PERCOLATOR
CONSULTING

Strategy Guide for Building Your Engagement Pyramid

Introduction

We've developed a strategy process at Percolator to help our clients define engagement in a way that fits with their theory of change. This document is intended to provide an abbreviated, do-it-yourself version of that process.

The strategy process should also help you:

- Build a shared understanding of your mission, strategy, and audiences
- Expose gaps in your organizing strategy
- Encourage experimentation
- Break down departmental silos
- Empower organizers

What is engagement?

Engagement is the process of building and managing the relationships between your organization and the people who help you achieve your mission.

As a mission-driven organization, you depend on people outside your organization for everything from volunteering to advocating to voting to donating.

Some of the things you ask people to do are easy and only take a moment -- signing an online petition online, for example -- while others, such as serving on a board of directors, take much more time and commitment.

The people you interact with have a widely varying set of skills, interests, and capacity to help. They're motivated by different things, and they have varying levels of commitment to your cause and your organization.

An effective engagement organization combines data, technology, and good old-fashioned organizing to lead people into deeper and more impactful roles within the organization. That means making the right ask to the right people at the right time. It means knowing which relationships are the most valuable and spending the time and effort needed to grow and maintain them. It means offering value that's appropriate and commensurate to the roles you're asking people to take on. And it means treating people as individuals, not as lists.

What's the Engagement Pyramid?

An engagement pyramid is a framework for tracking engagement across your organization. This framework builds on ideas from the fields of community organizing, relationship marketing, and fundraising. Fundraisers will see elements of the 'donor pyramid' in what we describe here. Members of the Percolator team participated in the early conceptual design of the engagement pyramid framework led by Gideon Rosenblatt at Groundwire, and that early work serves as the foundation of this guide.

The vertical dimension of our Engagement Pyramid represents the intensity of engagement, with low level, lightweight engagement at the bottom and high intensity, deep engagement at the top. Its horizontal dimension represents the number of people involved. Combine the two and you get a pyramid with lots of mildly engaged people at the base and a small number of deeply engaged people at the top.

At the bottom of the engagement pyramid, communications and relationships are technology-centric and more automated; at the top, they are more personal and labor-intensive. Using technology to automate interactions at the bottom of the pyramid helps us scale engagement efforts to reach lots of people. Websites, web applications, databases, email and social networks are excellent tools to this end.

The upper levels of an engagement pyramid entail a much deeper level of engagement than is typical of most approaches to online activism. That is because automated communications tend to become less effective in engaging people above level three in the pyramid, where personal relationships become increasingly critical to success. Websites, email and social networks still play an important role in offloading certain types of more routine communications, but above level three there is no substitute for the human touch. Relationship management databases can help organizations manage engagement across their constituencies; focusing resource-intensive personal interactions on their most important and/or promising people.

A well-designed engagement pyramid becomes a powerful indicator of your overall organizational health and success. As you move people into and up the pyramid, they're taking on more and more valuable roles. The better you are at moving people up the pyramid, the more successful you should be as an organization.

But the engagement pyramid only works when the data behind it is current, accurate, and accessible.

Strategy Process

This strategy process was designed to ensure you have engagement definitions that are comprehensive, appropriate, actionable, and embraced by your entire staff.

The process is comprised of three steps that build on each other:

1. **Theory of Change**: Defining what your organization is trying to achieve and the mechanisms you use to get there.
2. **Audiences, Roles & Value Propositions**: Defining the audiences you need to engage to achieve your mission, along with the roles you need them to take on and the value you offer them in return.
3. **Engagement Pyramid**: Organizing the roles you need your audiences to take on by their level of engagement.

We recommend working through each of these steps in all-staff working meetings and that you project or otherwise share notes as you work. This helps ensure everyone is on the same page and invested in the results.

Remember that every person in your organization will be responsible for putting your engagement strategy to work. For that reason, we strongly recommend including the entire staff in the working meetings whenever possible. If your staff is too large for that to be practical, make sure you have representation from each department or team, and build in opportunities to gather feedback from people who can't participate in the meetings.

We estimate about 12 hours of working meetings to complete the full process, plus time between meetings for the facilitator to clean up documents and handle scheduling. When we do this with clients, we generally schedule 2 day-long meetings with follow-up over the course of three or four weeks.

If you don't have the time or resources for the full strategy process, an alternative is to skip Step 1 (Theory of Change) and go directly to Step 2 (Audiences). While there are many benefits to completing a theory of change (read through the next section for details), it's also the most time-intensive part of the process. You can probably complete Steps 2 and 3 in two three-hour working meetings. If you do skip Step 1, we highly recommend completing it as soon as you can.

