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## Expanding Your Audience

By Shelli Bischoff<sup>1</sup>

*For environmental organizations discussions about engaging the mainstream tend to raise questions about their advocacy role.*

### Introduction

Anyone who has been around environmental organizations knows there is a great deal of discussion (and a fair amount of angst) about moving to the middle to reach a mainstream constituency. Some groups believe it is simply a matter of different messaging, while others add projects and more mainstream activities in an attempt to reach a broader audience. For environmental advocacy groups, discussions about engaging the mainstream tend to lead to angst about compromising their advocacy role. The answer will differ for every organization, but there are a few guidelines that help frame the discussions.

This article presents a framework for organizations thinking about reaching new constituencies. The bell curve offers a visually simple explanation, and the sample case studies illustrate the implications for organizations seeking to engage new constituencies.

### The Situation

Environmental groups face challenges that go beyond those of other nonprofits. They confront anti-environmental state and federal administrations and a conservative, sometimes hostile climate that positions environmentalists as radical extremists. They also have aging memberships that do not reflect the diversity of the general population. Like other nonprofits, they face competition for funding, demands for greater accountability, and an overwhelmingly noisy marketplace.

In most circles, environmentalists are aware that they have been preaching to the choir for too long. They recognize that they are not reaching a broad enough base to have substantial social and

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political impact. The vocal minority of environmental activists is actually shrinking. Activists are frustrated—unable to reach and engage those who say they care about the environment and the general populace who strives for high quality of life.

The polls consistently demonstrate that Americans care about clean air, clean water, beautiful places, and wildlife. They care about quality of life and a healthy balance between economic development and the environment, although they will rarely choose one over the other. There are hundreds of examples of citizens taking vocal and visible action on safety, health, education, and environmental issues when they impact their immediate lives or threaten their own values or lifestyles.

For the general public, also known as the mainstream, environmentalism has merged with quality of life issues. Further, the mainstream finds it increasingly difficult to separate environmental concerns from public health or social justice concerns. For example, the country's number one health problem, child obesity, is becoming a public policy and an urban design issue. In part, sprawling suburbs and dependence on the automobile has affected our way of life and our health.

In short, the context for doing environmental work in the 21st century is different than it was in the heyday of the 1960s. While focusing on how to safeguard existing environmental protections, organizations are also struggling with how to be relevant to a larger portion of the population.

### **Who is the Broader Constituency?**

No matter the group with which we work, on any issue or in any part of the country, the broader constituency is generally the same. First, there is some recognition that the constituency is, simply put, “not us.” They are not environmental activists, they are not practicing environmentalists, and while they care about the environment, they are not joining environmental groups. More specifically, they are not giving up their SUVs, and they are not voting solely on environmental issues. The broader constituency

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is generally referred to as the mainstream or literally, the middle. It is neither the anti-environmental, right-wing conservatives, nor the core environmental activists.

The mainstream cares about the environment in terms of quality of life. To them, environmental issues such as clean air, clean water, open space, and wildlife are equally as important as job security, economic health, safety, public education, and public health. They are people raising families, juggling work with recreation and family time, shuttling kids to soccer games and doctor appointments, trying to keep up with home maintenance, bills, and other “stuff.” They are not necessarily cynical about politics; they may simply be oblivious. They are the ones toward which hundreds of thousands of print, media, and Internet advertisements and messages are aimed everyday.

Generational cohorts also offer insight into the mainstream. The Generation Ys, the Generation Xs, and the baby boomers all have some distinct characteristics that predominate their values, attitudes, and lifestyles.

Gen Ys for example, young adults between 18 and 27, are the connected generation. A recent article in *American Demographics* reported that they are connected via Internet, instant messaging, television, radio and cell phones—31 hours a day—because they are consummate multi-taskers. They also tend to be more socially connected. They exhibit signs of being more loyal, more patriotic, and more responsible than their older peers. Diversity, global savviness, hard work, and drive define them.

Gen Xs, or now the 30-somethings, have the label of the lost generation. On the heels of their driven, materialistic, own-the-world baby boomer parents, they are children of divorce, the first latchkey kids, and the first American cohort that couldn't expect to have a higher standard of living than the previous generation. They are a cynical and pragmatic group. They were the first group to cause marketers to be at wit's end. They are not brand-loyal, they have MTV-short attention spans, and they are notoriously independent. As they age, they tend to seek the good life, the white-picket-fence-life they didn't have as children.

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The baby boomers are the mothers and the fathers of the environmental, civil rights, and feminist movements. They are the core of environmental groups’ (aging!) memberships. As the largest cohort, they group into various segments and sub-segments. In general, however, this group is mellowing with age. They seek the simplicity and balance they didn’t have in their 20s and 30s. They are trading aerobics for yoga, parties for retreats, and drugs for alternative medicines, herbal, organic, and natural everything.

When talking about the broader constituency, or the mainstream, it is useful to segment and understand the audience before developing strategies to engage that audience. This effort to reach the broader constituency has led to an interesting dialogue about advocacy.

