

The Art of Corporate Campaigns

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You've got to know when to hold 'em,
Know when to fold 'em
Know when to walk away
Know when to run
You never count your money
When you're sittin' at the table.
There'll be time enough for countin'
When the day is done

Kenny Rogers, "The Gambler"

The following is a set of notes for activists seeking to influence corporate behavior as part of a larger social justice strategy. While the notes specifically address campus activists working on corporate campaigns, most of the rules apply to any taking on any public or quasi-public institution. The guiding assumption behind this manual is that institutions like colleges and universities are susceptible to pressure from their constituents, and that these institutions can in turn shape corporate behavior through their economic power. The manual also assumes that most institutions work in fairly predictable ways, and that understanding how and why they work is the key to creating change. Finally, the manual assumes that corporate campaigning is **not** about separating "good" corporations from "bad" corporations, but about identifying specific corporate policies or practices that we want to change and then going after a company over which we have leverage in order to force it to change in order to set a standard for a whole industry.

The Art of Corporate Campaigns presents common campaign problems and provides strategic suggestions. The examples used are all fictional, but it shouldn't be too hard to apply them to whatever campaign you happen to be working on. We hope that you find these notes helpful, and we welcome your feedback. So without further ado: 10 easy steps to victory.

1. Know your objective

Never initiate a corporate campaign until you have decide what objective(s) you want to achieve. In a strong campaign, strategies and measures of progress flow from clear objectives. When those objectives are lacking, your opponents (read administration) will use that fact against you by making you look confused and by channeling you into aimless, dead-end "committees" set up to "examine" the vast complexity of the issues you've raised.

For example, there's a big difference between a campaign designed to force Acme Cleaning Company to give your outsourced cleaning staff a dollar an hour raise, and campaign to raise awareness of human rights abuses in Burma by forcing the campus to end its TastyCola contract. In the first case, you are doing everything in your power to force the company to make a favorable settlement so workers can feed their families. In the second case, you may succeed in raising awareness and pressure even if the campus never kicks TastyCola out and TastyCola never pulls out of Burma.

2. Understand your target

In most cases, the target of your corporate campaign is not the corporation itself, but the administration and/or governing body of a university or other similar institution. This is because, essentially, the corporation just doesn't care what you think about anything. Your university administration generally doesn't care what you think about anything either, but since even private universities are nominally structured as quasi-public institutions, there are more ways to force them to care.

The most common mistake of new activists is to assume that university administrators are regular people who can be persuaded through sweet reason to recognize the role of university policy X in supporting a global system of injustice, leading them to abandon policy X and join us in our struggle. Activists are often encouraged in this belief by administrators—occasionally the president him or herself, but usually people further down the food chain—who are “open to being convinced,” “sympathetic,” or even “in agreement” with their objectives. The sympathy may be genuine, since many college administrators are or were progressive, or it may be a deliberate tactic, but it doesn't really matter either way, since the end result is the same. That's because, whatever their personal politics, university presidents know only two rules:

#1: I'm the boss.

#2: Refer to rule #1.

Imagine that a student walks into the office of the university president to explain how purchasing from local organic farmers can help break the lock of agribusiness over farming, thereby ending world hunger, and urges the president to dump the existing food supplier and purchase only from organic farms. Regardless of what he or she says, the president's gut response is: “That's a nice idea, but you seem to have forgotten a small detail. I'M THE BOSS!” As the boss, university presidents have little interest in any proposal that a) limits in any way his/her capacity to make unilateral decisions about how the school is run; b) encourages students (or faculty or workers) to believe that they have a real say in how the school is run. When you think about it, all this makes sense. After all, if you had spent 30+ years working your way up to the position of president, would you want to hand control of the campus over to a bunch of wild-eyed 19 year-olds?

