

## Engaging and Mobilizing the Grassroots Community: How to Work with CBOs

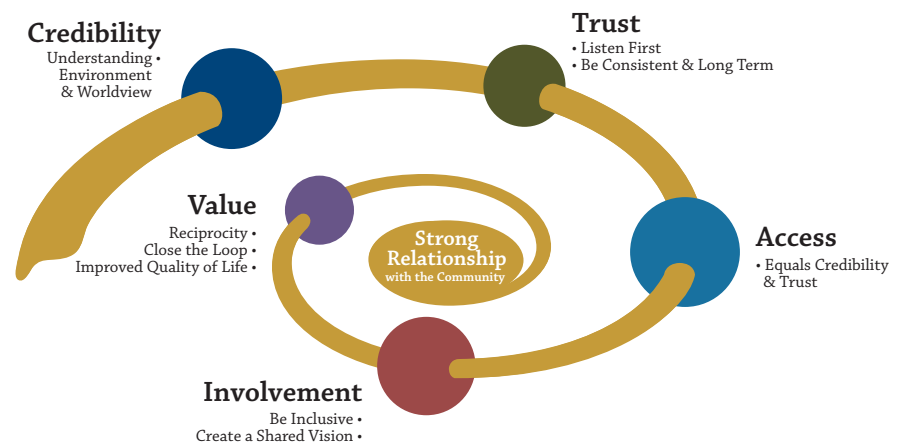
Making changes in the economic, social and health disparities in low-income communities will require a collaborative effort involving a broad range of partners. It is also critical to include various nontraditional elements of the grassroots community. Key individuals and organizations are valuable resources that can be used to disseminate information and promote pro-social messages. Thought leaders can be found among community elders, faith-based organizations and even among large and small retailers (including hair and nail salons). The challenge is to harness those resources in a culturally-relevant manner, bringing them together in ways that multiply their reach, penetration and effectiveness, and provide mutual support.

Used effectively, grassroots-focused mobilization strategies are perfect to promote community-building messages to underserved African American youth, young adults, and families. They are also both culturally-relevant and cost-effective.

### The Process

In workshops and other technical assistance engagements, MEE shows clients how to ensure that community-based organizations (CBOs) are active players in their community outreach and local social marketing efforts (particularly those focused on low-income communities of color). We believe CBOs must be an important part of both “what you say” and “how you say it” in a community mobilization campaign. In this *UrbanTrends*, we share some of these

### Keys to the Community



strategies, so our readers can benefit from our expertise. This information will help your audience truly embrace your efforts, because the messages will be reinforced by people they know and trust on a more personal level.

### Why CBOs are Important

Since they already know and work with many of the people you need to reach, CBOs that deal with issues such as mental health, HIV/STI prevention, violence prevention, youth development, drug and alcohol addiction, disease treatment/management, etc. should play an important role in local mobilization campaigns. Their “buy-in” and participation in promoting your message can be a critical success factor. In most places, grassroots CBOs have significant access to low-income youth and/or their families. They have often laid the groundwork for developing access points to the

individuals you need to reach. They may not be experts in the ins-and-outs of a particular issue, but they will be experts in the dynamics and key players in your community. CBOs’ broad base of knowledge about your community’s strengths, needs and key influencers should be a major ingredient in planning your mobilization tactics.

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## From The President

A little more than a decade ago, in a previous issue of *UrbanTrends* (Vol. 10, No. 1), we explored what it takes to mobilize urban communities so that they can be rebuilt from the inside out. Since that time, we have continued to refine our methods and strategies for engaging and influencing hard-to-reach audiences. MEE's track record in cities across the country demonstrates that understanding your target audience and using non-traditional, on-the-ground communications approaches yields social marketing campaigns that truly "move the numbers."

By continually thinking "outside the box," MEE has been able to generate effective word-of-mouth among a cross-section of target audiences. Our strategies ensure that any messages that we put into the community have a life that exceeds the length and reach of our strategic campaigns. When residents have a real chance to be heard, even to "vent," there is built-in sustainability because the community takes ownership of our message and process from the beginning.

In this issue, we provide some of our latest insights on how to develop unparalleled and authentic community access to often hard-to-reach populations. They are culled from lessons learned in public health outreach/education campaigns in Philadelphia, Chicago, Oakland and Washington DC, among other cities.

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Most CBOs are committed to responsible access to and interaction with the people and communities they serve. Once they, along with individual gatekeepers, are assured that your goals are not aimed to further stigmatize the community, but rather are honorable, "above-board" and critically needed, CBOs will be more supportive of your efforts and messages. By expanding upon already-developed trust and developing working relationships with CBOs, you can effectively build awareness, engage all stakeholders and secure greater community engagement.

