

A Look into the Public Relations Strategies of the North Carolina Sierra Club's Beyond Coal

Campaign

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### Abstract

The Sierra Club is one of the most popular environmental organizations in the United States of America. The organization is extremely influential in environmental advocacy and policy. A lot of the work done is completed through the individual campaigns the Sierra Club has. Beyond Coal is one major campaign that works to end the reliance of coal for energy and transition into clean energy solutions. To understand how this campaign succeeds, it is important to look at the more specific state efforts. In North Carolina, campaign efforts are muddled in organizational ambiguity, along with a less than stellar social media presence. While there have been successes such as a major coal plant in Asheville retiring, there are multiple areas for growth.

*Keywords:* Sierra Club, Beyond Coal, environment, North Carolina, public relations, campaign, grassroots

## A Look into the Public Relations Strategies of the North Carolina Sierra Club's Beyond Coal Campaign

### Introduction

When it comes to matters of the environment, almost no group is more well-known than the Sierra Club. They have been at the forefront of many environmental movements in the United States of America, and have played a significant role in the passing of legislation such as the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act. The organization succeeds with the multiple campaigns and various state and regional offices across the country. One campaign, Beyond Coal, has been one of the group's biggest campaigns, and has branches of influence in most states. In North Carolina, the case of the Beyond Coal campaign is quite quizzical. While there have been successes, such as a major coal burning plant being closed in Asheville, their day-to-day public relations strategies seem to be lacking. But while the North Carolina campaign may be lacking material, the man power and passion for the cause is strong.

### Organization Background

**The Sierra Club.** Before delving into the work of the North Carolina Beyond Coal campaign, it is important to understand the Sierra Club as a whole, and what their organization looks like. The Sierra Club was founded in 1892 by the well-known conservationist, John Muir. Since its beginning, it has grown to be one of the most successful and impactful environmental organizations in the country, with approximately 3 million members (Who We Are, 2018). The organization touches on a wide variety of topics that discuss every aspect of environmental protection and appreciation.

The Sierra Club is considered a grassroots organization, meaning that it helps mobilize local community members to work towards change in their own area. There are 64 chapters in

communities across the country (Who We Are, 2018). It is also a 501 (c)(4) organization, meaning that The Sierra Club can be directly involved in endorsing and promoting political candidates that are environmentally friendly (What We Do, 2017). State Sierra Clubs will often choose candidates for every type of electoral race to endorse and give assistance.

Many campaigns have been created by the Sierra Club in order to narrow their focus on more specific issues and causes. Our Wild America focuses on protecting public lands and conserving the wildlife in areas not yet impacted by human interaction. Get Outside is a campaign to encourage nature outings for groups of all ages to appreciate nature. Additionally, The Sierra Club has the Beyond Oil, Beyond Natural Gas, and the Beyond Coal campaigns to work towards cleaner energy (Who We Are, 2018).

**National Beyond Coal Campaign.** The Sierra Club's "Beyond Coal" campaign has been one of the organization's largest campaigns. According to an article in the MinnPost, the campaign was sparked by a 2001 court case challenging a coal plant near Chicago. While the Sierra Club lost this case, it inspired one lawyer who worked the case to begin a campaign that attacked coal plants with every tactic possible (Meador, 2015). Now, the campaign works nationally to end the reliance on coal as a major energy source, and promotes clean energy practices such as solar and wind energy. The main objective of the national campaign is to "replace coal with clean energy by mobilizing grassroots activists in local communities, and advocate for retirements of old and outdated coal plants" (About Us, 2017).

Along with the main objective, there are three goals the campaign focuses on. One goal is to retire one-third of the nation's coal plants by 2020. The campaign has already met this goal, with 268 plants retiring or in the process of retiring out of 530 (About Us, 2017). This shows the weight that this campaign has. The other goals aim to replace coal plants with cleaner energy

options and keep coal from being further extracted from vulnerable areas. The campaign focuses on three main areas: water pollution, air pollution, and clean energy (About Us, 2017).

The current director of the national campaign is Mary Anne Hitt (About Us, 2017). But because the Sierra Club is a grassroots organization, much of the work is done by the regional offices and state chapters. This ensures the biggest issues in the area are being focused on by the people who understand them the most. This is why it is important to look specifically at the efforts of the North Carolina Beyond Coal campaign.

