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Effective activism guide

ourfoodprint.com's Effective Activism Guide lay's down some of the most essential best practices and common mistakes to avoid, to help you become more effective in your outreach activities.

Being an effective activist

Being an effective activist is simply about being the kind of person that someone would like to listen to. In a nutshell, people like to listen to people who:

- Are experts on a particular topic and have credible information
- Speak of topics of interest to the listener
- Look respectable
- Are polite, genuine & positive
- Use creativity to grab the listeners attention

In a similar light, people are likely to dismiss any message coming from people who:

- Are highly opinionated & overzealous about spreading their message
- Go into long monologues, not allowing the listener to contribute to the conversation
- Are argumentative and irritable
- Are perceived to be different from themselves
- The following are some pointers towards helping you becoming an effective activist and a person whom people desire to listen to

What issue to communicate?

Every person will place a higher importance to some specific issue, based on his/her specific circumstances. For an animal lover, this may be animal welfare issues in factory farming. An environmentalist, may be the most disturbed by the environmental destruction caused. A mother may be most concerned about the impact on her child's health, or on the blatant abuse of mother-child bonds that take place in factory farming.

A person may possibly be most concerned by one specific narrower issue. A person who has lost a family member to cancer, may believe spreading awareness on the potential of diet to reverse cancer as being the most critical issue at hand. For environmentalists working on global warming, the issue of importance would be carbon emissions by livestock.

When you focus on communicating an issue which closest to your heart, you are likely to both: (a) read up more and with greater diligence becoming a form of a specialist on that particular issue (b) communicate with greater confidence & effectiveness.

At ourfoodprint.com, we believe that no single issue is more important than the other. People are needed to spread awareness at every level - be it a broad focus on any of the 3 key issues (animal welfare, health or the environment) or a more narrow focus on any one specific area (e.g. breast cancer, water problems, hunger & sustainability etc).

Choose the issue closest to your heart and focus specifically on understanding and spreading awareness on that one chosen issue, to be the most effective in your awareness activities.

Be informed

As an activist - it is important that before you launch any awareness activity, you are yourself well informed with the correct information and facts. During the course of awareness activities, you are likely to come across a diverse range of questions relating to the issue being discussed. The more efforts you spend on understanding the issue you wish to spread awareness on, the better prepared you will be to answer such queries correctly & effectively.

Our aim is to spread awareness on the lies spread by the meat & dairy industries. You are not here to make the same mistake. There is simply no place for incorrect facts & information in your awareness activities.

At ourfoodprint.com, we have taken every effort to make your journey towards becoming an expert on your chosen issue as easy as possible. Every issue discussed on our website, has a collection of related articles, research & videos (in the sidebars and in the resources sections) presenting the latest opinions by experts & other opinion makers in the field.

The time spent going through our resource sections will also aid significantly in your awareness efforts. You will find appropriate information which you can then decide showcase across different platforms - be it online channels, documentary screenings, presentations or talks.

Be informed! Know your facts! People will accordingly pay more attention to what you are trying to communicate.

Match the audience to the message

Awareness is most effective, when there is a tight fit between your audience and the message being delivered. People at an environmental conference, would clearly be more interested in learning about the environmental impact of livestock, but may not respond in the same ways to health & animal welfare related issues. For a group of heart disease patients, your message is more likely to be heard if you speak about how diet can reduce heart disease risk, rather than speaking about carbon emissions from livestock.

Choose your topic & your audience well. Make sure your audience has a direct interest in the message being delivered.

By narrowing the focus of your topic to better suit the audience, you significantly improve your chances of your audience truly listening to the message that you are delivering.

Dress the path

Almost all people judge people by their appearance, and people are more likely to listen to someone who look similar to them.

Study your audience and put in the effort to ensure you blend in. Formal attire is appropriate for addressing more conservative audiences such as professionals, corporates, decision makers, doctors etc. A more casual attire could work for students in schools & colleges. Traditional wear works well for addressing religious or cultural groups. Avoid torn or dirty clothing, your hair should be neat and avoid too many distracting accessories.

Dressing neat & tidy leads to an immediate positive impression, increasing chances of your audience listening to your message. Dress for success.

Be positive, genuine and polite

Always remember, that you are out as an **ambassador for the vegetarian cause, and your actions reflect back onto the cause that you are promoting.**

It is critical that all activism be conducted politely and with a positive outlook. A genuine warm smile & eye contact work remarkably to increase receptivity of your audience. Always be polite and do not get into aggressive or argumentative, regardless of the provocation.

Positivity is a powerful driving force. Even while talking about disturbing issues (e.g. animal welfare issues in factory farms), do not forget to drive home a positive message in your communication - such as 'you can make a difference' or 'simple lifestyle changes can help you save hundreds of animals every year'.

