally, you must determine what you can really accomplish. The Skillman Center for Children⁵ suggests that you consider the following:

- How many people are available to work on the data project?
- What skills are available to you?
- What experience do you or your colleagues have in working with data?
- What time and money constraints do you have?

PITFALLS AND GOOD PRACTICES

This How-To guide provides many tips on how to reinforce your advocacy efforts with data. Included below are some good practices to keep in mind and several related pitfalls to consider when creating your advocacy campaign. After each set of pitfalls and good practices, an example is provided to illustrate its potential use. Many of these tips were developed from concepts provided by Associated Early Care and Education³ and the Skillman Center for Children.⁵

USE DATA TO QUANTIFY THE ISSUE

Possible Pitfall

Advocacy statements not backed by data.

Good Practice

Data that numerically shows the effects and scope of the issue.

Putting it to use...

Using data helps quantify the scope of the issue you are addressing. The point is to show that your issue does not just affect one or two people in the community, but “62% of the population last year.” (Be specific. Use an actual number or percentage.) Also, use a number for comparison from a previous year or related geographical area. This helps your audience see why the situation you are addressing is not normal and needs action.

For example...

Instead of saying, “Child poverty in America continues to rise,” numerically demonstrate the scope of the issue by using data.

“The number of American children who live in poverty continues to rise, up from 11.7 million in 2000 to over 13 million children, more than one out of every six, in 2004.” (<http://www.childrensdefense.org>)

Take note...

When advocating for policy change, lawmakers and appointed or elected officials want data that numerically defines how your policy issue affects their specific constituents. It is important to provide information specific to their jurisdiction, state, or district.⁶



FOR ADDITIONAL POVERTY DATA VISIT
WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR
WWW.CHILDRENSDEFENSE.ORG

ENGAGE PEOPLE'S PASSION BY INCLUDING BOTH QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA

Possible Pitfall

Only numerical data (quantitative data) that describes the issue in your area.

Good Practice

Numerical data coupled with qualitative data to engage people's passion.

Putting it to use...

"The basis for advocacy is not limited to what we count and the statistics we derive," says Dr. Bassett, Deputy Commissioner of New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.⁷ The most convincing advocacy efforts will combine both quantitative and qualitative data.

Quantitative data is numerically based. It answers the questions: Who? What? When? Where? While the use of quantitative data provides objectivity, it can sometimes seem flat because it does not answer: Why? Examples of this form of data include surveys, demographics, or vital statistics.

Qualitative data is descriptive and answers questions about: How? and Why? Qualitative data from sources such as focus groups, interviews or case studies provide a human element to your advocacy efforts. On the other hand, it is important to remember that this type of data is not representative and can easily be misinterpreted.

"It's essential to engage peoples' passion, whether the issue is the environment, their children's health or social justice. You need to reach people emotionally first, and only then educate them. Hearts first, then minds."⁸ To be most effective, do not limit your advocacy to numbers and statistics. Include stories, anecdotes, or results from focus groups to your communication efforts.

USE RELIABLE DATA

Possible Pitfall

Data from sources that are not in the business of distributing reliable data.

Good Practice

Data from reputable sources.

Putting it to use...

It is imperative to use data that comes from reputable sources. Using one piece of unreliable data could discredit all of your advocacy efforts in the eyes of your audience. Some of these reliable sources include official agencies whose mission it is to collect and process primary data, such as the Census Bureau. Other reputable sources include governmental agencies, nonprofit associations, and academic or peer-reviewed journals. Another place to find reliable data is from secondary sources such as research reports provided by universities or foundations.

At times, a quote from the newspaper or a television program may seem like the perfect addition to your advocacy effort. It is important to be aware that these types of organizations are not in the business of providing objective information but rather are trying to sell their papers or increase their ratings. The data might be accurate, but your audience may see otherwise.

The Best Practice...if you do not know the source of the data or question its reliability, do not use it!

For example...

“According to World News Tonight, heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States “ Instead of citing ABC’s World News Tonight as your source, add credibility to your data by using a reliable and recognized source such as the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH).

“Heart Disease is the number one cause of death in Michigan residents. In fact, there are 71 deaths per day in Michigan* due to heart disease.”
(<http://www.michigan.gov/mdch>)

FOR ADDITIONAL HEALTH DATA VISIT
WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR WWW.MICHIGAN.GOV/MDCH

UNDERSTAND THE COMPARABILITY LIMITATIONS OF YOUR DATA

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Two data sets that are not comparable.	Data that is comparable based on definition and time-frame.

Putting it to use...

When comparing more than one piece of data in your advocacy efforts, make sure they are truly comparable. Comparability limitations may include data that is not gathered during the same time-frame making it difficult to analyze. For instance, one piece of data may be collected yearly while another is reported over three year intervals. Another comparability limitation is when definitions of the data set you are using vary from one organization to the next or may change over time.