**North Carolina Beyond Coal.** The North Carolina Beyond Coal Campaign has goals and objectives that are very similar to the national movement. On the North Carolina Beyond Coal website, the goals are listed clearly on their “about” page. In summary, NC Beyond Coal aims to shift energy reliance to cleaner and safer energy sources, retire coal plants, and create sustainable jobs for those who were dependent on fossil fuel jobs (Rogers, 2017).

The actual structure of the Beyond Coal campaign in North Carolina can be somewhat confusing. While there are no individuals solely in charge of the North Carolina campaign, there are multiple people who work on campaign efforts. Melissa Williams is the Senior Press Secretary for the Southeast Region of the “Beyond Coal” campaign. She works with North Carolina along with five other states. Since she has such a broad scope, the specific strategies and tactics for North Carolina are not planned and executed by her. In the North Carolina Sierra Club office, Molly Diggins is the State Director, and Margaret Lillard is the Communications Coordinator (North Carolina Chapter- Staff, 2018). However, since they cover all of the Sierra Club’s work in North Carolina, they are only “peripherally involved,” according to Margaret Lillard. Additionally, Lillard mentioned that most of the campaign’s work is done at the regional level (Lillard, 2018). There are also 12 smaller North Carolina regional offices, each having

individual programs and initiatives (Find Your Local Group, 2018). With all of these separate offices working toward similar goals, knowing who is actually doing the work for North Carolina Beyond Coal can often be unclear.

### **Strategies & Challenges**

**National Beyond Coal Strategies.** Before discussing the public relations strategies of the Beyond Coal campaign at the North Carolina level, it is beneficial to look at the strategies used at the national level. The national Beyond Coal campaign does two main things with their materials and messages. First, they use activism to influence laws and policies, and use public relations to create awareness of these policies. Second, they use public relations as a tool for educating the public on scientific information that may be difficult to understand for the average individual. Both of these efforts work together to create a population of people who understand the issues and can therefore create change through their grassroots movements.

Activism is a major part of the Beyond Coal Campaign. One of their goals is to continue retiring old coal plants and converting them to cleaner energy solutions. The success of this goal largely relies on activism. In an article discussing the use of activism as a legal tactic, Sascha Bollag says, “successful activism encompasses local, state, regional and national levels and includes four key components—litigation/legal representation, policy advocacy, legislative advocacy, and organizing/media” (Bollag, 2017).

While the legal side of the Sierra Club works on the actual cases and procedures to get certain laws passed, the public relations side brings those efforts to the public. For example, an article released on the Beyond Coal campaign discusses how coal plants are continuing to shut down, despite President Trump’s efforts to keep coal alive. The article mentions a settlement between the Sierra Club and Talen Energy that will end the burning of coal at one of the largest

polluting plants in Pennsylvania (Hitt, 2018). They made this activism successful by utilizing the man power of their local branches, and then reporting about it on their website. They provided clear, concise information with infographics and conversational vocabulary. This is just one way the Beyond Coal campaign uses activism to make their public relations strategies successful.

The other strategy used by the national Beyond Coal campaign is the educational material made available to the public. This is a big necessity for this campaign, because average citizens usually do not have exposure to the often complicated subjects of environmental science, such as fracking, mountain top removal and solar and wind energy. Senior Press Secretary Williams stated that one of the main focuses of the Beyond Coal campaign is to “(make) sure that our sometimes wonky and jargon-laden environmental communications are easy for people to understand and not overly technical” (Williams, 2018). The Sierra Club does a great job of providing materials that provide easy-to-understand wording while also being visually appealing.

One example of the ways the Beyond Coal campaign uses simplified material to educate the public is the Coal vs. Clean Energy video series created by the Sierra Club. These videos feature a cartoon coal character discussing different aspects of the coal industry with solar and wind energy cartoon characters (National Sierra Club, 2013). The videos use adult humor to entertain viewers while also providing quick facts about coal. Additionally, the videos are all around two minutes long, making the learning experience short and simple. The viewer may not even realize it is an educational video upon first viewing.

