

How to Organize an Effective Boycott

1. Why Organize a Boycott?

To “boycott” something is to stop buying it, or in the case of a meeting to refuse to attend the meeting. Consumer boycotts are usually started by citizen groups to try to change a corporation’s policies or activities. Boycotts of meetings are usually organized to try to stop the meeting, or change the agenda of the meeting.

There are dozens of consumer boycotts going on at any time in Canada, let alone around the world. For example, in October 2002 the Canadian Labour Congress (the umbrella group for most unions in Canada) had 15 consumer boycotts listed on its website.

However, as with every area of citizen action, boycotts (especially consumer boycotts) are easy to start, but difficult to use in a way that actually leads to the change you want. Set out below are the key steps any citizen group needs to take in order to win using a boycott. The steps focus on consumer boycotts because when organizing a boycott of a meeting usually the only step is that the citizen groups invited to the meeting agree not to attend through a collective decision-making process. In consumer boycotts, however, citizen groups need to convince other citizens to join them in a much broader campaign.

2. Steps in an Effective Boycott

(a) Prove the Corporation Has Done Something Wrong

The first step in an effective boycott is to do research and find the facts and figures that prove that the company has done something wrong. As you will see below, it is not enough for you alone to think what the company has done is wrong, you are going to have to convince many others as well.

(b) Prove that the Boycott is Necessary

Boycotts are not easy to organize, and you will not be successful if you do not organize effectively. As a result, a boycott is usually not the first step that a citizen group takes to try to change the policies or activities of a corporation. Usually, a citizen group will release a report on the corporation, with the hope that the media will cover the report and the public will call or write and the corporation will make the change. Meetings with corporate representatives may follow, as well as with government officials (especially if many corporations in the same sector have all done something wrong, and a change to a law, regulation or government policy could solve, or help solve, the problem).

However, often a large corporation will not change its policies or activities in response to a bit of media coverage, or a bit of public or government pressure. Corporate representatives may simply disagree that the corporation has done anything wrong, or may hope that the media, public

and government will move on to other issues (which often happens) and the spotlight will no longer be on the corporation. In these cases, a well-organized boycott can keep the spotlight on a corporation.

(c) Set Goals for the Boycott

Sometimes boycotts are planned only to embarrass a corporation in a very public way as one tactic/activity in an overall strategy/approach to push the corporation to change its policies or activities. In this type of boycott, the goal is more to educate the public than it is to have the consumers stop buying the corporation's products or services. You should still set a goal for the boycott of the number of people you will reach with your public education material.

If a boycott is the main or only tactic/activity in a citizen group's strategy/approach, then to be effective the goal has to be to convince enough consumers to stop buying from the corporation to convince the corporation to change its policies and/or activities.

How do you figure out how many consumers you need to convince? You have to do research into the source of the corporation's profits. If a corporation produces a raw material (e.g. oil, logs, fruit, vegetables, grains), then you will likely find that the corporation makes a profit of about 5%-10% each year. In other words, when you subtract the corporation's total costs from its total revenues, what is left over is 5% of the total revenues. For example, if a corporation's total revenues last year was \$100 million, and the corporation's total costs were \$95 million, then its profit was \$5 million (a 5% profit).

If a corporation produces a manufactured product, or a financial service (e.g. TVs, appliances, wine, paper, furniture, banking services, insurance services), then you will likely find that the corporation makes a profit of about 15%-20% each year.

Often you can assume that each consumer buys more or less the same amount from the corporation each year. Your goal is to convince enough consumers to stop buying from the corporation to cut the profit of the corporation to 0%. Therefore, if you are organizing a boycott of a corporation that produces a raw material, you have to convince 5%-10% of the corporation's customers to stop buying from the corporation. For a corporation that manufactures something, or provides financial services, you have to convince 15%-20% of the customers to stop buying.

If you do not have the resources and a plan that will reach this goal, you should realize that you will probably need more than a boycott to convince the corporation to change.

(d) Launch the Boycott Very Publicly

Again, the key to an effective boycott is to convince many consumers to participate. It is always good to start with a very public launch that receives lots of media coverage that will reach lots of consumers. Make sure you are ready, however, with a website or information telephone number people can call to find out more information who see you in the media and want to participate in the boycott.

(e) Build the Boycott Counting Total Support

From the mid-1960s through to the late 1970s, people who pick grapes and lettuce in California (mainly people who moved back and forth across the border with Mexico) launched a consumer boycott to win the right to organize a union. The grape boycott became one of the largest citizen actions in the history of the U.S., and the leaders of the workers, especially Cesar Chavez, became well-known. Chavez was once asked the best way to organize people, and he said simply: “First you talk to one person, then another, then another . . .” During the first 5 years of the boycott, 1,500 people across the U.S. volunteered full-time to knock on doors and talk to one person, then another, then another, and by 1970 the boycott was large enough that the growers changed their policy and a union, the United Farm Workers, was formed.