Two important lessons come out of this analysis. The first is to never take these things personally. Activists who feel betrayed by administrators are the ones who believed them when they said “I really want to see what the university can do about this world hunger issue,” or “if you can come up with an alternative, I'll support it,” or “I'll see what I can do to get the President Smith on board.” Some are just doing their jobs, trying to make the students feel listened to without allowing the school to descend into imagined anarchy. Some really mean it at the time, but have succumbed to bureaucratic inertia before you've left their office. And some may actually make an effort, but they will be shot down in no time unless activists on the outside are raising enough hell to strengthen their hands. The second lesson, is that in order to bring the president and administration on your side, you must convince the president that s/he is more likely to continue being “the boss” by meeting your demand than by opposing you; that is, you must convince the president that if s/he doesn't meet your demand, things will go so badly that the whole “boss” thing will fall apart.

3. Triangulate, triangulate, triangulate

Triangulation is a strategy made famous by Bill Clinton, who is the master of analyzing the competing “liberal” and “conservative” positions and staking out a middle ground. The concept as used here is related but slightly different. First, based on our second principle, it makes sense that, when activists begin campaigning against a corporation connected to the university, the administration will line up (publicly or privately) with the corporation and against the students because it will perceive the students as the problem. The point of triangulation is to figure out how, by the end of your campaign, the administration will end up on your side, opposite the corporation. This may seem contradictory to activists preparing to run an aggressive campaign against the university administration, but it’s important to keep in mind that corporations can come and go, but at the end of the day (unless you transfer), you’re going to have to be able to live with your administration and they will have to live with you. Therefore, it’s in your interest to develop an easy way for them to realign with you and against the target corporation when the time comes. This can be accomplished by a) making them see the corporation, not the students, as the problem; b) making it possible for them to come to your side without losing too much face.

For example, when students begin a campaign against campus fast food vendor “Slop Shop” for its labor practices, the administration will think the students are a pain in the ass. As the campaign escalates, however, while still frustrated with students, the administration will begin to blame Slop Shops for the unrest on campus and think with nostalgia of the days when Burger Monster (which had no labor problems) ran the concession. When Slop Shop finally fails a health inspection and the news hits the papers, creating a huge embarrassment for the university, administrators will have developed a full-blown hatred for the Slop Shop management, and they will also have a perfect (face-saving) excuse for kicking them out. While not all of these elements are under the control of activists, there’s a lot that can be done to make it clear to administrators that their lives would be easier if not for that damn corporation.

4. Good Cop/Bad Cop

Closely related to triangulation is the good cop/bad cop strategy. Cops do it, administrators do it, corporations do it, and they all do it because it works. Unfortunately, when it comes to activism/advocacy/reform, many good and bad cops become so wedded to their roles that they miss the important roles that each plays. Radical, uncompromising activists are absolutely necessary in order to provoke a useful crisis and push the margins of the debate, but they’re often absolutely incapable of entering into dialogue or seizing an opportunity to make concrete gains. More moderate, low-key activists are in a perfect position to build on those gains, but they generally have zero pull without the threat of barbarians knocking on the gates. At the very least, it’s crucial for activists to understand this dynamic and develop strategies that allow it to work. At best, activists develop integrated inside/outside strategies.

These strategies tend to work not only on the campaign target, but also on the target audience (usually the larger student body). For example, if activists are employing tactics that are pushing the boundaries of what students as a whole can support, the reasoned voice of an editorial in the campus newspaper can bring students on board by gently chiding the activists on the one hand, while providing the context for students to understand why the tactics are necessary on the other (“While we feel that the sweatshop activists must make a greater effort to dialogue with the campus administration, the ball is clearly in the administration’s court, and we feel it is time for the president to make significant concessions.”) This is a useful function not only of the main campus newspaper but also student government, a food service committee, or any other institution that purports to represent mainstream student interests.

5. Pitch To The Crowd (a/k/a Bread, Circuses and Revolution)

It should be clear from the above that you are never pitching to the administration because the administration doesn’t care and will eventually be forced to the table by your power, not your message. But you must pitch successfully to the students and/or faculty and/or staff and/or alumni and/or community members in order to build the power and legitimacy needed to win. The objective of this pitching is to accomplish the following: a) get the

activists on your side; b) make sure that none of the major university constituencies (apart from the administration) is actively opposed to the campaign; c) get the majority of your main constituency to at least nominally support your goals.

