

# For activist campaigns, disruption gains attention, but evidence-based education changes minds.

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*In their campaigns to get organizations to adopt socially responsible practices, social activists often choose between disruptive protests and evidence-based persuasion. But which tactics are more effective? [Forrest Briscoe](#), [Abhinav Gupta](#), and [Mark Anner](#) find that disruptive tactics actually hurt activists' goal of capitalizing on their wins to influence non-targeted organizations. In contrast, when activists used evidence-based tactics, their wider goals were furthered.*



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Social activists and NGOs are constantly trying to achieve broader social changes by influencing the decisions of companies and other large organizations. Yet from [#blacklivesmatter](#) targeting correctional departments, to LGBT activists targeting companies – and from animal-rights groups targeting “Big Food,” to anti-sweatshop student groups protesting apparel makers – these activists pursuing change have to be highly strategic about where and how to focus their efforts.

That's because when grassroots activists campaign for change, they typically have far fewer resources and capabilities than the organizations they endeavor to influence. So activists are forever calculating the way to maximize their impact, often targeting a few influential organizations—universities, corporations, government agencies—that are likely to set the standard for peer institutions. But in addition to selecting their targets, activists need to select appropriate *tactics* – tactics that will not only be effective locally, but which will also help activists' goal of spreading change more broadly to other organizations. Which tactics are suitable for achieving this broad change?



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To answer this question, we studied the 2009 “Rein in Russell” campaign, a major nine-month effort by a student activist organization called United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) that aims to improve working conditions in developing countries. The group went after the apparel manufacturer Russell Athletic, which had recently closed a manufacturing facility in Honduras after efforts to unionize its 1,300 workers. To pressure Russell to reopen the plant, USAS targeted the company’s biggest organizational customers: universities. Rein in Russell achieved success quickly. Within a year, the campaign reached critical mass. More than 75 major universities pledged to cut ties with Russell if it didn’t reopen the unionized factory, leading the company to concede and implement reforms. What was most intriguing about this movement was that so many of the universities that got on board came to this decision without even being targeted by activists. How did they do it? What tactic triggered this spillover effect to change universities’ policies?

To find out, we analyzed the strategy and tactics of the campaign, and interviewed activists and university administrators—from both targeted and non-targeted schools. We learned that the USAS activists deployed two very different tactics to rein in Russell: disruption and evidence-based education. They first tried disruption, acting on a longstanding intuition that localized protests expand impact by prompting other organizations to surrender preemptively. So the students fomented protests and sit-ins, which persuaded a few of the targeted universities to drop Russell. But they found that disruption and the threat of disruption did not lead to anything like the domino effect they desired.

Why not? When we asked administrators at non-targeted universities what they thought about seeing the disruptive USAS wins, perhaps not surprisingly, they balked. Administrators should not cave in to intimidation. So what *did* get the ball rolling across the nation’s major universities? This shift to evidence-based education tactics: USAS organizers transported workers from Russell’s shuttered factory on a limited campus tour, to share their stories of workplace abuse. This new approach was purely intended to change hearts and minds (with no disruption involved), and it was hugely effective with targeted and non-targeted schools.

### **What does it mean for activists in general?**

Our findings indicate that disruptive tactics such as protests and sit-ins can yield some immediate, localized success, but they do little to transform the objectives of a movement into a cause that is palatable to a broader swath of organizational decision makers. In contrast, evidence-backed education efforts can be a potent tool in persuading even the leaders of organizations *not* targeted by activists that there is merit in the changes being sought. By appealing to the rational decision-making processes, educational tactics help build the “business case” for change, creating the potential for a positive spillover effect in the campaign. Instead of justifying decisions exclusively in terms of right versus wrong – a question of morality – appeal to organizational decision makers by explaining how hoped-for changes can further their own organizational goals. Those goals may involve protecting the organization’s reputation, recruiting the best talent, expanding the customer base, or simply maximizing long-run profits. With effort and creativity, evidence-based tactics can be tailored to appeal to these goals and sensibilities.

While we found that evidence-based education were pivotal in achieving the campaign’s larger goals, there is certainly a place for disruptive protest as well. Disruption often plays a role in raising attention and bringing initial awareness to an issue, and early disruptive wins can “prime the pump” of an activist campaign, serving as a precursor for more broadly effective demonstrations of education and reasoning that follow. By drawing attention and raising awareness (if not universal sympathy), disruptive efforts can pave the way for more rational messages to convince organizational decision makers to change their policies. In this way, evidence-based tactics and disruption-based tactics have a kind of good cop/bad cop dynamic. Disruption gets attention. Evidence and persuasion change minds.

*This article is based on the paper, ‘[Social Activism and Practice Diffusion How Activist Tactics Affect Non-targeted Organizations](#)’ in *Administrative Science Quarterly*.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London*

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