

# GIVING MEMBERS VOICE

**PUTTING  
ENGAGEMENT  
INTO PRACTICE**

NOVEMBER 2022

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Victoria Barlow advises Unions 21 on communications and engagement strategy.

Having started her union career as NASUWT's press officer, she worked her way to Assistant General Secretary for communications and membership at ATL, then NEU. Her work with Unions 21 has seen her support the Association of Educational Psychologists with a member recruitment strategy, NGSU with a social and digital plan and ASLEF with a database and digital project. She also works with a broad range of membership organisations to improve their member engagement.

### **Unions 21**

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Unions 21 is a forum for unions to explore our shared challenges. As unions, we work collaboratively to develop practical projects and ideas which build tomorrow's unions.

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# Introduction

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The past few years has seen an intense period of public engagement around national moments – from the polarised Brexit campaigns to the nationwide COVID response, from the cost of living crisis to the Queen’s funeral arrangements.

No matter our opinion on any of these issues, the level of public engagement around these extraordinary events made sure everyone knew what was going on and everyone could participate as much as they wished.

**For unions, however, attempts to engage the broad membership around infrequent but high profile, high stakes moments stand a better chance of success when members have become familiar and comfortable with taking part in more frequent, lower stakes activity.**

Our everyday work, therefore, should focus on providing opportunities to get involved through regular, accessible, segmented activities – which usually demonstrate the value of union engagement to members, their colleagues, even their employers.

Then when the high profile, high stakes moments arise and the union needs broad engagement – like standing for, or voting in, national elections or taking part in ballots for industrial action – members have such a connection and affinity with their union and each other that they understand the opportunities for, and importance of, their involvement.

Member engagement starts at a strategic level – usually with priorities around recruitment and retention to generate income and secure influence in key sectors, and facilitating member voice to ensure democracy and inform the union’s direction.

The operational plans which deliver these aims often begin with a mapping exercise that plots a member’s route from the lowest to highest levels of engagement – say from non-member to President – and outline a range of activities which draw the member closer to the union and each other.

Such maps are sometimes known as member journeys, pipelines or activism ladders. Whatever the name, the idea is to create a series of interlinked opportunities for members to get increasingly involved so that when the ask comes to support high profile, high stakes moments, members are ready and quick to mobilise.

In Unions 21’s paper, **Giving Members’ Voice: A typology of engagements**, you’ll read the approach from low to high engagement, which starts with understanding what the union already knows about its members, moves into group engagement then to more focused work with segments and individuals, and ends in communities of members shaping and delivering the work of their union.

So, as well as understanding the benefits of an escalating approach to member engagement, what can we learn from the moments of public engagement from the past few years?

# Checklist for engagement

## 1. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Capturing, analysing and acting on the right data and information about your members gives you many clues around to what extent and over which issues your members are currently engaged so you can make strategic and operational decisions to strengthen the union.

For many unions, making a move from traditional membership databases, which mainly hold records and collect subs, to Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems which also provide ways to interact with members, has lifted the lid on how, when and why members engage – and what they think about their union's current offer and campaigns.

Such cutting of data, creating personas, targeting comms, analysing responses and adapting approaches was central to the success of the Vote Leave campaign, whether we agree with the outcome it achieved in the Brexit referendum or not.

Measuring success of your tactics and pivoting accordingly is a powerful means of ensuring your engagement plan stays relevant and on track.

## 2. TALK TO MEMBERS USING LANGUAGE AND STORIES TO WHICH THEY CAN RELATE

Any organiser will tell you that finding shared issues is the route to building member engagement and loyalty. And any comms person will tell you that the key to engaging the wider membership, decision-makers and the media is to humanise these issues by turning them in to real life stories.

Marshall Ganz, Senior Lecturer in Leadership, Organising and Civil Society at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, describes the journey from engaging around the individual's self-interest then linking to, and building sympathy with, the collective's interest before making an ask to 'do something' as the story of self, the story of us, the story of now.

We saw the power of storytelling during the pandemic. Having seen news reports and heard stories from friends and family about COVID's impact on individuals and the unimaginable toll on health workers and other frontline staff, we understood the need to adapt our behaviour to protect ourselves and wider society.

We acted together by following the rules on testing, self-isolation and we signed up for our vaccinations. We've since heard stories about when the rules weren't followed and we've seen the consequences on reputation and position.

As noted earlier, it's optimistic to expect members to get involved in their union if you only ever ask them to take part in high profile, high stakes moments. And it's also optimistic to ask members to get involved without any tangible benefit for themselves and/or their colleagues.

In the main, we live in peaceful times in the union movement. It's during the business-as-usual periods that we should build engagement around the benefits of union membership – e.g. professional and personal development; good employer relations for better working conditions – by sharing stories of individuals and colleagues taking part in successful union work.

Through these stories, we show what union membership looks like and so it's far easier to make the ask of non-engaged members to get

involved and move the more engaged members into greater involvement.

If you've made hay during the good times, you'll have built loyalty for the less happy times when we'll rely on individual and collective stories to motivate our members to make a difference in, say, workplace or employer disputes.

We'll also rely on these stories to convince the public, decision-makers and media to support our cause, as we've seen in the recent ASLEF, RMT, TSSA and CWU strikes.

### 3. ENGAGE THEM WHERE THEY'RE ALREADY ENGAGED

We know face-to-face is the most compelling way to engage members, but it is time-consuming and resource-intensive. While your member journey/activism ladder would undoubtedly have a large amount of activity dedicated to moving and keeping members in rep roles, the majority of members are not involved in their union beyond receiving – but possibly not opening – what you post or email to them.

Your engagement tactics should focus on reaching these members where they already are, and sharing stories which capture and reflect their experiences while making an ask which moves them from passive receivers of information to active contributors to union work.

Thinking about external channels, each media outlet has data on their listener, reader and follower profiles so you can hazard a guess where your members might be. And, of course, you can ask members about their preferred external channels as well, making sure you have a further ask to do something more when they reply.

Guided with insight on activity on your own channels, you'll have a range of places from which to start your engagement tactics. Testing different times, content and asks will help refine your approach.

### 4. OFFER SPACES FOR MEMBERS TO COME TOGETHER

A great example of bringing people together where they already are, happened after the Queen's death. Knowing many people would want to go somewhere and do something to grieve or mark the occasion, books of condolences were opened in familiar, local public spaces including civic centres and supermarkets, while the funeral was screened in cinemas, pubs and parks across the country.

At a national level, predicting crowds would gravitate towards London, *The Queue* to Westminster Hall was created, allowing people to come together, share their stories and the experience in a managed, safe way.

For unions, there are a range of virtual and real life ways of engaging members – from the small asks of signing a petition, sharing a newsletter or retweeting a post, to the larger asks of taking a seat on a local or sector committee or becoming President.

Every written or spoken communication with a member is an opportunity to move along the engagement journey, giving them many chances to get involved as much as they wish.

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