Answering the tough questions

When you spend time talking about veganism, you will realise that people tend to ask similar questions over and over again. Some of these can be stupid, provocative and at times even insulting. **It is critical that you do not lose your patience, and brush off or respond aggressively to any question.**

The key is to validate the person asking the question, every time. You can say that you used to feel the same (if you did). Tell the person that you hear the question a lot, if you do (in order to show that he or she is just like so many others who wonder the same thing). Try to ask a clarifying question—this will make the other person feel heard and will help you construct your reply. Try and reply in a polite and appropriate manner, without getting impatient or losing your cool.

Common mistakes: monologues

The damages caused by the meat & dairy industries are extremely widespread, and there is a huge amount of facts, data and other information that support the benefits of a shift to a plant based diet. This very often leads to discussions on factory farming or a vegan diet, turning into a monologue where the well informed vegan advocate drones on endlessly about the horrors of factory farming & the virtues of a vegan diet.

This is the simplest way to ensure you lose the attention of your audience and that your message is lost. Most people are interested in learning about a new concept and would be interested in discussing or even debating the same. But the moment your voice is the only voice being heard, you have lost the plot.

Ensure you pause to give your audience time to process the information, ask queries and form opinions of their own. Listen intently to their comments & views and provide appropriate responses. Never marginalise the other person or make them feel stupid about their views. Don't react adversely if provoked.

People are more likely to listen & respect someone, who listens and respects them in return.

Common mistakes: wrong timing

The desire to use every opportunity to spread your message, is a trait which is highly desirable in an activist, but also something which can potentially damage your cause. It is critical that you understand the audience that is in front of you and their willingness to listen at that point in time. There are often times where an audience is not receptive to a particular message, and trying to drive home your point at this time is only likely to alienate you and to have you come across as an argumentative and rigid person.

You may be at a dinner party, where the majority of the people present at the table are not interested in your message, but one person keeps pushing you to discuss the topic further. Rather than dominating the conversation at the table at a time when people are not keen on listening, it is better if you say something simple like: "You know, this is an issue which is really important to me because I care about this issue dearly. While I would love to talk about this, I am not sure if the others present are interested to discuss this at this time. Lets discuss this on the side post dinner or if you give me your contact details, we can discuss this in more depth later".

You have effectively raised the importance of the issue, while coming across in a very positive light to all others at the table who were just beginning to cringe.

Never try communicating a message to people when they are not in a mind frame to listen.

Common mistakes: not dining with meat eaters

The refusal to dine with meat eaters sends out a message of vegans being both deprived & self-righteous. For non-vegans, the impression is that vegans are the kind of people who can't even go to parties and can't go out to eat. Very few people would want to live like that, and it makes the vegan diet seem significantly harder and more sacrificial than it is in practise.

By dining with meat-eaters, you show that you are not rigid about your beliefs and that being a vegan does not mean a life of deprivation. In fact, a number of meat eaters may choose to taste some of your vegan food. By sharing tasty vegan food products with non-vegetarians, you often provide them the first exposures that plant based food can be tasty, wholesome and healthy at the same time.

Common mistakes: purity vs effectiveness

While purity with relation to a vegan diet is fine from an individual standpoint, this can have strong negative connotations if you desire to spread the message further. While a lot of people are aware of the ethical, health & environmental issues in the meat & dairy industries, the number one reason behind people not turning vegan - is that it often seems too difficult a lifestyle to adopt.

This is where as an vegan activist, it is important for you to understand the importance of pragmatism vs. purity.

Very few vegans, turned vegans overnight. For most people this has been a gradual transition, starting with a reduction of meat and dairy products. Often people will indicate a few food products that they simply can't give up --- it may be cheese, butter, a hamburger etc.

This is where your message as the vegan advocate becomes critical - if we try to convince the person to give up their one cherished food item, we are likely to alienate the person all together. It is possibly a lot more effective, asking them if they could give up all other animal food products, except for their one or two cherished food items. Alternately you could try to ask them to try reducing rather than eliminating their consumption of animal products.

In terms of impact, 5 people reducing their consumption of meat & dairy by 20%, is equal to one person going completely vegan. However, the message to reduce is something which may be a lot easier to accept for most people, as compared to a sudden elimination of meat & dairy from their diets.

Similarly, when dining out or in groups, try and avoid being obsessed about every single ingredient. By refusing to have a veggie burger because of some traces of butter or refusing other plant based foods which may carry small traces of animal products, we unconsciously spread a message that vegans are rigid and that a vegan diet is extremely hard to follow.

Focus on the big picture, don't sweat the small stuff. People need to understand the being vegan is easy, healthy and fun.