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Establishing Strength and Lasting Change Through Committed Coalitions

By Sharon Reis

The goals may vary: drawing attention to the crucial need for colorectal cancer screening for everyone 50 and older, convincing people to always wear seatbelts while driving, reducing teenage smoking rates or expanding the scope of health insurance in America. Whether the mission is small or large, committed groups of people or organizations—coalitions—can bring together diverse factions and create lasting change for our communities, our country and our world.

Forming and working effectively as a cohesive coalition is not easy. Some liken it to herding cats—strong, opinionated cats. Yet, in this era of being forced to accomplish more with scarcer resources, coalitions are a powerful way to further your organization's mission or cause. Success is most likely to come to those who follow some time-tested ground rules, learn from past successes, and, in some cases, realize that joining a coalition may sometimes not be a good fit.

“The challenge of a large and complex problem is that solutions tend to be large and complex as well. Individual efforts to tackle the problem are often hampered by resource constraints and narrow approaches,” said Paul Epner, executive vice president, co-Founder and director, **Society to Improve Diagnosis in Medicine** (SIDM). “Coalitions, while preserving individual decision-making and action, can bring diverse stakeholders together, leading to a broad understanding of the problem, alignment on key issues, and synergies

from each organization's individual efforts.”

SIDM recently formed a coalition to address the growing concern of diagnostic errors in medicine, diagnoses that are missed or inappropriately delayed. The issue affects one in 20 Americans but is not yet prominent on the nation's radar screen. All that will change later this year, when the Institute of Medicine, a highly influential federally chartered advisory group, releases what is billed as a landmark report on diagnostic error. The IOM report will bring considerable attention to the issue, and SIDM seeks to leverage that spotlight to publicize the work currently being done in the field and the further effort needed to solve the problem.

“While the biggest value of joining a coalition may vary depending on the goal (education, advocacy, marketing, etc.), the two largest benefits I typically see are amplifying your message and reaping the benefit of combined resources,” said Piper Su, vice president of the health policy division at **The Advisory Board**. “You can reach a larger audience with greater credibility by demonstrating consensus across a significant group of stakeholders.”

So how do you get started on your path to accomplishing big, audacious change? In order to get organizations to commit to joining a coalition, you need to do five things:

1. **Outline a clear statement** of the problem the coalition is planning to address, including the thought process behind forming the coalition and setting its goals.
2. **Draft a consensus statement** explaining

the coalition's purpose, the terms upon which the groups agree to come together and what you hope to achieve.

3. **Clearly define expectations and roles** for coalition members. Do you want them to endorse a consensus statement? Dedicate one staff person to participate in monthly calls? Lend their logo to a web site or share materials with their members or employees? Be sure to set those expectations up front.
4. **Determine how long the coalition will exist.** Will it end once legislation is passed, or after a set amount of time or once a certain milestone has been achieved? The point is that you need to start with an end date in mind.
5. **Conduct message testing with potential coalition members** to gain insights on the coalition's vision, problem statement and charge. During this important phase, you will gain valuable feedback on why groups would or wouldn't want to join, barriers for success and drivers for engagement.

“It is important to outline up front, how and in what ways each organization will contribute to fulfilling the coalition's mission. Is it staff time, funding, member engagement, Capitol Hill outreach, speaking engagement or education? It is essential that everyone

commit to taking action,” said Josh Wilson, senior manager of public and community relations at **Nemours Children's Health System**.

When our agency was preparing to launch the first-ever National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, we worked with a foundation client to bring together a core group of patient advocacy, healthcare professional and governmental organizations to draw attention to the need for higher screening rates. Our primary message: if you are 50 or older, get screened for colorectal cancer. It seemed pretty straightforward. It's what the medical science unequivocally supported and what the federal government recommended. However, we had one coalition member who wanted to say screening should begin at the age of 40. This was a pivotal moment in the formation of the coalition. We couldn't have conflicting messages go to the public, media or policy-makers. Our coalition would fail before it ever got off the ground. Luckily, we were able to come to an agreement through the art of compromise and to launch with one clearly focused message.