In the mid-1980s, Chavez and the grape workers tried to organize another boycott, this time to stop the use of pesticides on grapes. Times had changed, however, and it was not so easy to find 1,500 people to volunteer to knock on doors across the country --in fact it did not happen. Despite regular national TV coverage, the boycott did not grow at the same rate, and in the end all of the boycott’s goals were not won.

The lessons from these two boycotts are many. First, the boycott took 5 years before the goal of the boycott was won (so don’t expect that your boycott will be a short-term campaign tactic). Second, it has become more difficult to organize people in North America, especially if you are asking them to change their habits (such as their buying habits). Organizing has likely become more difficult in part because many more citizen groups are trying to organize on many more issues than 30 years ago, in part because in many more families both parents are working (which means there are fewer volunteers available for citizen action efforts), in part because many organizing efforts have failed to win changes and as a result many people who used be active citizens have “given up”, and for other reasons as well.

Two key things you can do in response are first, make sure you set realistic goals so you don’t disappoint yourselves, or others. To give another example of the difficulties of changing people’s buying habits, consider the reality of fair trade coffee-buying in Canada. There is clear evidence that coffee growers in developing countries are not paid fairly for the coffee they grow (they receive only 1%-5% of the price that Canadians pay for coffee), and that growing coffee harms their environment. There has been a lot of media coverage about “fair trade coffee” for which growers are paid fairly, and often it is grown differently to reduce harm to the environment. However, despite the media coverage and public education campaigns by Canadian development groups in the past few years, less than 1% of coffee sold in Canada is fair trade coffee.

A second key thing is to keep track of people who have committed to your boycott, building momentum by regularly and publicly announcing the totals as the boycott grows and passes milestones (for example, every time 100 or 1,000 people join the boycott, or 10 or 50 groups pass a resolution endorsing the boycott).

Other than these two key things, in order to organize a successful boycott you will likely have to do all of the things that any public education campaign needs to do to reach the majority of

people in your community, or province, or country (for example, get other citizen groups involved (and organize a coalition or network to back the boycott), hold events, knock on doors, set up information tables in malls and on the streets, send out mass emails, get lots of media coverage, set up a website, and get celebrities to endorse the boycott).

(f) Don't Forget Big Customers

In the early 1990s, a Canadian group called Friends of the Lubicon launched a consumer boycott against Daishowa, a logging and paper company. Daishowa was proposing to cut down trees on land in Alberta that was claimed by the Lubicon Nation. The land claim was still being negotiated between the Nation and the government, and the boycott was aimed at stopping logging on the land until the land claim was settled.

In the late 1990s, Greenpeace Canada began a boycott of several logging companies in B.C. with the aim of stopping the companies from cutting down old-growth forests.

Both of these boycotts aimed initially at other corporations who bought the products of the logging companies, instead of first trying to convince individuals to stop buying from the companies. The reasons they tried to convince other corporations to boycott the logging companies are that very few individuals buy logs, and the companies each had a few large corporate customers buying lumber, paper and other wood products from them.

Both citizen groups did their research to find out which corporations were the largest customers of the logging companies, and then they launched what could be called "2nd level" boycotts of these corporations. For example, the U.S. retail store Home Depot buys lumber from B.C. logging companies to sell to its customers, so Greenpeace publicized this and called on customers of Home Depot to boycott the store until Home Depot changed its policy and told the B.C. companies it would no longer buy lumber that came from old-growth logs.

Friends of the Lubicon targeted Pizza Pizza, which was a large customer of Daishowa, and called on customers of Pizza Pizza to boycott the pizza store until Pizza Pizza stopped buying paper from Daishowa. Both boycott campaigns were successful.

Such "2nd level" boycotts can also target governments. Governments, municipal, provincial and federal, buy a lot of products and services. If a government is a big customer of a corporation you are targeting with a boycott, it can be very effective to push the government join your boycott and stop buying from the corporation.

3. Conclusion

Boycotts can be an effective tactic/activity for either public education and/or for changing the policies and/or activities of large corporations. Boycotts of meetings can be effective for changing the policies and/or activities of both corporations and governments. However, as with every other citizen action, the more planning that goes into a boycott, and the more citizen groups that work together on a boycott, the more likely the boycott will actually win its goals.