### Reflecting Oral Communications Culture

Especially within communities of color, a campaign's "word-of-mouth" is key; it is the way important information will be shared. If you intend for your promotion efforts to live on beyond a "one-shot" push and to encourage the community to take ownership of and responsibility for improving its social, economic and health outcomes, building positive word-of-mouth is critical.

The primacy of oral communications culture must be recognized in developing an effective mobilization strategy for low-income communities of color. For example, because of the strong stigma, many myths and the sense of shame associated with some issues, such as mental illness, it is even more critical to allow open and honest dialogue among community members, so that the fears, mistrust and stereotypes can be addressed and overcome.

On an individual level, it is important that conversations reflect an argument/counter-argument framework. At the community level, gatherings of local residents should be planned and structured to be both flexible and interactive, leading to a safe space to air concerns and share potential solutions.

### Keys to the Community

In order to be successful in promoting health equity in your community, gaining "authentic" access to community gatekeepers is the first step. The "keys to the community" include having *credibility*,

building *trust*, gaining *access*, incorporating community *involvement*, and providing *value* to the community.

Having credibility means that you understand the environment, respect the culture and worldview, do not impose personal morality, and make no assumptions about what is happening in a particular community. Gaining that credibility will not occur overnight or be easy, especially if you limit yourself to using only traditional communication strategies. If you take the time "on the front end" to lay the appropriate groundwork, the target audience will not only receive your messages, but will also share and promote them among their peers.

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—Why CBOs are Important

The second key to the community, trust, will require that you listen before doing anything else. Then, you must be consistent and always follow through with and follow up on your tasks and commitments. This will ensure that the community will be eagerly looking for the new phases of your outreach or campaign as they are rolled out.

Authentic access to a community is based on first having **credibility** and gaining **trust**. Community members, at the deepest levels, should be afforded the opportunity to **be involved** and at the table. CBOs must be made to feel that they are being brought into the process from the start, rather than being invited to participate at a later point in time when you've already developed a list of things for them to do. Bringing

together a broad range of community stakeholders with a shared vision of success will also help you to identify the strengths and skills each CBO brings to the process. Finally, a campaign should “close the loop” or ensure that, to the extent possible, the community’s identified needs are met. A community should perceive that a campaign brings **added value** to its quality of life—both now and in the future. One way you can do this is by supporting a cross-section of community events, whether they are focused on your particular issue or others that are indirectly related or not at all—but still critically important to the people who live in your community.

## Identifying and Recruiting Community Partners

All key stakeholders in your community should be “brought to the table” to discuss solutions for the people who need them

most; their voices and perspectives must be heard and respected. In approaching these community gatekeepers, “movers and shakers” and others, it is essential to take the time and steps necessary to build credibility and trust. Time is also necessary to understand and work through any differences, competing agendas, negative experiences with health, social and criminal justice systems or mistrust created by past failed or ineffective community-based efforts.

You will need to identify and invite key, grassroots organizations that are places where youth and their families go for programs, services and information. Keep in mind, though, that as you bring together various community-based organizations, most of them have other priorities on which they are already focused. While an organization may understand the broad need for increasing mental wellness, for example, the goal of

doing so must be presented in a way that it can easily be integrated into its current priorities. For example, finding effective ways to deal with stressors could decrease domestic or community violence, which would support the work of many CBOs.

The process for involving CBOs has several basic steps. CBO preparation, including a thorough orientation for all partners, will need to be facilitated through multiple phases over several weeks/months. This will ensure a sufficient amount of time for complete understanding by the participating CBOs of how they can support, benefit from and fit in with your goals.

*To learn more about MEE’s mobilization process and see our Chat-and-Chew steps, go to [www.meeproductions.com/mentalwellness](http://www.meeproductions.com/mentalwellness) to access MEE’s Community Mobilization Toolkit.*

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**Mobilizing Urban Communities: Re-Building from the Inside Out**

Urban communities face a myriad of challenges—concentrated poverty, a slumping economy, institutional racism, drugs and violence, and poor schools and health care. Instead of waiting for outsiders to solve these problems, inner city residents, with support, can come together to work for changes that improve their quality of life, socially and financially. In fact, most urban residents have come to the conclusion that it is futile to wait for any meaningful help to arrive from outside the community.