One of the keys in pitching to the crowd is making sure to **never get too far ahead of your constituency**. For example, it is generally not advisable to do a building takeover during the first week of the campaign, not only because of the “where do we go from here” problem, but also because the tactic will probably alienate the vast majority of students who haven’t bought in to the campaign at any level. Generally, these students need to be exposed to flyering, tabling, educational events, escalating actions, and a pattern of delay and deception on the part of the administration before they are likely to side with activists engaged in militant tactics. If circumstances do require you to get ahead of your constituency, it’s important to work to repair the damage after the tactic is over by reaching out to potentially alienated students, etc.

A second key is to **give people things they actually want**. What they do not want, generally, is guilt, pressure and the weight of the world on their shoulders. What they do want is activities that are fun and, best of all, **free food!** Free food can’t be emphasized enough, especially as a tactic in campaigns against campus food service providers, since good, free food provides a great contrast to bad, expensive food, and because it challenges exactly the sort of exclusive contracts that tend to piss students off.

6. Attack From All Sides

While in most forms of organizing, taking on too many issues tends to dilute your strength and get you into trouble, when it comes to a corporate campaign, the sky’s the limit—as long as you stack the issues up right. The first value of raising multiple issues is that it helps broaden and strengthen support for your campaign. The fact that Agglomerated Bank just busted its clerk’s union will work for some people, but not everyone feels labor issues, and one measly corporate crime just doesn’t work people up the way it used to. But start adding the fact that AB redlines in African-American communities, lends to a company that’s trying to strip-mine native burial grounds, charges students outrageous banking fees and has a board member known for pushing people in front of buses, and now you have a campaign people can sink their teeth into.

The second value of raising multiple issues is that you can use them to short-circuit typical administration tactics designed to delay and confuse activists. This works best when a) each issue is linked to a larger campaign; b) the campaigns present a series of different, but interlinked, demands that could be met by the administration.

What does this mean in practice? Let’s say that your campus food service is owned by a company heavily invested in private prisons, brings in temporary workers outside the organized bargaining unit, buys through a central purchasing system rather than from local producers and serves vegetarian food that, “is bad, and there’s not enough of it.” Within a month, you’ve put together a coalition that includes students of color and prison groups (around the prison issue), the sweatshop group (around the labor issue), the environmental group (around the local purchasing issue) and a food co-op (around the food issue)—and that’s just on the inside. On the outside, you have relationships with a national anti-private prison campaign targeting your dining service, the union that represents the workers and the local producers’ cooperative. Together, you’ve put forward a set of demands that include kicking the company off campus, including temp workers in the contract, buying locally and expanding vegetarian options.

This puts your administration in a bind. First, you now have virtually the entire campus worked up about the issue. And second, you’ve made it very difficult for them to manage you, because each campaign requires a slightly different management tactic and a slightly different excuse for inaction, and advancing one tactic or excuse is certain to undermine another. Normally, for example, the administration might deal with the private prison connection by saying they can’t break the contract, the temp worker issue by shifting responsibility to the food service and the local producer issue by setting up a meaningless “committee” to investigate purchasing apples locally. But they can’t shift blame to the food service company while they’re busy defending the contract, and they

can't put the environmentalists off with a committee when the environmentalists see blood in the water over the labor issue.

To defuse the situation, the administration is forced instead into making concessions in order to split different groups off the coalition. So they sit down with the now thoroughly freaked food service manager and come up with a limited local purchasing agreement with the environmentalists—just enough to get them out of the campaign. The environmental group is no longer a formal part of the campaign, and the administration gets a bit of breathing room, but not much, because the other groups see the concession as proof that victory is within their grasp, and the tactics continue to escalate. Furthermore, while the environmental group is out, many of its members get exposure to the other issues, and they owe their victory to the coalition, so a number will remain active in the campaign on their own. The next to fall is the temporary worker issue, and fairly soon, it's possible to get most of what you want.

