

Action Alerts: Mobilizing Your Network



COMMUNICATIONS

Making Your Voice Heard on Issues Important to Your Nonprofit

Launched in 1982 by Jim and Patty Rouse, The Enterprise Foundation is a national, nonprofit housing and community development organization dedicated to bringing lasting improvements to distressed communities.

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ISBN: 0-942901-18-5

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ADDITIONAL ENTERPRISE RESOURCES

The Enterprise Foundation provides nonprofit organizations with expert consultation and training as well as an extensive collection of print and online tools. For more information, please visit our Web site at www.enterprisefoundation.org.



About This Manual

What is an action alert?

An action alert prompts immediate action from your network of individuals and agencies that shares concerns regarding public policy issues. Limited to a one-page fax or email, an alert asks the network to write a letter, place a call or attend a meeting to influence a key decision on a pending issue. Action alerts help coalitions influence issues they feel strongly about.

Action Alerts: Mobilizing Your Network gives you the tools to make your voice heard by public officials. It is designed to help the staff of non-profit community development organizations create effective action alerts and make the process less intimidating. Follow the steps in this manual to:

- Develop an alert action network
- Write an action alert
- Distribute an alert
- Follow up an alert

This manual is part of the *Communication* series within The Enterprise Foundation's Community Development Library™. This series provides detailed information on all aspects of communications — from developing a central message to creating a comprehensive communications strategy. Other manuals in the series provide information on:

- Creating brochures and newsletters
- Developing annual reports
- Working effectively with the media
- Writing marketing sheets
- Organizing neighborhood tours
- Creating a message for your organization and identifying an audience

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Why Use Action Alerts?

Nonprofits use action alerts to mobilize a grassroots effort to support or oppose a specific legislative or administrative action by officials in the federal, state or local government. Normally, you are prompting the members of your network to phone, fax, email or write a particular official (or set of officials) to ask for a specific action. Action alerts are generally sent just before the decision is to be made or votes cast.

The alert itself is usually transmitted to your grassroots network by fax or, increasingly, by email. It can also be distributed by the U.S. Postal Service, but this method is used less and less because of its higher cost and slower delivery compared to a fax or email.

Action alerts generate contact between officials and the people they care about — their constituents — at a time when it will make a difference.

ACTION ALERTS ARE VALUABLE

In a representative democracy like ours, numbers have meaning. The actions of informed citizens can have tremendous influence on public officials, especially at the state and local levels, where sophisticated grassroots advocacy work is not as common as at the federal level.

Action alerts allow you to use the resources of your network at a relatively low cost to both them and you in terms of time and money. Properly targeted, action alerts generate contact between officials and the people they care about — their constituents — at a time when it will make a difference, such as before a critical vote on a policy that is important to your network.

Action alerts compress critical information:

- What the issue is
- Specific reasons to support or oppose the issue
- Who should be contacted and how
- The deadline for taking action

With this information, your network can effectively participate in the political process to the benefit of your nonprofit.

Developing an Action Alert Network

YOUR DATABASE IS YOUR ACTION ALERT NETWORK

Time is the most expensive element of creating and maintaining an action alert network, so a systematic plan for identifying people and organizations to include in the network will be worthwhile. And, because inaccurate information is useless, you must spend extra time to ensure names, addresses and numbers are accurate. The time you commit up front building an accurate, inclusive database of motivated individuals is vital to your success in mobilizing your network. Think of it as the initial capital investment. Once it is set up, the incremental cost, in staff time and cash outlay, of each alert is minimal.

CREATING YOUR DATABASE

It is more efficient to establish your database in concert with other advocacy or organizing activities. This is also an effective way to identify individuals interested in your issues. Talk with people attending meetings of organizations involved in housing and community development issues. Determine who has taken part in previous efforts and ask them for names and phone numbers of others who might be interested in your nonprofit's issues. Take advantage of all your opportunities to ask people if they would like to receive your organization's action alerts.

You can also develop your database by integrating lists of organizations involved in activities similar to your nonprofit's. For example, organizations within your state that have received funds for housing and community development would probably be interested in your policy issues. Lists of such groups, including contact people, addresses, phone and fax numbers, and

email addresses, are public record and are often easily available from governmental agencies.

You should become attuned to opportunities to add people and organizations to your database. For example, anytime you address a group about an issue, ask for the name, affiliation and contact information of anyone interested in your organization and its issues.