The Coal vs. Clean Energy videos are just one way the Beyond Coal campaign attempts to educate the public. The Beyond Coal website has a page solely devoted to resources individuals can access. The resources include infographics, fact sheets, maps and handouts along with many other communication materials. Furthermore, each category has material that can be

used nationally or that is more specific to a certain state. So, someone could find a factsheet about the national campaign, or a factsheet about the RECLAIM Act in Colorado specifically.

There are countless options to encourage the spread of information.

**North Carolina Beyond Coal Strategies.** The state specific strategies of the North Carolina Beyond Coal campaign are slim compared to the national efforts. However, there are a few things that are done well through the North Carolina campaign. First, the regional chapters of the Sierra Club in North Carolina use the grassroots campaign strategies to connect people to the campaign efforts. The article *Back to Basics: Grassroots PR*, discusses the many benefits of using grassroots strategies for public relations campaign. Public relations is based on building mutually beneficial relationships with the public. By using grassroots strategies, the relationships with club members and the rest of the public are the top priority (Ellis, 2012). The success of the campaign relies on the community members becoming advocates for Beyond Coal.

The North Carolina branch of the Sierra Club does well in building these relationships. One way in which this happens is through the local groups in North Carolina. The 12 different groups bring together members from similar geographic areas to focus on issues that specifically affect them, with groups such as Central Piedmont, Blue Ridge and Headwaters (Find Your Local Group, 2018). Each group has their own website and Facebook page. The websites provide information about each groups' main focus as well as ways to get involved. For example, the Sierra Club Foothills Group has a page for outings and events. The events vary from social events to casually discuss environmental topics to official meetings to discuss bike and pedestrian trails in the city of Winston-Salem (Outings and Events). The levels of seriousness and commitment are different for every event, providing an opportunity for every type of community member to get involved at the degree to which they are comfortable.

Another strength of North Carolina Beyond Coal is the success of the campaign when focused on a specific problem or obstacle. A prime example of this would be the campaign efforts to shut down a coal burning plant in Asheville, specifically located on Lake Julian. In 2012, the Sierra Club began working with MountainTrue and other environmental organizations to launch the Asheville Beyond Coal Campaign. A combination of litigation and public campaign efforts made this specific campaign successful. There were constant public hearings, peaceful protests, and news stories being released to keep people constantly updated with information (Asheville Beyond Coal, 2016).

It is often difficult to go up against a powerhouse such as Duke Energy. Because of this, the Beyond Coal campaign relied on collaboration from organizations in the Asheville area. Groups such as the Southern Environmental Law Center, the WaterKeeper Alliance and Appalachian Voices had to utilize their member power and combine efforts to ensure success. Their committed efforts got them national media coverage on news outlets such as CBS News, and a feature in a Showtime Documentary (Asheville Beyond Coal, 2016). Duke announced they were shutting down the Lake Julian plant in 2015. And even after that announcement, the Beyond Coal campaign continued efforts to make sure the retired plant was not converted into a natural gas plant. In February of 2016, as many as 250 activists showed up at a Buncombe County courthouse to voice their opposition of the natural gas plant at a public hearing (Rose, 2016). This just shows the relentless public efforts to create change. These tactics are vital for the Beyond Coal campaign's success.

**North Carolina Beyond Coal Weaknesses.** While there are multiple things that are done well with the public relations efforts of the North Carolina Beyond Coal campaign, there are certainly areas that need improvement. First, the social media presence is lacking content and consistency.

There are individual Facebook and Instagram accounts for North Carolina Beyond Coal and Asheville Beyond Coal. However, the last Facebook post from the North Carolina Beyond Coal campaign was posted in 2014 (NC Beyond Coal, Facebook). Additionally, the last post on the Asheville Beyond Coal Instagram page was from 2013 and only received six “likes” (@ashevillebeyondcoal, Instagram). A Forbes article suggests that posting consistently on Instagram at a frequent rate that works for the organization. For Facebook, only posting a few times a month can actually benefit smaller organizations, such as the North Carolina Beyond Coal page (Patel, 2016). But the North Carolina Beyond Coal social media sites are following neither of the tactics and have not put anything up in years. As most public relations professionals know, a social media presence is crucial for creating connections with the organization’s publics. The Beyond Coal campaign is missing a huge opportunity to stay relevant. And while one Sierra Club employee did mention that the Asheville social media sites for Beyond Coal were inactive now due to the coal plant being retired, the last post on their Facebook page was from 2013, two years before the Duke plant announced its retirement. It seems that no one is focusing on this obvious opportunity for communication.