7. Don't Believe The Hype

A favorite tactic of administrators confronted with a corporate campaign is to convince students that the reasoning behind the campaign is flawed because it's based on inaccurate information and/or impossible demands. One way they accomplish this is by setting out a series of questions, or informational hurdles, which students must answer and document before any action is taken by the administrations. For example, if students want the Bank of Money kicked off campus for helping to finance "Big Time" Oil's operations in Nigeria, administrators might quite reasonably ask students to provide information about what's happening in Nigeria and document Big Time's involvement. It's important to assemble all of your facts and provide answers that are as simple and accurate as possible, not only to your administrators but also to your constituencies.

Too often, however, students discover that instead of helping administrators understand the issue, they're being subjected to the dreaded "Death Of A Thousand Questions." The simple questions give way to difficult or impossible questions like "We know that BoM was financing the operation last week, but how do we know that they're still financing it this week?" or "Prove to us that the other banks are *not* financing Big Time in Nigeria." The "Death Of A Thousand Questions" can quickly take up all your time and even sap your coalition's will to live, as can its cousin, the "Death Of A Thousand Suggestions" (i.e. Why not focus on Somalia instead of Nigeria? Why not focus on legislation rather than going after companies? The real problem is CashTrust Bank, why don't you go after them?). Not infrequently, the attempt to discredit the campaign also involves unproven assertions about things that administrators "heard" or "read" or "were told," and it's the responsibility of students to disprove the assertions.

At this point, you have three choices. First, you can spend all your energy trying to satisfy the administration's endless appetite for information. Second, you can try to find a philosophy professor to testify that it is logically impossible to prove a negative. Third, you can decide to stand your ground and force the administration to defend theirs. This isn't easy, because we're all used to deferring to older people, especially when they're in positions of authority. Administrators know that, and when talking with activists, they often adopt a paternalistic and superior tone that most of us would never use on our own children. More remarkably, they will take this tone *even when they have no idea what they're talking about*. Despite an extremely poor record when it comes to this sort of applied research, many academics are convinced that they are always smarter and better read than students. You may have reams of documents to back up your campaign, but that won't stop an economics professor from spending two hours on Yahoo and then pronouncing that he or she has conclusively proven you wrong.

There are things you can do, however. First, you can "Just Say No" to unreasonable requests. By all means, provide all the information that's needed and can be reasonably obtained, but don't let them waste your time with pointless and baseless questions. Second, turn the tables by forcing your administration to fully document all of their claims as well as the basis for their requests (i.e. "Do you have any evidence to suggest that BoM has pulled out of Nigeria since last week? If not, then we're just wasting time."). Third, don't get mad—get even! If your college president is talking to you as if you're in Kindergarten, feel free to use the same tone back.

8. Pin The Position On The Administrator

There's another way to deal not only with "Death By A Thousand Questions" but also with many other tactics designed to delay a campaign. Administrators like to send activists on endless quests for information because it delays the inevitable day of reckoning. As long as they're gathering information, the administration has an excuse to avoid taking any stance on the issue, because they know that once they take a position it's guaranteed to both piss people off and limit their room to maneuver.

But you can short-circuit this tactic by trying to force the administration to make commitments on all of the issues that are not in question, and contingent commitments (IF we find out X, THEN you commit to do Y) on all the issues that are in question. For example, let's say that you're trying to get the university to use a minority-owned building contractor, and the university suggests a task force with a vague mandate to look into alternative contractors. You value your time, and realize that you might spend six months going to meetings only to have the university raise totally new objections when it's over. So you start trying to pin them down: "Do you agree that the university should support minority-owned businesses where possible? What are your criteria for hiring contractors? IF we find qualified minority contractors, WILL you promise to switch to one of them?" If your administration refuses to take concrete stands or provide guarantees about what will happen when you've finished jumping through their hoops, then it may not be worth your time, and instead of researching, you should probably be making a public issue of the administration's unwillingness to take the issue seriously.