For each name entered in your database, list their public officials — members of Congress, state senator, state representative and city or county council members — for every level of government relevant to the issue(s) you are promoting. Include addresses, phone and fax numbers, and email addresses.

MAINTAINING AND UPDATING YOUR DATABASE

Because people change jobs and interests, your database will change and require maintenance. A staff person should have the responsibility of maintaining the database — adding and deleting names, and updating the data file when an organization names a new contact person or new officials are elected. Because accurate data is so important, you want to update your database every six months to ensure the names and pertinent data are correct.

Writing an Action Alert

An action alert consists of five basic parts: what, why, who, where and when. As you compose your action alert, be aware that your network will likely use your words in their communication to their officials.

STEP 1

WHAT

Use a concise headline and opening to tell your network what is going on and what you want them to do. Most people, including officials receiving communications from their constituents, will scan the headline and perhaps the first few sentences or bulleted points to determine whether they are going to spend any more time on it. Your headline needs to capture the urgency of the action needed. For example: *House Committee Votes on Housing Trust Fund This Week*

STEP 2

WHY

Next, explain the issue and solidify the basic talking points. Using a bulleted format is generally most effective. Give no more than three talking points. More than three reduces comprehension, and therefore the effectiveness, of your message. By providing the talking points, you will help give the people in your network confidence that they understand the issue they are calling or writing about. Name a contact person with your organization who can provide additional information.

STEP 3

WHO

Identify the target(s) of the action alert. Be as specific as possible. Do not just tell them to write their mayor or state representative; give them the name and title of the public official(s).

STEP 4

WHERE

Give the address, phone, fax and email information of the public officials you want your network to contact. You should have this data for each entry in your database.

The information for members of Congress is available online through the Thomas Web site at <http://thomas.loc.gov>. There are organizations in most states that publish similar information for state governments. They usually print the data as a brochure, and for a fee, they will print your organization's name on your copies. You can then distribute them to your network.

STEP 5

WHEN

Tell your network when to act. Most people work better on a deadline, so give them one. It also underlines the urgency of your request.

Remember, the people you want to respond to your alerts are busy, so keep it short and to the point. A single page is the maximum length.

Distributing an Action Alert

Faxes and emails are two effective methods of getting the word to a lot of people quickly. They both have the advantage of being sent automatically using desktop computers. The disadvantage is that they tie up one or more phone lines. You can mitigate this by scheduling your transmissions at night.

Faxes and emails also have a higher probability of being read than a piece of mail. Because the people in your network are deluged with messages daily, your action alert has to compete for attention.

REACHING OUT WITH A FAX

Nearly every organization and many individuals now have fax machines, making it a fast, cost-effective communications tool. To take advantage of this tool, however, you need the technology to send faxes directly from your computer. See the section on Budgeting for Action Alerts for specifications and typical costs.

Faxes allow you to dress up your alert with graphics, although you do not want to make them too visually complex because of the limited resolution on most computers and printers. Faxes are fast; a one-page fax typically takes 30 to 60 seconds, including dialing, connecting, transmitting and disconnecting (if you have an older, slower modem, it may take longer). The cost of faxing is far less than mailing but more than email.

OPENING THE POSSIBILITIES OF EMAIL

Currently, you can reach more people by fax than by email. Within the next two years, however, expect emails to become the common communications tool.

This method of transmission is even faster and less expensive than faxing, and it offers greater possibilities. The time it takes to send a one-page email including dialing, connecting and disconnecting is less than 30 seconds. With a flat-rate Internet connection (about \$20 a month), you can send an action alert to your entire network with one local call.

Older email programs allow you to send only text. If both you and your recipient have a newer program, you can enhance your message with graphics and design. Another approach is to embed a hypertext link to your Web site or your Web site address, where your network can go for more information about the alert. See the paragraph on the next page under Investing in Advanced Email Programs for more information.

INTEGRATING YOUR DATABASE

Technology should work for you. To ensure it does, your database must be able to communicate with your desktop computer's fax and email programs so, at the push of a button (or two), you can send your action alert to your network. To really benefit from technology, you want to be able to sort your database into lists reflecting specific interests.

For example, if you need to mobilize people interested in multifamily new construction in Ward 8, you want your software to sort your database and pull out only the people in your action alert network who live in Ward 8 and the adjacent wards and send the alert just to them.

