

Public Affairs

Can digital communications revolutionize public affairs?

How the internet influences public affairs work in Brussels

BY JAMES STEVENS

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any of us may do it for a living, but there is still debate about what “public affairs” actually is. Definitions vary. Some use the term interchangeably with “government relations”. The collective wisdom of Wikipedia prefers to equate public affairs with “lobbying” plain and simple. Whatever your definition, one trend is apparent: the scope of what activities are judged to constitute “public affairs” has expanded over the years. One only has to witness the rash of issue advertising

in this and other Brussels based publications, the plethora of policy events in our diaries each day or the number of job adverts that seek a “Public Affairs and Communications Manager” to see this trend at work. Given the nature of Brussels, communicating to policymakers directly through one-on-one meetings will remain the most effective means of getting your message across. This of course assumes you meet the right people at the right time and say the right thing. But is it sufficient to achieve our goals as organizations and what role, if any, should digital play in our public affairs toolbox?

YOU ALREADY DO DIGITAL

The good news is that, for a large part, the internet has already changed the way public affairs practitioners work in Brussels. Gone are the days of receiving reams of faxed amendments from the Parliament. As long as you can know how to point and click, you can find most of the documents you need on the EU institutions websites. EU information has become a commodity that is accessed through one of the largest public websites in the world. As a result, we have more time to concentrate our efforts on gathering political intelligence, conducting outreach and ensuring we have the right strategy to get to our objectives.

In this behavior, we are simply mirroring a wider shift in the way we get our information. When we want to know about something today, we do what everyone else does. We go to a trusted website or we google. Research recently conducted in Europe by Fleishman-Hillard and Harris Interactive has found that not only do Europeans increasingly turn

to the internet for information but such information is more likely to influence the decisions they make than print and broadcast media. This research can be found online at <http://www.fhdigital.net/InfluenceIndex/>. As such, conversations about you and your issues are increasingly taking place online. These conversations can take place with or without you. They will have an impact on public policy, either directly as decision-makers read them, or indirectly as they filter through the media or shifts in public opinion.

POLICYMAKERS ARE NO DIFFERENT

In the use of the internet for research purposes, surveys of policymakers from the US suggest that they are using it just as much as the rest of us. One survey from the National Journal found that around 50% of Congressional staffers use the internet as their primary research tool in the 24 hours before a vote, with 70% of them looking for position papers and 53% looking for tutorials to explain complex topics.

A number of factors suggest that the figures are just as likely to be as high, if not higher, for the European Parliament. Firstly, most assistants are relatively young and therefore more likely to be au fait with the use of the internet as a research tool. Secondly, European Parliamentarians have a much smaller and less experienced staff than most US federal representatives. Finally, the large number of technical issues that pass through the institutions are likely to lead to the need for the most basic information on any given issue.

With this in mind, the presence of your information online, whether on EU policy portals like Euractiv, your own website or your own blog, is a necessary condition for communicating effectively to policymakers. A second condition is of course that policymakers are able to find it. If your information is tucked away on a trade association site somewhere, will it be found by an assistant googling for a specific search term? For key search terms on an issue, both search engine optimization to increase your search engine rankings and search engine marketing to move your information up the “paid for” results should be considered as part of any public affairs campaign.

THE INTERNET CAN BECOME OUR ALLY IN ADVOCACY

Policymakers are also increasingly leading the charge in using the internet to reach out to voters. The presidential elections in the US have led the way in terms of using the internet to harvest political donations

and find and motivate supporters to take action both online and offline. In a Brussels context, both the Commission and the Parliamentarians are increasingly seeking to use the internet to reach out to citizens. It has a number of benefits. It is relatively cheap as a form of communication. It is also effective, as it enables you to be targeted in reaching out to people that actually care about your issues. It also bypasses the traditional national media, who often only see the Brussels agenda through the prism of “red lines” and foreign ministers.

These benefits not only apply to the use of the internet by policymakers but could also apply for those seeking to practice public affairs in Brussels. Many of the legislative issues we deal with are of personal relevance to the daily lives of many of our fellow EU citizens. If only they realized it was the EU that legislates on them. On the internet, for every issue there is a self-selecting group of citizens that gravitate towards certain sites, blogs and Facebook groups. For public affairs in Brussels, the internet offers a cost-effective way of finding and motivating interested third parties to advocate either directly or indirectly towards policymakers, be they organizations or individuals. In a town where issues tend to be the primary focus, such techniques should be second nature to us.

Several campaigns have already sought to use such techniques. The disabled rights lobby and the European Parliament’s oneseat.eu campaign have both collected over a million signatures using an online campaign website, supported by both digital and offline activities to drive supporters to their sites. Such people power may be politically hard to ignore in the context of the Lisbon Treaty provisions on citizens’ petitions, even if the right of legislative initiative remains with the Commission.

While a million signatures may be a noble aim, to be successful in influencing policy an online campaign does not need to gather such a multitude of voices. On topics such as REACH, the NGO community has in the past used postcard campaigns to great effect. An inbox made up of individual contacts from concerned citizens is not something that can be ignored by policymakers who are themselves concerned about their connection with citizens. The nature of the internet should make it possible for all Brussels organizations to harness these views from across the Union, a move which would allow them to supplement what are often dry, factual arguments with the emotional and persuasive weight of “real” people expressing themselves in their own words.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Policymakers are of course influenced by the world around them as much as your one-on-one meeting with them. Expressing yourself online

THE CONVERSATION WILL HAPPEN WITH OR WITHOUT YOU

Search for your issue in Google or Yahoo and see what results are returned. This is the information that Parliamentary researchers and Commission desk officers are finding on your subject matter. Who is talking about your issue or organization in the blogosphere? Try typing in your issue on www.technorati.com to find out. Blogs are increasingly used and read by those who influence policymakers, such as journalists.

and in the media influences the likelihood that your message finds resonance. As the online world has changed the way we receive information and understand issues, so digital should become part of our toolbox of public affairs tactics.

There are a few barriers to overcome before you can go beyond “having a website” and use the internet to its full potential in your public affairs activities. Firstly, you should not be afraid of your lack of technical knowledge. For certain, most of us are more au fait with Parliamentary procedure than terms such as “blogs”, “RRS aggregators” and “social media”, but at heart the principles behind online communications are little different from other forms of communications, including public affairs. Secondly, we should stop making an artificial distinction between “public affairs” and “communications”. Public affairs is at its heart communications towards policymakers to influence policy. The trend of integration needs to continue and public affairs practitioners should consider digital as part of their day jobs.

If we can integrate digital into what we do, there is a real world of opportunity for us and our organisations. Firstly, it is one of a number of tools that can help us all move beyond reacting to legislation already in the process to thinking about how to shape the policy debate to come. Secondly, by helping us to make this shift, we can move closer to other communications colleagues and become integrators within our own organisations. Finally, it can help us succeed in public affairs more often, by ensuring that our message is found in the place where all decision-makers are increasingly looking for their information. ◀

EU ONLINE GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS

www.1million4disability.eu

The disability rights lobby collected 1 million signatures for action by the European Union on discrimination

www.oneseat.eu

Despite a million signatures online for this campaign, certain Member States continue to say “non” to a move to one seat for the European Parliament

www.whodoicall.eu

Bloggers Jon Worth and Jan Seifert launched a website, blog and Facebook group to argue for one individual to be both EU Commission and Council President

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