Another way in which the Beyond Coal campaign struggles in North Carolina is the fluidity of campaign efforts throughout the local branches across the state. While the local groups’ websites and Facebook pages remain active and accessible for club members, not much is actually said about the Beyond Coal campaign. Only one local group directly mentions the campaign on their website (Find Your group, 2018). Furthermore, there are multiple coal burning plants still active in North Carolina. One major plant is the Duke plant in Belews Creek. The Belews Creek Steam Station has been critiqued for the questionable disposal techniques for coal ash, and the suspected pollution of the Belews Lake. With such a major source of coal burning in

the area, it could be assumed that the local Sierra Club Group would be avidly campaigning for this plant's retirement. However, the Foothills Sierra Club group that covers the area where the Belews Creek Steam Station is located mentions nothing about the plant on their website.

Retiring coal burning plants is one of the main goals for beyond Coal, yet this group is doing nothing for that at the local level. This is yet another opportunity that is being overlooked.

### **Recommendations and Takeaways**

**Recommendations for Improvement.** There are many simple ways that the North Carolina Beyond Coal can be improved. The campaign has the resources and man power, but it needs a clear plan of attack. First, a suggestion would be to hire someone at the North Carolina office to run the Beyond Coal campaign at the state level. While it may be difficult for nonprofit organizations to find the money for an additional salary, there are plenty of ways to be cost-effective with this position. For instance, non-paid interns could be hired semi-annually to run the campaign's social media pages, create events, and maintain communication with the local groups across the state. Similarly, a part-time position could be offered for someone to come in a few times a week to work on the campaign. The grassroots efforts make the workload for the head campaign planner less intense because the local group members can organize and plan things for their own area. However, there needs to be someone monitoring things from a higher position.

Another way that the campaign's public relations efforts could be improved is through a planned social media calendar. This has begun to be a growing trend for organizations social media pages. Social media calendars give organizations a clear and organized plan. Additionally, it makes the messages more cohesive for the viewers. A social media calendar could add a lot of value to the North Carolina Beyond Coal social media sites that already exist.

One final recommendation would be to focus on the local groups and utilize their membership in the most efficient ways. As previously discussed, Sierra Club success largely relies on the collaboration of local organizations and community members. Local groups need to start developing yearly goals for what they want to accomplish in their community. Additionally, local groups could communicate with each other to make their goals similar. Then, by joining forces, they could see an increase in progress. There are so many opportunities for the Beyond Coal campaign to take action in North Carolina. But, it must start at the local level and continue to flourish.

**Takeaways.** The analysis of both the national and North Carolina Beyond Coal campaign efforts has brought many realizations to light. First, the efforts of the regional Sierra Club offices across the country truly represent what a grassroots movement should look like. The Sierra Club does well in focusing on relationships with its club members. They are always encouraged to get involved and take action. There is strength in numbers when it comes to social movements, and the Sierra Club knows how to create this. Additionally, the Beyond Coal campaign does well with creating messages that can be understood by the masses. Structured conversation and debate is crucial for the progress of laws and initiatives in any government. The Sierra Club makes sure that its members are prepared for such debate by providing them with as much information as possible. However, the information is simply stated, and presented in an attractive way.

### **Conclusion**

The Sierra Club is a huge organization with branches of success all over the country. There are multiple campaigns that attempt to touch on every aspect of environmental protection and appreciation. The Beyond Coal campaign has been one of the largest and most successful, with over half of the coal-burning plants announcing retirement. However, at the North Carolina

level, there are many opportunities for improvement. To continue its success, the North Carolina campaign needs to refocus the social media strategies while developing annual goals and plans.

A clearer organizational structure will greatly improve the campaign success and lead North Carolina to cleaner, coal free future.

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