Most basic fax and email programs that come free with your modem, computer or browser have limited capabilities and can only store but not sort basic information (name and fax or email address). You can customize separate lists by manually selecting names and building separate lists. This can be error-prone and time-consuming, however, as you will have to maintain separately the master list and any customized lists.

INVESTING IN ADVANCED EMAIL PROGRAMS

If you will be sending alerts to groups sorted from the database, you should invest in a software program that both faxes and emails. For less than \$100, you can buy a program with fairly sophisticated capabilities, including the ability to link to other programs (using your email database to fax or import data from another database program). Advanced email programs also allow you to dress up your alert graphically. Although it will increase the transmission time of your email, graphics make the alert more interesting to read, and are a worthwhile investment if you expect to use action alerts frequently.

Following Up Your Action Alert

Even if you have sorted your database very narrowly, most people receiving your action alert will not act without prompting. You can increase the response rate by conducting direct telephone follow-up to some or all of the people receiving the alert. This is very time-consuming — you can probably contact no more than 20 people in an hour — and should be done only for very important issues, or if you have a lot of volunteer support and phone lines. Be prepared to re-fax or email the action alert.

Use a written script for your follow-up calls, even if just one person is making the calls. A script helps your phone workers stay focused as they repeat their message call after call.

A typical follow-up phone script first draws attention to the alert you sent. It restates the headline and basic points, and stresses the importance of the action you want your network people to take. For example: “Senator Smith is the critical vote as to whether or not this funding will pass. At present, the senator is undecided, so your call or fax can make a difference.” When people tell you they cannot or do not want to make the contact, do not argue. Thank them for their time and move on to the next person on your list. If someone wants to be taken off your list, ensure it is done.

If the person on your contact list is unavailable, leave a summary message with the person who answers or on their voice mail. Do not ask them to call back — they probably will not.

A script helps your phone workers stay focused as they repeat their message call after call.

Although phone contacts will substantially increase your response rate, you may need a lot of them to make a difference in policy outcome. So use your resources for phone follow-up wisely, allocating time according to the follow-up script described on page 10.

Budgeting for Action Alerts

Although there are up-front costs, your non-profit will benefit by using the best technology your budget can afford. Today's technology can help you get your message to your network — to people who will take action — quickly and cost effectively. And if being able to distribute action alerts is the impetus for your nonprofit to upgrade its computer system, it is a valid reason. The cost will actually be spread over your organization because it will improve your efficiencies in many other areas.

Here are typical costs for setting up and maintaining the technology to operate your network. Costs incurred to build your database, such as staff to input data or purchase of a list, are not provided, as they vary.

SETTING UP YOUR NETWORK

Equipment Needed	Approximate Cost
Pentium-based PC	Nothing, assuming your office has one
Phone line	\$100 installation fee*
33.67kbps modem/fax board	\$100
Advanced fax/email software	\$100

* Assuming your office phone system has the capacity for an additional line. If you send out your alerts at night or on weekends, no additional line will be necessary, negating this cost.

If you have several computers in your office that are networked, you might consider purchasing fax software that is installed on the server rather than on one computer. Then you are not limited to just one machine for faxing.

The time it will take to build your database will vary. If your organization already has vigorous outreach efforts to your constituency — newsletter, frequent meetings or mailings —

the time to format that database into an action alert network can be as little as an hour to enter 20 people. If, however, you are starting from scratch, the process of developing a strong network will be very time-consuming.

MAINTAINING YOUR NETWORK

Maintaining your network takes 5 to 10 percent of a full-time person's job, depending on the size of the database. This function is often integrated with organizational communications, such as newsletter and membership development.

Items Needed	Approximate Cost
Flat-rate Internet access	\$20 per month
Phone line	\$15 to \$20 per month*

* This phone line will be used for action alerts only a small portion of the time and will be available for other uses the rest of the time.

Approximate Cost Per Action Alert (assuming 500 people per fax or email)

Item	Approximate Cost
Long distance phone charges (fax)	20 to 25 cents per call*
Local Internet access charges are minimal.	

* Program the fax to begin sending after 11 p.m., so you can take advantage of the cheaper evening phone rates.