For example...

“The 1990 census questions on race and Hispanic origin were changed for Census 2000. Because of these changes, the Census 2000 data on race are not directly comparable with data from the 1990 census or earlier censuses. Caution must be used when interpreting changes in the racial composition of the U.S. population overtime.”



**FOR ADDITIONAL DEMOGRAPHIC DATA VISIT
WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR WWW.CENSUS.GOV**

USE THE MOST CURRENT DATA AVAILABLE

Possible Pitfall

Data that is outdated and old.

Good Practice

The most recent data available from your data source.

Putting it to use...

It will be easier for your advocacy efforts to convince an audience that the issue or problem you are addressing is of concern *now* if the data is the most current information available. Many data sources update their information at regular intervals. Becoming familiar with their reporting schedules will help you choose the timeliest data to support your argument.

CHECK AND DOUBLE-CHECK YOUR DATA

Possible Pitfall

Advocacy effort includes unchecked data.

Good Practice

Data has been checked and double-checked against original source.

Putting it to use...

One piece of incorrect data has the potential to make your audience question your reliability. Before publishing data, check your numbers against the original data source and then have someone else double-check the information again. It does not take a statistician or researcher to use data effectively for advocacy. Be smart and report the correct statistics!

PRESENT DATA IN A SIMPLE FORMAT

Possible Pitfall

Data presented in cumbersome paragraphs.

Good Practice

Data presented clearly and concisely.

Putting it to use...

Data presented as simple rates and percentages is a great way to communicate information so that almost anyone can understand it. When used in long paragraphs, data can be cumbersome and easily lost. Instead, present statistics clearly and concisely in easy to read bullet points, tables, or graphs so your audience can quickly capture the message. Keep graphics understated so the reader does not lose the message in overdone artwork.

For example...

When presenting your message to policy-makers, a single page (can be double-sided) “fact sheet” is the suggested method. The fact sheet communicates a succinct summary of the problem you are addressing with support for your policy initiative. In addition, it demonstrates successful models, suggestions for change, and references in a clear and concise format.

The Center for Health Improvement¹ gives the following suggestions for an effective fact sheet:

- “Summarizes the problem in one or two sentences
- Uses current data and supporting statistics
- Avoids “lying with statistics” or using misleading graphs
- Is written in simple language and is geared towards the audience it is meant to reach
- Is localized (if possible), but also compares local data with state and national figures
- Includes the name, address, and telephone number of a contact person
- Uses headings
- Is no more than one page in length (front and back)
- Includes a professional-looking chart or graph (i.e., bar chart, trend line graph, pie chart)”

INCLUDE DATA EVERYWHERE

Possible Pitfall

Data reserved for specific advocacy efforts.

Good Practice

Data used in communication with all audiences.

Putting it to use...

Data can be used to add emphasis to your point of view with all audiences. Do not limit data use to formal or specific advocacy communication. Instead, use it everywhere to enhance your message to all audiences who hear your organization's voice.

For example...

Using data in a parents' newsletter can help you advocate the importance of family members reading with their children.

"Children who were read to at least three times a week by a family member were almost twice as likely to score in the top 25% in reading than children who were read to less than 3 times a week."
(<http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/parental.html>)

**FOR MORE DATA ABOUT CHILDREN OR LITERACY
VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR WWW.NIFL.GOV**

WHERE TO BEGIN FINDING DATA

The Community Research Institute (CRI) is working to develop a data sharehouse for the Greater Grand Rapids community. The concept or purpose of a data sharehouse is to develop a single integrated system that can support one-stop data shopping.

To begin exploring community data, visit our website at www.cridata.org. There you will find county, city, and neighborhood level data. Examples include:

- Demographic information on topics such as, population counts, poverty rates, race, housing and education from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census
- Crime, housing, and voting data from the City of Grand Rapids
- Data on regional trends including topics such as: Healthy Youth, Healthy Seniors, Education, Civic Engagement, and Community & Economic Development, Arts & Culture, Poverty, and Philanthropy.
- Various reports on topics that include: the status of women in the workplace, barriers to success for entry level healthcare workers, tobacco and smoking cessation programs, violence in Kent County, employee training needs and practices, communities of support for the aging population, and the working poor.

It should be noted that CRI has more data than we can fit on our website. If after reviewing our website, you haven't found what you're looking for contact Gustavo Rotondaro, GIS/Information Specialist for CRI, for additional data.

For more information on using data to support advocacy efforts, please contact, Korrie Ottenwess, Research Manager for the Community Research Institute at:

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Email: Korrie Ottenwess, ottenwko@gvsu.edu
Gustavo Rotondaro, rotondag@gvsu.edu
Web: www.cridata.org

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