

Picture New York...Without Pictures of New York

How a group of fast-acting artists and activists prevented the City of New York from strangling independent media

Written by Free Range Studios and Beka Economopoulos

In May 2007, the New York City Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting (MOFTB) released a new set of regulations to codify the rights of media makers on the streets of New York. The proposed regulations severely limited the freedom of independent and amateur photographers by requiring any group of two or more people to get a city permit, and \$1 million in liability insurance, before using a camera in a single public location for more than a half hour (including setup and breakdown time). The regulation also applied to any group of five or more people using a tripod for more than ten minutes.

Though barely covered in the media, a few independent artists, filmmakers and photographers got wind of these regulations. Knowing they only had a short time to act before MOFTB's public comment period ended, they formed an ad hoc coalition to organize a response.



The Campaign

Not An Alternative, a group of artists and activists in Brooklyn with a history of staging campaigns centered on visually compelling props, convened a large scale brainstorming meeting just three weeks before the deadline for public comments. From this meeting, a campaign name, media strategy and organizing tactics were agreed upon and a core steering committee of 10 people was formed. The “Picture New York... Without Pictures of New York” campaign was created to flood the MOFTB with multimedia comments in objection to their proposed regulations and build media buzz leading up to a live protest.

How Did They Do It?

Organizing is critical

“Picture New York Without Pictures of New York” is a perfect example of how to leverage Web 2.0 strategies to effect real-life change. The campaign was successful because it implemented both on and offline organizing tactics that centered on the same narrative: What would New York be like without the iconic images and media that tell the story of the city? Because the campaign explicitly affected artists, photographers, and filmmakers, leveraging user-generated content was key to moving people to action and providing visual impact. The campaign encouraged participation and drew significant media attention with the following tactics:

Offline Resources

- » *Public Brainstorming Meeting.* Using an existing art gallery called The Change You Want To See, the ad hoc coalition was able to come together in one intensive session to plan the campaign.
- » *Props.* A campaign narrative does not resonate without compelling imagery to support it. The ubiquitous campaign image of a stenciled Bolex camera was mounted on

cardboard and served as a campaign icon for the rally. It also increased the impact of photographs in the press and images on TV.

- » *Prop Making.* Campaign leaders welcomed journalists to prop-making sessions to create another “event” to be captured in the press. The visibility of the prop-making sessions heightened the grassroots feel of the campaign and raised the buzz around the impending rally that would be held in Union Square. Utilizing a grassroots aesthetic was also a way of connecting the group visually to the aesthetic of other preexisting first amendment focused campaigns.
- » *New York Imagery and Media.* The campaign asked people to submit imagery of what New York means to them through video and photos, allowing the offline media to tell the same story that “Picture New York” was telling on its website.

Online Resources

- » *Re-Use of a Campaign Website.* Using the existing infrastructure of a WordPress site from a previous campaign, Picture New York created a campaign site that allowed people to upload media, stay up to date, and sign a petition to the MOFTB.
- » *YouTube.com & Flickr.com.* The campaign website was designed around a Flickr feed. People submitted their own photos and videos of New York, which were shown on the site and kept it fresh: <http://www.pictureeny.org/archives/category/youtube-videos>
- » *Organizing Wiki and conference calls.* To minimize the need for in person meetings, the core strategy team created a wiki to divide up responsibilities, coordinate outreach and events, and collaboratively write press releases and written materials. A free conference call service, Freeconferencecall.com, was used for daily lunch hour

- conference calls, which offered an easy way to make plans, discuss strategy, and clear up confusion as most of the core team had day jobs and some were not as wiki-savvy as others.
- » *Web Banners and Blog Ads.* Web banners were designed to allow for mass distribution throughout blogs, websites and social networking sites.
 - » *CitizenSpeak.org.* The campaign integrated the CitizenSpeak e-action tool, www.citizenspeak.org, which allows anyone to set up and track an e-mail advocacy campaign. It allowed for tendering and forwarding emails from the public to key New York decision makers in the MOFTB and City Council.
 - » *DemocracyInAction.org.* This online tool was used to manage online contacts and send email blasts.
 - » *And More and More Coverage:* The campaign was featured on the cover of AM New York and Metro NY and ran in every major NYC paper and several NY Times stories. An Associated Press story ran in The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Newsday, The Philadelphia Daily News, The Guardian (UK), The International Herald Tribune, ABC News, and at least 100 other news outlets. The rally was covered live on ABC Local News and NY 1. <http://www.pictureny.org/archives/category/press-clip>
 - » *Increased awareness about larger issues.* The Picture New York campaign did not just seek to restore the freedom of the press or the freedom to photograph in public. On a broader scale, it addressed the privatization of public space, and stood for civil liberties and constitutional rights that were being infringed upon by those in power in New York City.