Sample Action Alert

WHAT

Recordation Fee Lost, But the Battle Is Not Over — The Housing Trust Fund Is in Jeopardy

With a tie vote of 6-6, the State Senate Finance Committee rejected the recordation fee proposal from the state budget. This fee was supposed to be dedicated to the Housing Trust Fund. However, the conference committee will ultimately determine the final version of the state budget, so it is possible the Housing Trust Fund may receive additional resources from the General Revenue Fund. We must stress the need for additional funding to the conference committee.

ACTION NEEDED: Send this message to the members of the Conference Committee: “Approve additional general revenue funds for the Housing Trust Fund to increase the overall funding level from the \$29 million in the House version to the \$54.5 million level proposed by the governor.”

WHY

TALKING POINTS: Explain to the members these reasons why additional general revenue should be added to the Housing Trust Fund:

- More worthy projects applied to the Housing Trust Fund than could receive funds in the past year.
- The need for more supportive housing projects for homeless individuals has reached crisis proportions. Housing Trust Fund money helps to create homes for the homeless.
- The original legislation committed the state to use the Housing Trust Fund to “alleviate substandard housing for low-income families,” and this purpose cannot be realized without additional revenues for the trust fund.

WHO

SEND YOUR MESSAGE TO: Members of the Conference Committee

House Members

Representative Tom Johns 123.555.8728; fax: 123.555.8729;
email: tjohns@statehouse.com

Representative Joan Law 123.555.6711; fax: 123.555.6712;
email: jlaw@statehouse.com

Representative Vernon Smyth 123.555.3100; fax: 123.555.3101;
email: vsmyth@statehouse.com

Senate Members

Senator Roy Ricks 123.555.4823; fax: 123.555.4824;
email: rricks@statesenate.com

Senator Gary Donik 123.555.8056; fax: 123.555.8057;
email: donik@statesenate.com

Senator Judy Shara 123.555.4583; fax: 123.555.4584;
email: shara@statesenate.com

WHERE

WHEN

DEADLINE: 4:00 p.m., Wednesday, June 18, 2000

If you need more information, please call Dawn Taler at 123.555.1984.
Thank you for your immediate attention to this critical matter.

Sample Telephone Follow-Up Script

The purpose of your follow-up call is to prompt those who received your action alert fax or email the previous week to act on it by calling their state representative. Be prepared to provide the name and phone number of their representative.

ASK FOR THE SPECIFIC PERSON ON THE LIST. IF THE PERSON IS THERE SAY:

“Hi, Mr./Ms. _____. My name is _____ and I’m calling on behalf of The Ohio Coalition on Homelessness. Did you receive the action alert on the Housing Trust Fund that we sent last week?”

IF YES, SAY:

“Great! Have you been able to call Representative _____ yet?”

IF YES, SAY:

“Was there any response? (Write down what they say.) Thanks so much for your time and effort. Good-bye.”

IF NO, SAY:

“We would appreciate it if you could call no later than this Friday, as our lawmakers will be taking action next Tuesday. (Offer to provide their representative’s phone number.) Thanks so much for your time and effort. Good-bye.”

IF THEY DO NOT RECALL RECEIVING THE ALERT, SAY:

“Would you like me to fax or email the information again?” (If yes, confirm their fax number or email address and re-send the alert to them. Follow up with a telephone call, if time permits. Offer to provide their representative’s phone number.)

REGARDLESS OF WHAT THEY SAY, END THE CALL BY SAYING:

“Thanks so much for your time and effort. Good-bye.”

IF THE PERSON IS NOT THERE, LEAVE THIS MESSAGE:

“My name is _____, and I’m calling on behalf of The Ohio Coalition on Homelessness. We sent you an action alert last week about the upcoming vote on the Housing Trust Fund. We are requesting telephone calls to members of the Conference Committee in support of this proposal for a dedicated revenue source for the Ohio Housing Trust Fund. Please call (official’s name and phone number). If Mr./Ms. _____ needs more information, he or she can call Dawn Taler at 123.555.1984. Thanks so much for your time and effort. Good-bye.”

Notes

Notes

THE ENTERPRISE FOUNDATION

The Foundation's mission is to see that all low-income people in the United States have access to fit and affordable housing and an opportunity to move out of poverty and into the mainstream of American life. To achieve that mission, we strive to:

- Build a national community revitalization movement.
- Demonstrate what is possible in low-income communities.
- Communicate and advocate what works in community development.