If possible, we recommend asking someone from outside the organization to facilitate the strategy process. A process like this offers a valuable opportunity to challenge organizational assumptions and strategies, and that can be difficult for someone inside the organization. It's often easier for someone with an outside perspective to ask questions that lead to good conversation and new insights.

Step 1: Creating a Theory of Change

What is it?

A theory of change is a roadmap, or logic model, which outlines a chain of events starting with your campaign activities or program work and leading, plausibly, to your desired vision. It helps you to most efficiently use your resources -- money, staff, political capital, etc. -- to reach your goal.

A theory of change allows you to evaluate your assumptions and related strategies and tactics, so you can shift away from what's not working and focus on or expand what is working. And it ensures that staff and campaign/program partners are on the same page about what you're trying to accomplish and how.

Without a theory of change you can actually do harm to your cause. It's like traveling somewhere without a map. Even though you know where you want to end up, if you don't know the path and end up pointed in the wrong direction, going faster only puts you further from your goal.

When you spend your limited social and political capital asking supporters to fund or work on the wrong tactics, you not only waste their money and time, you waste their passion and you lose credibility. You may never get another shot at the resources you've misspent.

A theory of change can come in many shapes and sizes, and we're not zealots about following a specific format. However, if your theory of change is going to be a useful guiding document, there are three rules to follow:

- It has to be believable
- It has to be achievable
- It has to be testable

Example: Friends of Tiny Creek

Friends of Tiny Creek (FoTC) is our go-to fictional advocacy organization. Friends of Tiny Creek works in a small town near you to protect the Tiny Creek watershed, a last bastion of wildness in the area which is under threat from new development.

Tiny Creek's vision is clear and straightforward:

Tiny Creek is protected and can be enjoyed by this and future generations.

For Friends of Tiny Creek to achieve their vision, they need three conditions to be true:

1. **The water in Tiny Creek is clean**
2. **The Tiny Creek watershed is legally protected from further development**
3. **Trails through Tiny Creek Park are repaired and maintained**

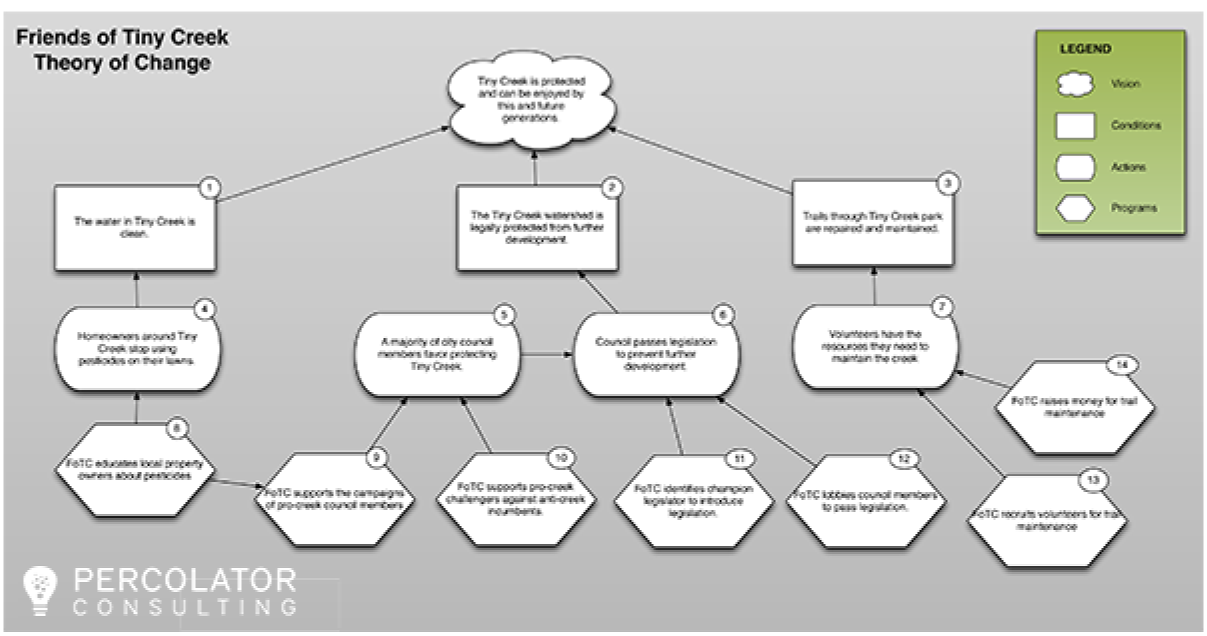
Note that each of those conditions is clear and testable -- they are either true or false.