9. There IS An Alternative & That's Not My Problem

If administrators can't convince students that they've got their facts wrong, they usually resort to claiming that they CAN'T give you what you want anyway because what you're asking for is contrary to the dictates of university policy, state regulations, the iron law of wages, the Ten Commandments or common sense. What they really mean is that they don't WANT to meet your demand because it might be DIFFICULT or simply INCONVENIENT.

Administrators are full of excuses like "we can't break our contract" and "we're not allowed to consider social issues as part of the contracting process" and "we can't afford it." But think about it—a school's administrators would have to be pretty incompetent to allow themselves to get locked into a situation in which they were essentially bound to a given contractor or corporate partner. Colleges and universities tend to be some of the largest institutions in their respective locales, and this gives them a lot of leverage when it comes to negotiating favorable and flexible deals with corporations.

A little independent research will generally reveal that universities have a lot more power than they like to admit. You will probably discover, for example, that your university's "ten-year" food service contract contains a provision allowing the university to terminate the contract with 90-days notice without cause. Even where there is no obvious escape clause, university administrators know more than one way to skin a cat (what do you think they're learning in the animal testing labs?). If you're still unconvinced, ask yourself this question: if it came to light that the contractor was owned by neonazis and trafficked in child pornography, do you think your college could find a way out of its contract?

On a related note, it's important not to get sucked in by administrative guilt trips. "In order to change the coffee served in the cafeteria, we have to form three committees and renegotiate our contract and poll all of the students and it will be a lot of work and very expensive for the college." And...this is supposed to be **our** problem? First, this is just an argument for creating a system to check out contractors' record on social issues before bringing them on board. Second, even when students **do** raise objections during the contracting process, those objections are routinely ignored. Third, most of the "difficulties" are either fictional or part of a bureaucratic process designed **specifically** to prevent students, faculty and staff from doing what you're trying to do right now—have a voice in the administration of the school.

10. Never Threaten

Once a campaign has moved into high gear, many students find themselves toe-to-toe with an administration that seems completely unwilling to enter into serious dialogue. At such times, activists contemplate raising the stakes, and delivering an ultimatum to the university seems like a natural way to do it. In our experience, however, ultimatums (a/k/a threats) are almost always a bad idea.

Suppose, for example, that your little band of thirty students has successfully occupied the office of the President for more than an hour, completely disrupting normal business. The President still refuses to meet your demands, so one of the lead organizers (whose veins are now pumping pure adrenaline) declares “if you don’t sign by noon tomorrow, there will be fifty students in your office and we’ll all be NAKED!”

First, by threatening the administration with an office full of naked students, you allow them to claim the moral high ground by shifting public attention to your threats (rather than the administration’s sleaze), giving them an excuse not to deal with you. Second, you risk undermining your credibility if it turns out that, upon further reflection, you really don’t have fifty students willing to strip in the President’s office. Third, even if by some miracle you can deliver on your threat, you’ve already tipped the administration off to your plans, so they can make sure that there’s extra security available, or that thermostat in the office is set to a cool 55 degrees when you get there.

All of this could have been handled much more effectively if your lead organizer had simply said, “We want you to understand that the students of Springfield University take this issue very seriously, and we will continue making that clear until the university acts to resolve it.” THEN you can “make it clear” with 50 naked students to much greater effect.

11. Beware of Greeks Bearing Compromises

Another tendency of activists faced with an intransigent administration is to seek a “compromise,” especially when victory seems impossible. Let’s say that a formerly student-run bus service at College in the Woods has been outsourced, leading to poor service for students and poor wages for workers. Your coalition has mounted a reasonably successful campaign to get the bus service put back in student hands, but it’s now three weeks before graduation, and there is no way to leverage enough pressure on the administration to win outright. The administration has discussed setting up a Transportation Task Force which will have two administration-appointed student representatives and which will report back in December with suggestions for how to improve the bus service. Worried about leaving school without actually accomplishing anything, the coalition is considering agreeing to the task force as a compromise, while pushing for the student representatives to be democratically elected.