### **The Bell Curve, Constituents, and Advocacy**

To reach the mainstream, some recommend that environmental groups simply need to sound and look more like the mainstream. They encourage groups to use words like quality of life rather than environmental, and to participate in community events like country fairs and parades. Some environmental groups are reaching out to nontraditional audiences through involvement in Rotary, garden, and business clubs. Environmental groups understandably have concerns about softening the message and becoming less potent. Advocacy groups are asking, “To reach the mainstream, must we compromise our advocacy role?”

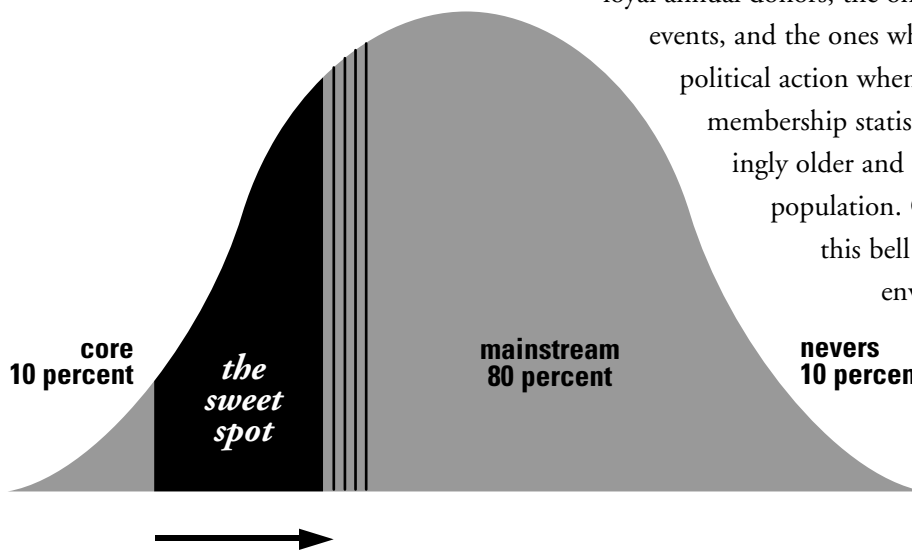
Reaching a broader constituency does indeed mean that an organization must look carefully at what it does, as well as what it says. Simply changing the message, but behaving the same way, won’t work. However, the organization does not have to abdicate its advocacy role. This broader constituencies discussion is causing organizations to do some soul searching about who they are trying to reach, and why, and to make significant strategic decisions about new constituencies, brand, image, and programs.

Picture a bell curve. The bell curve provides a framework for groups in the midst of this dialogue. Let us define the *mainstream* as the 80 percent of Americans who care about quality of life. They pay particular attention to issues in their own backyards or when something interferes with their lifestyle or recreational pursuits. For example, hunters care about habitat to the extent it impacts their ability to hunt, anglers care about watershed conditions to the extent that it impacts fishing, moms care about open space to the extent that their children have a safe place to play. They care, but they are also busy and preoccupied with family, work, or even the basics of food, shelter, and safety. Some percent, though not all, can be moved to action when an issue impacts them directly or attracts broad media attention.

On the right side of the bell curve are the 10 percent who are the *nevers*. They are the people who will never support conservation activities under any circumstance. They simply do not believe in the fundamental precepts. To the extreme right in this category, are not only the naysayers, but also the saboteurs. With the exception of damage control, it is most useful to avoid this group as a target market. The return on investment is simply too minimal and distracts the organization from success.

On the left side of the bell curve is the 10 percent who are the *core*—the active environmentalists. They form the traditional membership of many environmental organizations. They are the loyal annual donors, the ones who support special events, and the ones who have or will take social and political action when asked. We know from membership statistics that this group is increasingly older and less diverse than the general population. On the very far left side of this bell curve are the most active environmentalists, those die-hard, shrill activists that the “other side” likes to paint as extremists.

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The question is: “To reach the mainstream—the 80 percent, do we have to soften the message, or worse, not be advocates?” By definition, environmental organizations are advocates—they advocate for a specific position. Some groups will soften how they advocate—not if they advocate. For example, they may decide it is more appropriate to dialogue with nontraditional allies or to engage in community processes rather than be provocative or inflammatory. But the important thing is that they stand for something, they believe in a particular position, and therefore, they are advocates.

As such, reaching the mainstream does not mean reaching and engaging all 80 percent. It means broadening the core to begin to move into the mainstream—the sweet spot in the diagram. The sweet spot is those people who care about the environment, who support the positions of environmental groups, and with the right programs, services, or issues, can be moved to action and thus support the advocacy role of the organization.

It is important for environmental groups to segment and target the mainstream population and then align programs and strategies to that market. They will not reach the entire mainstream, and they don’t need to. However, they can begin to broaden the core.

