CASE STUDY: OCCUPY WALL STREET

Activists: Adbusters, SEIU, college students, Communist Party USA, liberal activists, union workers, anarchist groups
Advocates: MoveOn.org, Rebuild The Dream Coalition, Campaign for America’s Future, SEIU, AFL-CIO, Open Society Institute, among others
Academics: Economists, left-leaning political scientists and columnists, the NY Times Editorial Board
Antagonists: Wall Street, Corporate Executives (“the 1%”), Republican Party politicians against raising the minimum wage, law enforcement, the Tea Party

Mission

Challenge the influence of large financial institutions and corporations over the political process, force the federal government to tackle “social and economic inequalities” in the U.S. through increased regulation of financial services industries and an increase in federal and state minimum wage levels.

Strategy

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) activists, consisting of students, anti-capitalist organizations, and anarchy groups, and organized by various advocacy organizations, set up an illegal camp in a park near Wall Street in New York City to protest social and economic inequality in the United States, and push for policies to combat inequality. The populist, grassroots nature of the protests was augmented by the slogan “We are the 99%”, a statement against income inequality which rallied support for the cause among young people throughout the country.

By employing extreme, illegal, and sometimes violent tactics to raise awareness for their cause, OWS Activists created an opportunity for traditional advocacy groups on the Left and Democratic politicians to take advantage of the media attention and push for liberal economic policies without being perceived as extremists.

Tactics and Positioning

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement was the result of a combination of forces. The ultimate spark was a call to protest by Canadian nonprofit advocacy group Adbusters, which convened a coalition of students and union workers to rally against social and economic inequality. Activists in New York City captured public attention by physically occupying Zuccotti Park in the heart of New York’s financial district, camping without permits for several weeks, harassing Wall Street workers, carrying signs disparaging capitalism, and committing acts of civil disobedience. OWS protesters repeatedly clashed with law enforcement, leading to violence and hundreds of arrests.

OWS Activists consistently repeated the mantra that the movement was “leaderless” to give the appearance of a truly organic grassroots movement, despite its considerable funding and behind-the-scenes support from labor unions and wealthy donors. OWS also made a point to appear as an inclusive and diverse mix of students, anti-capitalists, union workers, anarchists, and progressives. By demonstrating that they were inclusive, OWS gained mainstream credibility with the public watching them on the news who could identify with the participants.

OWS encouraged violent engagement with law enforcement, and garnered sympathy thanks to the images showing riot police clashing with mostly unarmed students. By engaging in civil disobedience,

Note: Wise Public Affairs was not involved in this campaign. This case study was compiled using publicly available information.
OWS was able to give Advocates an opportunity to support the cause but distance themselves from the Activist tactics.

**Advocates** developed working groups to ensure that Activists were equipped with the tools and resources they needed, and helped coordinate activities to capitalize on Activist successes. For example, the OWS Internet Working Group was tasked with infrastructure requirements of the protesters and ensuring that all supporters were accurately tracked in a central Activist database.

Liberal advocacy groups such as MoveOn.org effectively utilized social media by encouraging Activist protesters to record their experiences with phones and cameras, and use that content to drive awareness of the protests. A number of blogs and websites were dedicated to pushing the OWS agenda, and were given financial and in-kind backing by allied advocacy groups. Advocates also encouraged **Academics** and like-minded Editors at major newspapers to write op-eds and editorials in support of policies aimed at combating inequality, giving added credibility to the movement.

President Obama responded to the drumbeat by retooling his campaign message to focus on income inequality, raising the minimum wage, holding Wall Street accountable, and ensuring the wealthy “pay their fair share.” This messaging was later adopted by much of the Democratic Party, including rising stars such as then-acting CFPB Director Elizabeth Warren, who echoed the core messaging of OWS and actively sought and received support from Advocates during her U.S. Senate campaign.

Popular messages and talking points used by the Activists included:

- “We are the 99%”, a populist battle cry to unite the average workers who are being oppressed by the richest 1% of Americans
- Communist symbols such as the raised fist and hammer and sickle
- The hashtag #OccupyWallStreet

Advocates capitalized on the proliferation of media attention by echoing the Activists messaging, while avoiding inflammatory language or symbols, in advocating for higher taxes on the wealthy and raising the minimum wage.

**Antagonists** offered little in the way of a coordinated grassroots counter-strategy, though the conservative Tea (“Taxed Enough Already”) Party movement offered a populist alternative to the anti-free-market OWS, and spokespersons from free-market organizations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Americans for Prosperity, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Cato Institute would often appear on cable news opposite OWS Advocates, to denounce the protesters and defend American capitalism. While most mainstream Americans were turned off by OWS’ extreme tactics, many on the Right seemed to be surprised by the appeal of their extreme left-wing message among average Americans still reeling from the effects of the economic downturn. The protests continued into much of the 2012 election cycle, giving fuel to Democratic candidates who successfully painted wealthy GOP candidate Mitt Romney as a symbol of the 1%.

**Outcome**

OWS catapulted the issue of income inequality to the top of the Democratic Party’s platform. U.S. regulators, including the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the Federal Reserve, the Securities Exchange Commission, were strengthened by the public support and have used that strength to aggressively engage in enforcement actions and settlements that have resulted in billions of dollars in fines against U.S. banks. As a result of this “movement”, legislation has been introduced in the U.S. Senate to raise the federal minimum wage to $15/ hour and cities such as Seattle have recently adopted this wage increase.

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