As the nation's leader in community development, Enterprise cultivates, collects and disseminates expertise and resources to help communities across America successfully improve the quality of life for low-income people.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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SPECIAL THANKS

Research and development of this manual was made possible by the National Community Development Initiative, which is a consortium of 15 major national corporations and foundations and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and scores of public and private organizations. NCDI was created to support and sustain the efforts of community development organizations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

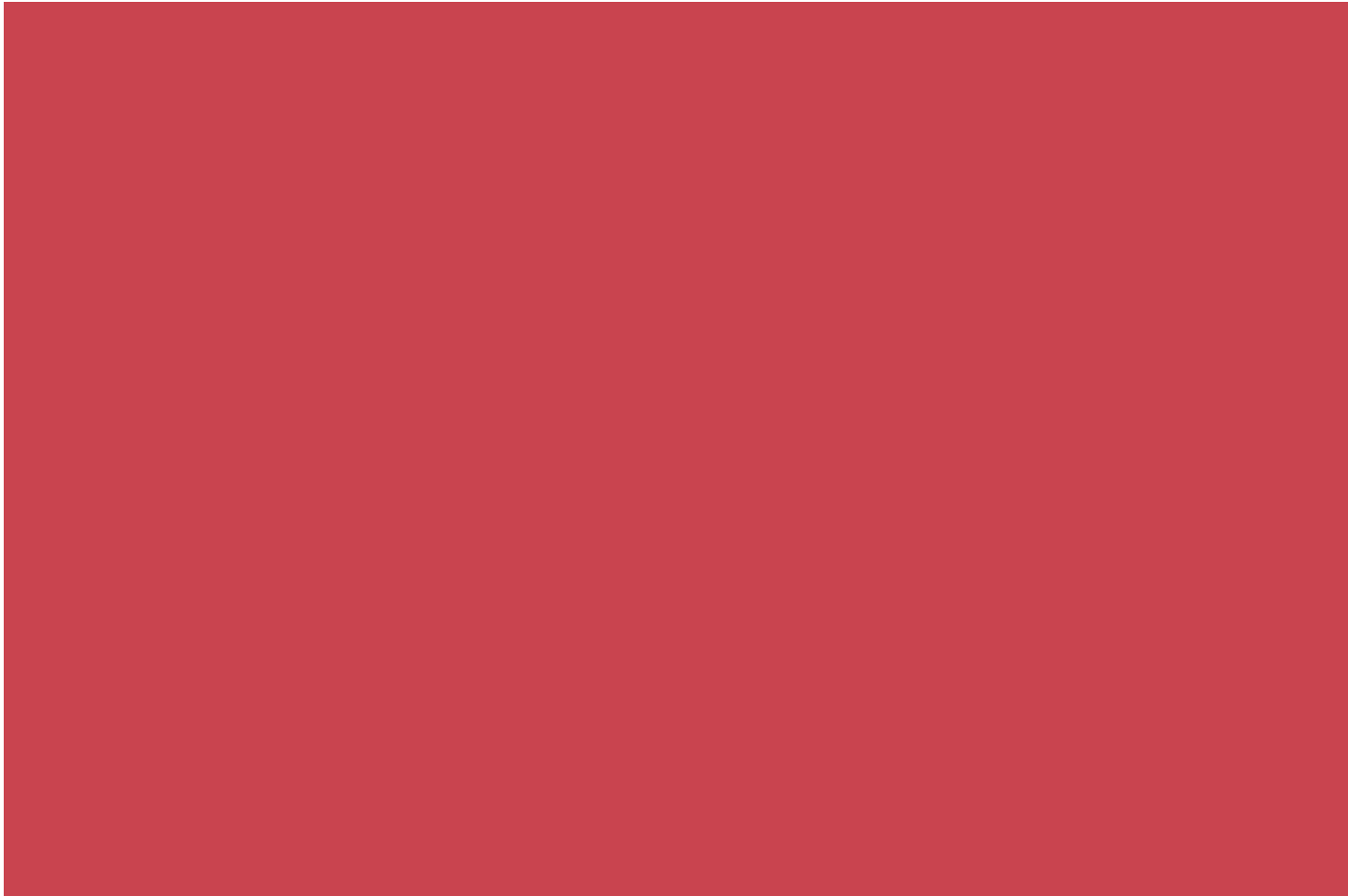
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ISBN 0-942901-18-5



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