At a time like this, it’s important for the group to ask itself whether what you’re proposing is really compromise—or just capitulation. Keep in mind that compromises require sacrifice from both, and they happen either when there is a strong commitment to working things out together (highly unlikely in this case), or when there is a balance of power that prevents either side from getting what it wants unless both sides agree.

Before agreeing to a compromise, you should ask yourself three questions: what is the administration actually giving up?; why would they be willing to give it up?; what will we give up by agreeing to it?; and what difference will it make if we don’t agree to it? In this case, it’s not clear that the administration is giving up very little, since they have made no commitment to moving toward your demands and given up no decision-making power. Given that it’s the end of the year, they’re obviously not doing it because students hold the upper hand, but more likely because they think it will be a good public relations move. By agreeing to this “compromise,” on the other hand, your coalition has given up the right to escalate the campaign during the fall. And the truth is that the administration

is probably going to create the task force whether or not you agree to it, because it's primarily designed to serve their needs, and they hold all of the cards right now.

The mistake activists sometimes make is to assume that victory, defeat and compromise are the only possible outcomes, and since victories sometimes take a while, they feel compelled to agree to "compromises" that are really just settlements imposed by the administration. Rather than pretending that an imposed settlement is a compromise, activists should treat them as imposed settlements and partial (if totally inadequate) victories. In the case of College in the Woods, rather than the coalition agreeing to the task force, it should say, "The administration has acknowledged that students are unhappy with outsourced bus service, but the task force they propose is completely inadequate, and the lack of democratic student representation is an insult. We don't plan to go away until the administration comes up with a real solution."

This isn't to say that there aren't real opportunities for an honorable compromise, but these are few and far between in the autocratic setting of most colleges and universities, so until you have enough power to force a real compromise, you're probably better off letting the university do what it was going to do anyway—WITHOUT your approval.

12. Wherever They Go, There You Are

The final rule of corporate campaigning is that you should always try to anticipate where your target and your opponent are going and then beat them to it. This requires getting into the institutional mindset and thinking "if I were a college administrator or corporate PR flack, how would I respond to this campaign?" For instance, you may anticipate that, based on past experience and your own brainstorming, your campus food service provider will respond to a campaign to kick them off campus (because of their practice of driving organic farmers out of business) in three ways. First, they will probably try to terrorize workers by convincing telling them that the campaign will cost them their jobs, or possibly even use the campaign as an excuse to downsize their own workforce. Second, they will probably trot out donations they've made to the university's library fund to convince students that they're an asset to the college. And third, they will claim that the company is already in the process of resolving the organic farmer issue.

In each case, if you move quickly, however, you can cut them off at the pass. For instance, to prevent them from terrorizing workers it's crucial to immediately begin talking to workers, to make worker rights an important part of your message, and to warn workers and students that the company has a history of terrorizing and laying off workers to maximize profits. It then becomes very difficult for the company to use the campaign against workers without playing straight into activists' hands. Similarly, the donation to the university becomes a liability rather than an asset if you get out there first with a message that says "the donations are nothing more than a kickback to the administration in return for allowing the company the exclusive right to exploit our workers and students." And finally, if you know the company is going to make misleading suggestions that the situation is about to be resolved, put those claims out and refute them before the company gets a chance (a press release might read "Merry Meals representatives have suggested that the company is already moving to meet the students demands, but according to Sophomore John Smith, "I talked to farmers' representatives last night, and they said there's been no progress. This is just wishful thinking on the company's part."") This forces to the company to come up with a new line since activists have stolen the old one.

So that's it. Simple but proven ways to hold institutions and corporations accountable to their consumers and constituents. Many of the arguments in the manual may seem obvious, but we've found that whether the issue is sweatshops or campus labor or prison investments, the strategic issues raised here come up repeatedly and in very similar forms. Following these principles doesn't guarantee success, they will guarantee that you can give it your best shot. Finally, as the Kenny Rogers quote is meant to suggest, these notes are meant for people who actually want to *win* struggles for social justice, not just go through the motions, and so it's important to learn not only how to speak truth to power (which is often easy, at least for college students) but also how to play the game well.