All of FoTC's program work can be directly connected to one or more of these conditions in their theory of change:

- They run education campaigns to teach local property owners about the effect of pesticides on the stream.
- They have an advocacy program to lobby the city council for new zoning regulations.
- They have an electoral program to support pro-creek city council members.
- They have a stewardship program that recruits volunteers and raises money to maintain trails along the creek.

FoTC's theory of change defines what audiences they need to reach and what they need those audiences to do. We'll be using that information as we move to the next step and for our Engagement Pyramid definitions.

Click the image below to see a full-sized version of FoTC's Theory of Change.



FoTC's theory of change also highlights metrics the organization should be tracking to measure their success. Each arrow connecting a campaign to an action or condition should be measurable in some way. For example, how many articles about pesticides have been in the local newspaper? How many pro-creek city council members won in the last election? How many volunteers are signed up for trail maintenance? How much of the trail is currently repaired? How many homeowners around Tiny Creek have signed pledges to stop using pesticides?

These metrics will be valuable not only to improving their program work, but also in creating meaningful reports to donors and volunteers.

Friends of Tiny Creek has a very simple, straightforward theory of change. In large part, that's because they are a figment of our imagination and escape a lot of the complexities of real life. But that kind of simplicity is also something to aspire to -- working on your theory of change is a good time to ask hard questions about which of your programs are truly central to achieving your vision and which ones have outlasted their benefits.

Facilitation Notes

- As with the rest of the strategy process, make sure you have as much of the staff represented as possible. Doing this live, with everyone's participation, ensures that people are invested in the final result.
- Your end goal, or vision statement should be at the top. You'll know that you've got the right language if it describes a world where your efforts (at least related to the mission of your organization) are no longer required. You can then write a novel, spend your time painting landscapes, or take lots of naps.
- We recommend starting from the top (with the vision and conditions) and working your way down to campaigns and programs.
- If all of your participants are in the same room, we recommend working on a large whiteboard, or putting each box on a piece of paper and taping them to the wall. Assume you will be doing a lot of rewriting and moving things around.
- If some people are participating remotely, we recommend building your theory of change using online software so that everyone can see what's happening. An easy, free way to do it is with a Google Drawing document in Google Docs. It's easy to learn, and anyone you invite to share the document can see changes as you make them.
- Each box should be clear enough that you can easily define what you would measure to determine success.

Step 2: Cataloging Your Audiences, Roles & Value Propositions

What is it?

The Audiences, Roles, and Value Propositions worksheet is a catalog of all the people you count on to achieve your vision. We call those people “audiences”, and they are the reason you’re building an engagement strategy.

Along with identifying your audiences, you also want to identify the specific actions you’re asking them to take – we call those “roles”. Roles are discrete jobs that you may ask a given supporter to take on -- anything from donating money to hosting a house party to joining your board. Any given supporter may fulfill a variety of roles.

If you’ve completed a theory of change, cataloging your audiences and roles should be easy, as they should be explicitly or implicitly described in that document.

What’s new is “value proposition.” A value proposition is something you offer to members of your audience that incentivizes their participation. Some value propositions are concrete and transactional (think membership benefits like coffee mugs and discount cards). Others are just as real but less concrete (like “a sense of community” or “the ability to make a difference”).

While value propositions won’t directly impact your Engagement Pyramid definitions, they are central to your engagement strategy. Value propositions are the carrots you use to move people up the pyramid, and this is a great time to talk through them. If you find that you’re having difficulty moving people from one level of the pyramid to another, your value proposition is often a good place to start making changes.

Make sure, as you detail each list, that you’re capturing everything you ever ask anyone to do, and all of the reasons that could possibly motivate them. You’ll be using the “Roles” from this exercise to define your engagement pyramid, so be exhaustive.

Example: Friends of Tiny Creek

Click the image below for a full-sized version of FoTC’s Audience Worksheet.

