



Independent Courts Toolbox™

created by The Constitution Project's
COURTS INITIATIVE



Blueprints for Action

General Strategic Plan

All campaigns, regardless of the cause, need to invest a bit of time in creating a strategic plan. Whether your organization is focused indefinitely on the issue of judicial independence, whether you want to conduct a short-term public education campaign, or whether you are working with other organizations on a coordinated effort, a strategic plan can help. It will provide you with an assessment of your strengths, weaknesses and resources; help you to develop an effective message; and enable you to target it effectively. Without it, your campaign can become improperly focused, disorganized, and over-extended.

There are several elements that are common to all strategic plans.

I. Positioning

Your campaign needs a strategic statement of, ideally, one sentence and certainly no more than two that describes who you are and what you do, and that differentiates you from other similar efforts. Sound impossible? It's not. The exercise will help you to reduce your organization or campaign to its essence. Once you have created it, commit it to memory, attach it to all your promotional materials and press releases, and above all, let it guide you in avoiding distraction from your main purposes.

Example: The Judicial Alliance (fictitious) is an Ohio-based membership organization that works to educate community journalists on the importance of judicial independence and is the oldest organization of its kind in the country.

II. Critical Audiences

Determine who your critical audiences are for your messages. They could be the media, elected officials, corporate executives, affinity groups, trade organizations, the general public, etc. In short, a critical audience is the public or any sub-group that needs to hear your message in order for you to effect change. Once you have a list of them, prioritize them. This will help you in developing effective messages and the best conduits for delivering them.

III. Opposition

Determine who comprises your most formidable opposition. Know how they operate. Know their strengths and weaknesses. This will help you develop a tactical program for conveying your messages and blunting theirs.

IV. Message

Once you have your positioning statement and know your critical audiences, develop messages that are compatible with your strategic statement and ones that will resonate with each of your critical audiences. It's not easy to form these in a vacuum, so, if possible, test your messages through research and the utilization of focus groups. Polling research has shown that messages relating to the protection of the Constitution, the protection of individual rights, and the right to a fair and impartial trial are most effective in promoting judicial independence.

V. Resources

Assess your resources. Determine the level of financial commitment your organization can make in promoting judicial independence. Assess non-financial resources: availability of prominent individuals for speaking and promotion, volunteers, shared resources of affinity groups, personnel skills, equipment (computers, fax machines, phones), etc. An honest assessment will give you a good idea of what you can reasonably accomplish and how to prioritize your activities for the greatest impact. If resources are tight, consider forming alliances or coalitions with affinity groups.

VI. Reaching Audiences

Materials: Determine what materials you will need to effectively convey your message and accomplish your mission. These will probably include stationery, brochures, issue backgrounders, fact sheets, credible outside research, graphs, charts, tables, bumper stickers, etc. These do not have to be expensive glossy items. In fact, in some cases, a glitzy, deep-pockets image can work against you. Better to appear the David than the Goliath.

Tactics: You need to reach your audiences on the "highways" they travel. Therefore, you might consider reaching them through:

- Operation of a web site
- Guest opinion articles or letters-to-the-editor
- Feature articles in newspapers, magazines, and trade publications
- Guest speaking appearances
- Advertising
- Staged special events
- Direct mail
- Door-to-door campaigns
- Petitions
- Legislative letter-writing campaigns
- Lobbying
- Educational videos
- School curricula

The final mix of tactics will be shaped by your critical audiences and your budget. The important thing is not how many activities you can engage in, but how effective you can be. If you can only afford one activity, acknowledge it, concentrate your resources and execute that activity well.

A strategic plan will not guarantee success but it is hard to succeed without it. It will help you organize and focus your resources for optimal effect and develop messages that are meaningful and effective.