### **Case Study One: More Than Messaging**

This case study involves a statewide environmental advocacy group. It has been around for more than 30 years, has a staff of 10, and boasts the state’s largest grassroots membership base. Its programs include more traditional public lands, forestry, and wilderness work, and over the past few years, the group has grown to include quality of life issues such as clean air, sprawl, and recycling.

Recent polling shows that people who live in this state care about the environment but also care about their jobs and the economy. They resonate with messages of balance and protecting resources for future generations. Their values are pride, independence, and responsibility.

The climate for environmental work in this state is unfriendly at best and actively hostile at worst. Environmentalists have been

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positioned as extremists and outsiders, not representing the best interests of the citizens. The conservative, industry-based powers have benefited from polarizing the issues and from keeping the environmental movement fragmented.

In this case, the organization undertook a strategic positioning process to define how the group could distinguish itself from other environmental groups and reach the mainstream. The process they underwent demonstrates the implications of engaging the mainstream.

The implications of repositioning to engage the mainstream were significant. If the group were to act with integrity, the organization would have to:

- ◆ look, act, and feel more like the mainstream, i.e., really care about the economy, not just give lip service to it
- ◆ care about quality of life in the whole, including issues of safety, education, recreation, not just the environmental aspects
- ◆ interact in places where the mainstream interacted, whether it be with Rotary clubs, garden clubs, or parent-teacher associations
- ◆ employ strategies such as research or negotiation to present balanced alternatives
- ◆ employ people who care about and have expertise in economic issues and social issues as well as environmental issues and,
- ◆ build a more diverse board (currently, it is young environmental activists)!

The group recognized the potential of alienating their smaller, activist base to reach the larger mainstream constituency. After considering the implications, the board and staff unanimously agreed that they were not willing to obfuscate their environmental advocacy role to reach a more mainstream audience. Instead, they agreed it was more important to reach those already interested in conservation but who are not active. They understood that this decision meant clearly targeting and not trying to reach everyone. They were willing to give up on the “masses” to engage and activate a smaller, but stronger constituency.

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they are trying to develop more stable long-term relationships with their constituents. They need to be what they say they are. If they talk about quality of life, they need to really care about it in the way their constituents do, and actively work on it. If not, over the long term their constituents will see through the messages, and they'll be worse off than before.

### **Case Study Two: The Mainstream is Not All Things for All People**

This example is one of a national organization with a significant history and presence throughout the country. Like many large, older organizations, it has multiple constituencies, several somewhat unrelated programs, and a diffuse image in the marketplace.

This organization tackled its identity in the marketplace and defined its target market. Its story is about recognizing that reaching the mainstream is not about being all things to all people and does not mean abdicating the advocacy role.

This organization, like the example above, struggled with the commitment to advocate for a particular position relative to its mission versus satisfying a mainstream audience. The relief came in the recognition that advocacy means supporting a particular position. It does not mean softening the position to please everyone.

While this group was not willing to back down on its positions, it was willing to recognize that a more diverse mainstream audience may choose to support the position in their own way. While not everyone would become a core, environmental activist, the broader constituency could take actions more suitable to their own interests or styles. This organization realized the best thing they could do to engage the mainstream was to provide diverse avenues for people to get involved toward a particular advocacy position, rather than trying to make a diverse audience behave the same way.

This organization segmented the market by people willing to practice conservation at a lifestyle, consumer, or sociopolitical level. These segments are subsets of the mainstream and include traditional activists. However, by focusing on the desired behavior

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and targeting for that behavior, it helped the organization better identify and understand the target market and ultimately design strategies to reach that market through a variety of integrated programs and services, all of which have a clear advocacy role.

## **Conclusion**

It is necessary for environmental organizations to reach the mainstream to be more potent and effective. However, environmental organizations should focus on broadening the core by reaching those in the mainstream that are already predisposed to support the organization's position, rather than trying to reach the larger 80 percent. Focusing on a smaller portion of the broader constituency enables environmental organizations to focus on message and maintain a clear position. It also prevents trying to be all things to all people.

If anything, reaching the mainstream should strengthen an organization's advocacy role, rather than dilute it. To break through the noise, organizations have to stand for something, clearly and unequivocally. This may not resonate with everyone in the mainstream, but will attract those who already care but have not been moved to action.

Understanding the audience and the implications of engaging that audience will help environmental organizations broaden their base and engage new constituencies toward mission success.

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## **About the Author**

Shelli Bischoff is a partner in Conservation Impact and founder of Nonprofit Impact. She has worked with more than 350 nonprofit organizations throughout the United States and Canada, teaches in a master's of nonprofit management program, and is an invited speaker at national conferences. Bischoff specializes in strategic marketing and organizational development. She helps organizations create Constituent-Centered Nonprofits™ through a unique approach to market segmentation and target marketing. She is best known for her customized consulting services that range from one-day marketing planning sessions to comprehensive strategic repositioning projects. For more information, contact her at 303-223-4886 or shelli@conservationimpact.com.