

Building a Communication Strategy for a Public Hearing

A **public hearing** is a live meeting where the public can provide verbal testimony on a proposed policy, rule or regulation—often in front of decision-makers or a regulatory body. The goal is to advocate or raise awareness about need for the policy in real-time.

Public hearings are critical moments in an advocacy campaign to strategically use earned, owned and paid media to influence decision-makers and shape public narratives. They allow you to make an impression face-to-face (or screen-to-screen) and present a valuable opportunity to activate the networks you’ve been building—demonstrating broad support, shaping the policy, driving participation and increasing pressure for policy change.

Overview of Steps

Step 1: Define Goals and Gather Hearing Information

Step 2: Map Committee Members

Step 3: Identify and Prepare Speakers

Step 4: Develop Tactics for Grassroots and Grasstops Advocacy

1 Define Goals and Gather Hearing Information

Your first step is to determine your goal for the public hearing—are you trying to persuade decision-makers? Mobilize public opinion? Show broad support or opposition for the proposed policy? Elevate specific voices (e.g., youth, health experts, affected communities)?

Once you know what you want to achieve through the public hearing, you should gather information about the structure and purpose of the hearing to define your strategy. You may want to consider:

1. Is the hearing open to the public?
 - Most public hearings are open, but not all allow public testimony.

- Some may be "listening sessions" with limited or no opportunity for public comment.
- Others may be invite-only or held during working hours, which affects turnout.

2. What is the hearing's purpose? To gather input, vote on a bill or comply with a legal requirement?

3. How is the hearing structured?

- Will there be a presentation first (e.g., from policymakers or sponsors)?
- Is there a Q&A or just testimony?
- Are opposing sides separated or alternated?

4. How do people register to speak?

- Online form? On-site sign-up? Deadline to register?
- Are speakers chosen first-come-first-served or pre-selected?
- Is there a time limit (usually 2–3 minutes per speaker)?

5. Can written testimony also be submitted? If yes, find out if there is a deadline for submission and any format or length requirements.

2 Map Committee Members

Next you should map committee members and their support for the policy so you understand your audience and can tailor your messaging to the knowledge of the decision-making body, the policy process and what each audience cares about. A sample audience mapping template is below.

Name	Interest in the Issue	Level of Opposition/Support	Key Messages	Preferred Messengers

3 Identify and Prepare Speakers

Once you understand who is allowed to give testimony during the public hearings and know which messengers will be most influential to the committee members, you can choose speakers that can help achieve your goal (e.g. persuade decision-makers, mobilize public opinion, show broad support or opposition for the proposed policy, elevate specific voices).

Choose speakers who are:

- Credible/knowledgeable (e.g., doctors, parents, youth, academics, national or global experts)
- Relatable (share personal or community stories)
- Diverse in background and experience (to reflect broad support)

Consider a lead speaker to set the tone and anchor the message. Provide talking points, coaching and timing guidance for your speakers.

- Combine facts and emotion: data to show impact, stories to make it real.
- Make your ask clear and direct.
- Tailor messages to your audience—what do the decision-makers care about?
- Keep it brief, you often have just 2–3 minutes.

4 Develop Tactics for Grassroots and Grasstops Advocacy

Driving meaningful change requires a dual approach: directly engaging decision-makers to take action (grasstops), while simultaneously mobilizing the public to create pressure from the ground up (grassroots).

GRASSTOPS: Leveraging Decision Makers and Opinion Leaders as Influencers

Engaging decision-makers and opinion leaders to participate in the public hearing can lend credibility to your ask and speak to experiences from other countries, showing breadth of support.

Examples:

- Identify global experts and local experts who can participate in the public hearings.

- Draft and place opinion editorial by global experts participating in the hearings. Timing should coincide with the week of the hearings and counter any anticipated attacks by the industry.
- Reach out to the Minister of Health communications team to explore if they will issue a press release or other earned media activities in support of the policy the week of the hearings.
- Outreach to WHO office to see if they will issue a public statement in support of the policy and participate in the public hearings.
- Engage political parties and decision-makers directly on social media, thanking those who support the policy and calling out those who don't.
- Develop social media cards featuring images and quotes from prominent persons talking about why we should support the policy. You could also tag reporters if the support is newsworthy.
- Ask experts to share snippets of their testimony via social channels and tag decision-makers or reporters, if relevant.

GRASSTOPS: Generating Traditional Media Coverage

You can sway opinion among decision-makers and the public in the period leading up to, during and after the public hearings by generating media coverage.

Examples:

- Set up desk-side meetings with key reporters in advance of the hearings to present them with a succinct media kit with key data around the policy and list of experts/spokespeople who can serve as sources. The list should include critical columnists and influential journalists.
- Publish an online press release to get some of the facts out ahead of time (this could be boosted on social media).

GRASSROOTS

Raising awareness among the public about the public hearing allows you to activate networks to participate in or attend the hearings, with the goal of demonstrating to decision-makers that there is public support for the policy.

Examples - Mobilizing Citizen Participation/Action to Support the Policy:

- Host an online live event in advance of the hearing featuring an expert demystifying the policy.
- Live event – if public hearings are open to the public, explore doing a live event from the hearings to share through Facebook, etc.

- If the hearing is broadcast online, encourage the public to watch in real-time and share positive comments.
- Create an interactive experience for the public that demonstrates the need for the policy (e.g. try to guess the FOPWL different foods would have, etc. - Contact GHAI for examples of these types of displays).
- Petitions delivered as official testimony or attachments. Share copies with the media once received by the concerned committees and stakeholders to expand coverage opportunities.
- Email action tools with pre-filled language (but editable).
- Offline tools like postcard campaigns, community signature drives.
- Engage other organizations to activate networks via digital channels and email/WhatsApp.
- Encourage written testimony from those who can't attend. You could develop an online vehicle to collect comments that can be compiled and hand-delivered to the committee during the hearings. Depending on the content, identify ways to highlight compelling excerpts visually at public rally or via digital platforms.
- Public rally or demonstration with coalition members visually demonstrating the health impact of UPPs and/or wearing a common shirt or color to signify support for the policy. Activate online supporters by inviting them to engage in these off-line activities.
- Use email lists to send targeted messages to specific geographic areas, highlighting local support or opposition to generate either a micro "thank you" campaign or a protest campaign, as appropriate.
- Phone calls/phone banks: Host an afternoon where people decision-makers to ask them to support/kill the bill. You can also develop a script to share with supporters via email and schedule a mass call in day before a critical vote.