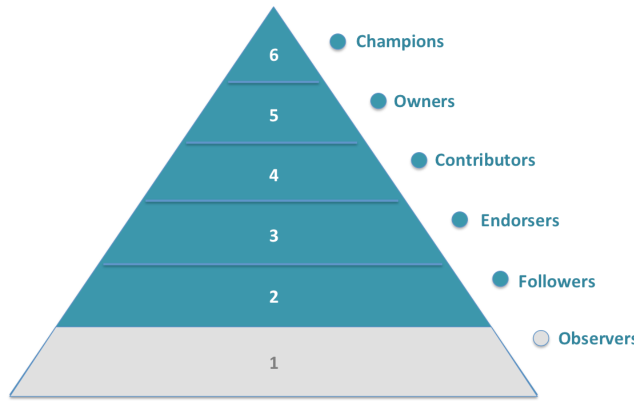
Facilitation Notes

- Be specific in your audience definitions. The general public is not an audience (unless you are Coca-Cola, in which case, carry on).
- Roles will overlap for many of your audiences. That's ok -- it's better to duplicate than to miss something.
- There's a bit of an art to deciding how granular to be in your audience list. For example, are your major donors really a different audience than your monthly donors? Should you consider young people as a separate audience because you have a program targeting them? Our advice is to be as specific as necessary to ensure you're capturing all of your roles and value propositions. If you have different value propositions for monthly members than major donors, they should be separate audiences.
- We use a Google Docs spreadsheet for this work -- they can be shared with and edited by all of your participants, and revisions are tracked.

Step 3: Building Your Engagement Pyramid

What is it?

The final step in the strategy process is creating your Engagement Pyramid. The Engagement Pyramid is a framework for dividing your supporters into segments based on their level of engagement with your organization and how valuable they are in helping you achieve your mission.



The Engagement Pyramid integrates all of your engagement work, from online to offline and from donors to volunteers. Organizations can use it as a way to think more holistically about the range of engagement strategies and tactics they have at their disposal. It also provides a framework for matching these opportunities with those constituents most likely to succeed in carrying them out.

An individual's engagement level is defined by the highest level action they've taken on in the past year. So, for example, if in the last year, a particular person volunteered at an event (a level 3 action), signed up for your email list (a level 1 action) and wrote a $1000 check (a level 5 action), that person would have an engagement level of 5.

In some cases, engagement level may be defined by taking certain actions repeatedly rather than just once. For example, you may decide that someone who volunteers five times is a "Super Volunteer", or someone who signs eight or more online petitions is an "Online Activist".

Our archetypal Ladder of Engagement has six levels, which are outlined in detail below. But your particular organization might require more or less, depending on the complexity of relationships, levels of authority and responsibility, and your capacity to track activities. Six is a good number to start with, but StepUp works just as well with fewer levels and can accommodate up to eight.

Engagement Level Descriptions

(adapted from Gideon Rosenblatt's THE SIX LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT)

Engagement Level 0: Observers

Primary engagement goals	Inspire initial and repeat contact with the organization.
Mindset of person being engaged	Interested in the cause and aware of the organization. Awareness is the major factor. "I care enough about the issue to be aware of your organization's existence, but you haven't given me reason or opportunity to investigate you first-hand."
Nature of engagement	Sporadic, indirect communications.
Communications	Person takes occasional, distracted glances at the organization's work. These indirect communications may be via word-of-mouth, social media or traditional media. Person may visit the organization's website but does not provide contact information, so any direct communication is at their initiative. Communications focus on information sharing and awareness-building.
Action	Deciding to visit organization's website or attend an event.
Examples	Hearing about an organization's work from a friend via email or a Facebook or Twitter post. Hearing about the work through a newspaper article or blog or by attending an event.
Engagement metrics	Website traffic, polling, media impressions.

Engagement Level 1: Followers

Primary engagement goals	Offer value and secure permission to deliver direct, proactive communications.
Mindset of	Understands and is interested in the cause and cares somewhat

person being engaged	about the organization. Attention is the major factor. "I care enough about your work to open my stream of incoming communications to you, but there's no guarantee I'll look at what you send me."
Nature of engagement	Regular, direct communications.
Communications	Person receives ongoing stream of communications focused on information sharing and piquing interest. These updates keep the organization's work front-of-mind and build enthusiasm.
Action	Providing contact information. Reading and watching direct communications from organization.
Examples	Subscribing to an email distribution list, print newsletter or an RSS feed. Signing up on a list at an event. Note that Facebook fans and to some degree Twitter followers blur the lines between levels two and three because the public nature of following an organization on a social network is also a mild form of endorsement.
Engagement metrics	Email subscribers; RSS subscribers; Twitter followers; Facebook fans; Attendees of a free event.

Engagement Level 2: Endorsers

Primary engagement goals	Earn enough trust to secure endorsement of the work.
Mindset of person being engaged	Believes in the mission and trusts the organization enough to approve the use of their name to endorse the organization, its programs or a particular campaign. The endorsement may also include a nominal financial contribution. Trust and time are the major factors. "I endorse the work you do, but it is your work and I'm not prepared to invest a significant amount of my time/money in it."
Nature of engagement	Straightforward, single-step, transactions.
Communications	Regular, direct mass communications to inform and pique interest, punctuated by concise, persuasive communications leading to a

	simple call to action.
Action	Simple, quick acts with little risk or investment of resources; commitments limited enough to be made on impulse rather than through real deliberation.
Examples	Examples of endorsement include: low-level membership pledges, forwarding email, and petition signing.
Engagement metrics	Number of members or other lower-level contributors; public endorsers (such as petition signers); supporters who contact officials, Attendees of a paid event.

