

The Engagement Pyramid: Six Levels of Connecting People and Social Change



Level 5: Owning It.

By Gideon Rosenblatt, Groundwire Executive Director

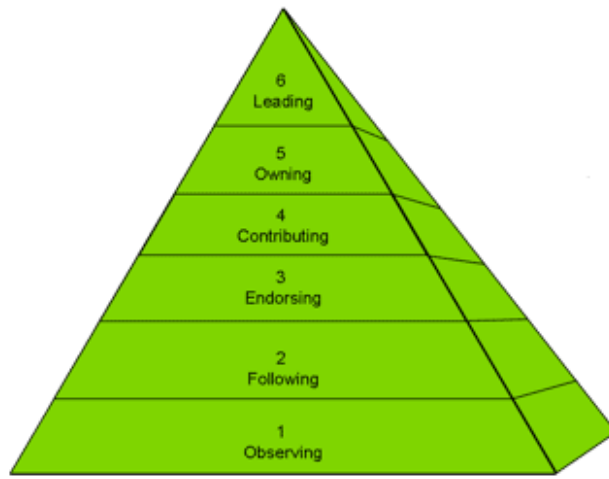
One of the things we do at Groundwire is help environmental organizations build better strategies for engaging people. You can learn more about why we think civic engagement is so critical to building a sustainable society from our Theory of Change, but the short answer is that it builds power – power that influences decisions that shape society and impact the planet.

Civic engagement can mean a lot of different things though – from the casual forwarding of a friend’s email to deep involvement on a board of directors. Some engagement is lightweight and some is deep, and that’s OK – we can’t expect everyone to have the same degree of interest in our mission. In fact, having a mix of people with varying levels of interest and engagement is actually a good thing. Why? Because being effective at social change means being able to choose from a portfolio of strategies and tactics in a way that best maps to the specific conditions we’re facing at any given moment. Sometimes that’s lightweight communications from lots of people; sometimes is a well-timed phone call from a carefully cultivated relationship with a community leader.

The most effective social change organizations understand how to wield their portfolio of engagement tactics in Zen-like fashion; knowing just what kind of touch is called for to influence the outcomes of a particular decision. They also know how to meet people where they are at, and craft their calls to action appropriately so as to match the specific level of interest and commitment from each person they ask. These organizations also tend to have good processes for stewarding people toward ever higher levels of engagement in their mission.

At Groundwire, we use a framework for mapping these different levels of engagement that we call an “Engagement Pyramid.” 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. We’ve also had plenty of feedback and inspiration from peers as we’ve developed these ideas over the years, including our friend Stephen Legault from Highwater Mark.

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.



We’ve found it useful to think of the vertical dimension – the intensity of engagement – as a “ladder” that individuals climb as they become more involved in a particular organization or campaign. We call it a “Ladder of Engagement” but really it’s just the vertical rise of the pyramid.

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, databases, email and social networks are excellent tools to this end.

The upper levels of our 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 our ladder, 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.

The Engagement Pyramid is an integrated approach to spanning engagement in both the electronic world and the real world. 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.

Our Ladder of Engagement has six rungs, or levels, which are outlined in detail below. Why six, and not five or seven? Because six is the number of levels that we have found to be meaningfully different in our work with the organizations we serve. Civic engagement is a complex field though, and there is no way a model like this will ever fully capture the nuances and inherent messiness of any one particular on-the-ground campaign. What it can do is serve as a conceptual map; a jumping off point we can use to clarify assumptions and help simplify the complex realities we face, in order to gain perspective and help us navigate the right course.

Engagement Level 1: “Observing”

(bottom of the engagement pyramid)

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, aided and unaided recognition polling.

Engagement Level 2: "Following"	
Primary engagement goals	Offer value and secure permission to deliver direct, proactive communications.
Mindset of person being engaged	Understands and is interested in the cause and cares somewhat 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	Newsletter subscriptions, opens and click-through metrics. RSS subscriptions. Twitter followers and Facebook fans.

Engagement Level 3: "Endorsing"	
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. Becoming a fan on Facebook and even a follower on Twitter might be construed as a low-level endorsement.
Engagement metrics	Number of membership or other lower-level contributions, public

endorsements (such as petition signing), contacting officials, and email forwards. Conversion and renewal rates. Social media forwarding/sharing.

Engagement Level 4: “Contributing”

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	Growth in the number of active volunteers and significant donors; conversion and renewal rates; volunteer hours and contributed dollars.

Engagement Level 5: “Owning”

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, which necessitates

assessing perceptions through interviews and surveys.

Engagement Level 6: “Leading”

(top of the engagement pyramid)

Primary engagement goals	Develop leadership skills and opportunities.
Mindset of person being engaged	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, which necessitates assessing perceptions through interviews and surveys.

Engagement Pyramid of WiserEarth

Posted by Angus Parker at Mar 10, 2010 03:33 AM

Thank you for sharing your Engagement Pyramid. It's remarkable that we are all looking for the same kind of model to explain how to encourage our communities to take action. Strangely enough WiserEarth has its own six level engagement pyramid [http://blog.wiserearth.org/\[...\]/](http://blog.wiserearth.org/[...]/) which has many similarities with yours but I really like the way you have fleshed out the goals and actions at each stage.