Kicking Butt

How to plan a punchy AIDS action

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When an uncaring bureaucrat needs a kick in the butt, when a greedy drug company needs to be shamed, when a politician who cuts lifesaving services needs a comeuppance or when a deadly policy killing PWAs needs to be exposed, nothing works better than direct action.

In its many forms, direct action is the biggest, baddest and meanest stick in the arsenal of AIDS activists. Those in the corridors of power, whether government or corporate, simply don't like to be its focus. It embarasses them, exposes them and, if done well, really disrupts their workday.

Types of Actions

Among the most popular and effective types of direct action are the *picket line*, the *march*, the *die-in* and the *zap*. Any of these can include a *civil disobedience* component. Each has a unique purpose, to be used strategically for the desired impact.

Picket lines. A picket line is a legal demonstration by a group of people with fact sheets and posters walking and chanting in a circle in front of a specified site. The First Amendment guarantees the right of free speech, and as long as you stay on public property, keep the line moving and leave room for pedestrians, you're not breaking the law, no matter what the police say. Similarly, handing out fact sheets at the demonstration site or in any public space is perfectly legal.

Marches and die-ins. If you move your picket from point A to point B, you have a march. Other popular variations include the sit-in, kiss-in and the ever-popular (and very photogenic) die-in. A die-in is when protesters lie down on the ground to represent the thousands who have died or are being killed by the policies or neglect of your target. Sometimes protesters carry cardboard tombstones with names or slogans, and other times the "dead" bodies are outlined in chalk with messages written in.

Zaps. Whereas larger demonstrations tend to be symbolic, the zap is focused on a specific target or goal. Zaps can take any form, from pickets to disruptions of speeches and meetings, to simply the disruption caused by distributing information (safe-sex information, condoms or fact sheets) where it's unexpected.

Civil disobedience. Civil disobedience, a direct action in which participants purposely risk arrest, can include everything from a sit-in at a culprit's office to blocking traffic.

Tools for Successful Actions

Getting out your message. You will want fact sheets, chants and visuals. Fact sheets clearly outline why you are protesting and what your demands are. Chants help get your information out to the public (and the media) in short, memorable sound bites ("Women with AIDS under attack! What do we do? ACT UP, Fight Back!"). They also keep momentum going. Sympathetic visuals are crucial in getting your message across to the public-and especially key for the media. A picture is worth a thousand words. Visuals can include posters, banners (carried or hung from windows), red tape, handcuffs, bedsheets, clown masks or costumes. Have fun, be creative-just get your message out. Designate a media-liaison coordinator to ensure each reporter gets written material and interviews.

Logistics. Choose the "where" and "when" of your action with care. Scout out the location ahead of time, preferably at the same time of day as your action. (If a march is planned, walk the route.) This will give you a truer picture of traffic and security concerns. In deciding when to hold your demo, remember that certain days and times are better for media coverage (Monday through Thursday, early in the day, are best-or you can try to get a live feed on the evening news), traffic (rush hours and lunch time) and turnout (before or after work, lunch hours and weekends).

Marshals. It's important to have members of your group acting as marshals or peacekeepers to help facilitate the action. Their main job is to serve as a buffer between the demonstrators and the police or any other unfriendly presence. They can also inform participants of changing plans or emergencies. They do not police the demo.

Legal support. The job of legal-support people is to observe-not participate in-the action and write down any "happenings" with police, paying particular attention to names and badge numbers. They need not be lawyers, but it's wise to have a lawyer on-site or on-call, just in case. Even when no one *intends* to risk arrest, one or two support people should be prepared to track any arrestees until they're released.

Contingency plans. Thing things through: What if you can't get your preferred site, or the group is larger or smaller than planned? What if it rains or you have to get out of there quickly? The biggest "what if" is always the police, which is why marshals and legal-support people are your best protection against the unexpected.

Adapted by permission from a posting on the ACT UP/New York website at http://www.actupny.org/PA.html.

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