Engagement Level 3: Contributors

Primary engagement goals	Deepen commitment to the mission and the work.
Mindset of person being engaged	Contributes significant time, financial or social capital to the organization. Time and money are the major factors. “I’m committed to the work and will pitch in to help, but don’t expect me to assume responsibility.”
Nature of engagement	Multi-step assignments.
Communications	Regular, direct mass communications to inform and pique interest, accompanied by periodic, personal email, phone calls or face-to-face meetings to share information and coordinate on a discrete project or request for funding.
Action	Contributions are not made on impulse – only after due consideration. Habitual contributions may feel like impulse decisions (writing the year-end check or coming into the office regularly to volunteer), but they are part of a larger pattern of behavior indicating a considered investment in the mission. Significant contributions of time and resources become an expression of values and beliefs. The best volunteer jobs are concrete assignments with clearly defined deliverables and good staff oversight.
Examples	Writing or reviewing organizational marketing materials, making personally significant donations, attending public hearings, or

	joining a committee or task force.
Engagement metrics	Number of regular volunteers; Number of regular activists; number of mid-level donors; number of content contributors or collaborators.

Engagement Level 4: Owners

Primary engagement goals	Instill and develop a sense of responsibility for the mission.
Mindset of person being engaged	Fully invested in the mission and success of the organization, a program or campaign. Mission-relevant knowledge and skills are the major factors. "You can count on me to figure out what needs doing and to be responsible for getting the job done in the way that makes the most sense."
Nature of engagement	Ongoing, collaborative actions.
Communications	Regular, direct mass communications to inform and pique interest, accompanied by regular personal email, phone calls and face-to-face meetings to collaborate on ongoing projects. Flow of communication is two-way and conversational.
Action	Investments of time, financial and social capital increase, often blurring together. These investments confer a sense of ownership in the organization's work. Financial support is significant enough that the person feels warranted in their desire to shape the work and understand its impact. Contributions become a creative outlet and expression of passion. People begin using the term "we" instead of "you" when talking about the organization.
Examples	Deep volunteer involvement in a program or board membership; testifying at a public hearing; blogging or otherwise publishing about the organization's work.
Engagement metrics	Metrics become less quantitative, more subjective, but may include board members, major donors, etc.

Engagement Level 5: Champions

Primary engagement goals	Develop leadership skills and opportunities.
Mindset of person being engaged	Serves as a champion and leads others in carrying out the organization's work. Leadership skills are the major factor. "I'm willing to lead us in carrying out this mission."
Nature of engagement	Ongoing acts of leadership.
Communications	Regular, direct mass communications to inform and pique interest, accompanied by regular personal email, phone calls and face-to-face meetings to support the mission. Communication flow is often initiated by the person, rather than the organization.
Action	The engaged becomes the engager, so deeply committed to the mission they now focus their energy on engaging and leading others in the work. Focus of energy broadens from campaigns and programs to a more holistic mission focus.
Examples	Community organizers who find and development talent in their community; board members who take on real governance and leadership of the organization.
Engagement metrics	Metrics become less quantitative and more subjective -- the people in this level are the most important to your organization.

Facilitation Notes

- It's critical that your Engagement Pyramid definitions are specific. A new employee should be able to look at your pyramid and use it to assign levels to activities they're organizing.
- For many organizations, the Engagement Pyramid is the first time they'll be directly comparing the value of different types of volunteers to donors. It's often helpful to think about how much you'd be willing to pay a volunteer to fill a particular role -- that will help ensure they're on the right level.
- There is often tension between the concepts of "engagement" and "value." Aunt Millie, who's on a fixed income and makes a monthly donation of $5, may be more emotionally and spiritually engaged than Mr. Burns, a millionaire who writes a $1,000 check. But the $1,000 is still more valuable to carrying out your organization's mission.

We strongly recommend that clients err on the side of value -- not because we're heartless cretins, but because from an organizational perspective, it makes more sense to invest your limited time and resources into ensuring the millionaire writes another $1,000 check. That's not to say you shouldn't shower Aunt Millie with love -- but you shouldn't do it at the expense of major donor retention.

- Whenever possible, define people by the roles they are taking on, and not their characteristics as people. For example, "VIP" is not a role, but "testified before congress" is.