Results

- » *Retraction of the MOFTB's proposed regulations.* In roughly 3 weeks, the Campaign was successful at halting the progress of the proposed regulations. The MOFTB reluctantly recognized the public disapproval and is now in the process of drafting a revision. The campaign is standing by waiting for next steps.
- » *Public Rally with over 700 participants.*
- » *Local and international press coverage.* The New York Times article "Picturing Protest, Artists Organize to Fight Camera Permit Proposal," was published just a few days after the campaign began to ramp up. Because the issue directly affected the media, countless media outlets including the Associated Press and local television news stations turned their ears to Picture New York.

Petition language: The right to photograph in public space is established by the First Amendment, which states that, "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble." These rights are not the City's possession to take away, or to restrict to the point where such free expression is rendered impossible. The impact on public space of the types of activities you propose to regulate are so minimal that requiring permits is an undue burden towards exercising First Amendment rights.

Activist language: The 1st Amendment Is My Permit!

Note: This was deliberate on the part of the campaign. Understanding that the issue would be popular, the framing and messaging they chose was broader, specifically connecting the film/photo regulations to other active public space and civil liberties campaigns.

Why Did It Work?

- » It was named. This campaign was pinpointed with a headline. “Picture New York Without Pictures of New York” was the perfect distillation of the issue and its potential consequence: a city with rules so strict that pictures would no longer be taken of New York. People could immediately react to this simple but descriptive tag.
- » It was strategically organized. Bringing people together and delegating responsibilities based on people’s skills and talents was key to the campaign’s success. The core organizers contributed their applicable experience in other fields, especially art and activism. By leveraging people’s existing strengths, the campaign was able to creatively and quickly mobilize the public around a cause.
- » It was relevant. Everyone, from tourists to the media to professional photographers, takes for granted the freedom to take photos. Framing the campaign around a single issue with mass appeal and then broadening it to encompass the first amendment, engaged both traditional and nontraditional activists. It was a topic that was relevant in people’s lives.
- » It was accessible. Use of the Internet was absolutely key. Members of the organizational committee all had other jobs and responsibilities, so it was critical for organizers to have easy access to the components of the campaign. This was made possible entirely through the Internet.
- » It was connected. The Picture New York website delivered up-to-the-minute campaign information both to those involved and to the general public. A call on the website was made for YouTube videos and photos in order to support the very medium that the MOFTB was attempting to regulate.



PICTURE NEW YORK WITHOUT PICTURES OF NEW YORK

FIGHT BACK AGAINST NEW YORK CITY'S PROPOSED
FILMMAKING AND PHOTOGRAPHY REGULATIONS.
THE PERIOD OF PUBLIC COMMENT ENDS AUGUST 3, 2007
SO TAKE ACTION NOW!

SIGN THE PETITION AT WWW.PICTURENEWYORK.ORG

CONTACT THE MAYOR'S OFFICE OF FILM
AT 212-489-6710 OR EMAIL jcho@film.nyc.gov

REMEMBER: THE FIRST AMENDMENT IS MY PERMIT!

- » It was networked. Picture New York didn’t have an existing email list of supporters. In order to make public comments and petition signatures rise exponentially, organizers prioritized activating nodes of influence by emailing and phonebanking organizations with newsletters and bloggers with broad reach.
- » It was collaborative. Press releases and letters were not written individually but collaboratively through an Internet wiki, which organizers could contribute to and edit from anywhere at any time. By sharing skills and information, press outreach and written content was optimized and tasks could be delegated quickly.
- » It was collective. The Picture New York online petition became emblematic of the collective energy of the campaign. This online petition was so well received that at one point it logged a hundred signatures per minute.

Then, with over 35,800 signatures collected electronically in ten days, a complete 3-ream printout of the petition was sent to the MOFTB.

- » It was shareable. Picture New York banner ads and flyers were designed to raise Internet awareness about the campaign. Supporters could post hotlinked banners on their blogs, websites, and social networking profiles and a click would take viewers to PictureNY.org. The banners read, “The 1st amendment is my permit!” with a camera icon—a simple visual metaphor to describe the issue at hand.

The posters were also downloadable so volunteers could distribute them at several outdoor summer film festivals that were taking place.

Find Out More

You can check out the Picture New York campaign at PictureNY.org, where there are links to the campaign’s media coverage, press releases, Flickr feeds, YouTube videos, and the online petition.

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