“With so many voices and viewpoints around the table, keeping an effective and timely stream of communication can be challenging,” added Su of The Advisory Board. “It's critical that the coalition has a mechanism for

HOW TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE COALITION

<p>Identify key leaders: An organized leader who is skilled in the art of consensus-building. This person should be able to effectively and respectfully run a meeting in which everyone feels heard, and no one or two voices dominate the discussion..</p>	<p>Respect for people's time: Make them feel like their time is always valuable. If you can get the meeting done in only 30 minutes with everyone focused and paying attention, then do it.</p>	<p>Prepare for every encounter: How many times have you been in a meeting or on a call and felt this was a waste of your time. Make the most of busy people's time. Most organizations are low on staff power & resources. Schedule regular calls and always be prepared. Have an agenda and goals for each meeting. It's time for decision-making.</p>	<p>Get Creative: Consider using interactive webinars to hold regular meetings. It will force people to pay attention, and reduce the number of people multi-tasking and not paying attention.</p>	<p>Agree on optimal communications channels: A communications person from each organization should be part of the coalition activities to ensure everyone is kept informed.</p>	<p>Don't reinvent the wheel: If one organization has high-quality written materials, then use them. If you don't have time to pass these materials through the group approval process, consider forgoing the coalition brand and attributing the information to the organization that created it.</p>	<p>Leave your ego at the door: Everyone is joined together to achieve the task at hand and that should be the goal. Ensuring that one organization is spotlighted over any others will inevitably lead to division.</p>
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sharing intelligence and feedback so that the group can leverage the benefit of that information while ensuring that members stay on message and reinforce the consensus position.”

The **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s** “Cover the Uninsured” campaign is an important example of groups uniting under a broad umbrella, even while holding differing perspectives on how to best solve the problem. The coalition members did not let their differences divide them. Instead they focused on their commonalities and on improving access to affordable health care for everyone.

“Trust is essential for working together. You have to know that people are coming with their best intentions and ideas,” said Christine Maulhardt, communications manager, **Blue Shield of California Foundation**.

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On the flip side, you shouldn’t join a coalition if your organization isn’t willing to devote a senior level team member with decision-making authority or if you aren’t willing to compromise and be flexible. You also will need to be comfortable with some coalition members moving forward with their own one-off projects, not officially sanctioned by the coalition. This may not be what you envisioned. The thing to remember is that the coalition will keep firmly focused on putting its weight behind the key goals. Then, it will be up to the individual organizations to demonstrate support and conduct initiatives to achieve the broader goal.

“Successful coalitions have members who are willing to accept a certain level of self-interest on the part of their partners in the

Why Create a Coalition?

An organization should consider creating a coalition if they would like to:

- Draw attention to a particular issue.
- Pool resources to make a bigger impact.
- Advance a legislation.
- Broad the reach of messages.

name of achieving a goal,” said Chris Manning, senior manager, public and media relations, Nemours Children’s Health System. “For example, public health groups may want to expand immunizations because it makes people healthier; pharmaceutical companies may want to expand immunizations because it is good for their business. But if the goal is getting more people immunized, each group doesn’t necessarily have to embrace the motivation that brought the others to the table, so long as they can each keep their self-interest in check enough so that it doesn’t interfere with the goal or disrupt the group dynamic.”

So, what are some ground rules for success? When looking for potential coalition members, you should consider groups that share a passion for the issue, have the ability to reach an audience that is important to your goal, clearly agree on the strategy and the measures for success, and will commit to taking action.

If you or your organization would like to draw attention to an issue, advocate on a particular topic, need additional resources to make an impact or broaden your reach and influence, then consider forming or joining a coalition. The value of bringing together multiple perspectives and pooled resources will undoubtedly lead to a magnified outcome—created by a small group of thoughtful, committed people who want to change the world. **PRN**

Sharon Reis is co-founder and partner of GYMR Public Relations.