Even in the poorest neighborhoods, there are individuals and organizations that are resources that can be used to rebuild communities. The challenge is to harness those assets in a socially-responsible and culturally-relevant manner. Programs that validate the voices of inner city residents create empowered communities prepared to pool their energies to make a positive difference.

Authentic access is critical when developing campaigns intended to have a positive impact on the community. Credibility does not occur overnight or easily. Yet, once it is in place, marketers can engage members of the intended target audience not only as message-receivers, but as message-owners. A relationship of trust allows one to perform in-depth qualitative research (take information out), and successfully execute grassroots campaigns and promoters (put information in), whether they are social marketing or consumer product-oriented.

It all comes back to building positive word-of-mouth, an essential ingredient of campaigns that live on beyond the funding and encourage the community to take ownership and responsibility. Grass-roots communication may be considered a back-to-basics approach, but it is one that works. Within communities of color, “word-of-mouth” communication will remain key whether it takes place over the Internet or in the barber shops and beauty salons.

When it comes to making decisions, people tend to ask their friends or family for advice. Once you educate and inform the opinion leaders in urban communities, they become advocates on behalf of your product or message. They in turn persuade any skeptical peers. Such strategies can be used even for campaigns with complex or personal behavior change messages. For example, community-based outreach was used in the NAACP National Voter Fund Campaign, which substantially increased the Black voter turnout in last fall’s elections. Promotional campaigns, designed to increase media ratings, or introduce a new product can also benefit from informed and targeted community outreach.

Most CBOs are committed to responsible access to and interaction with the communities they serve. Once they, along with individual gatekeepers, are assured that a company’s or organization’s intentions are truly socially honorable, they become more receptive to research, intervention campaigns and appropriate consumer marketing within the community.

Bringing together a broad range of community stakeholders with a shared vision of positive change will ultimately strengthen a community’s long-term problem-solving capacities. Religious, cultural, and recreational associations, along with private business, non-profit groups, and institutions, including schools, hospitals, and social service agencies, all have an important role to play. Such relationship building will provide urban communities with the ability to mobilize and use the resources of its members, along with outside resources, to make themselves stronger.

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*“Mobilizing Urban Communities: Re-Building from the Inside Out” was an UrbanTrends issue published by MEE almost a decade ago, with a focus on the social and cultural contexts that impact effective engagement of urban communities. The cover article outlines how to rebuild inner city communities by engaging and mobilizing the people who live there. Access the complete issue online at [www.mee-productions.com/mentalwellness](http://www.mee-productions.com/mentalwellness)*

## MEE’s Community Mobilization Model

As with all of its work, MEE aims to both respect and protect urban neighborhoods across the country. One way to support and strengthen the grassroots organizations who are already doing the important work of serving their communities is to bring them together in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness. Another is providing and fostering mutual support among these community opinion leaders.

The MEE Community Network is a national group of community-based organizations (CBOs) committed to responsible access to and interaction with the community they serve. Its members are the gatekeepers of the community, whose input is critical for effective communications. More than 20,000 CBOs are part of the network, which takes urban word-of-mouth to a whole new level. For two decades, MEE has been using “human-ology”—combining technology with people power—to re-create ancestral villages where the ideas and values which ensured survival and prosperity were shared.

Now, we have incorporated the reach, versatility and immediacy of the Web to create a joint online/offline strategy that engages the Network using multiple platforms. Our Network members have already been connected (to MEE and each other) through traditional digital tactics such as e-mail and a Website. These tactics are supplemented by the use of social media such as Facebook for specific, project-related initiatives. Additionally, MEE is piloting a proprietary, text-based communications platform to enhance engagement and mobilization efforts. Combined with MEE’s grassroots credibility and expertise, these strategies carry critical information into and out of urban communities in new and exciting ways. In the future, partner CBOs will be offered the texting services to facilitate effective communications between the CBOs and those they serve.

To find out more about the Network or to sign up your own community organization, visit [www.meeproductions.com/CommunityNetwork](http://www.meeproductions.com/CommunityNetwork) or contact Community Network Coordinator Christina Upsher at [cupsher@meeproductions.com](mailto:cupsher@meeproductions.com) or 1-877-MEE-PROD.

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## Join the Community Network!



Membership benefits include: being connected with other community leaders across the country making a positive difference through their work; opportunities to share success strategies and lessons learned; and discounts on MEE's award-winning products and communications workshops.

*For more information or to join the Community Network, visit [www.meeproductions.com](http://www.meeproductions.com) and Click on CommunityNetwork or call 1-877-MEE-PROD*

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