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How to pick a birth-control battle

By Sarah Brown

All things contraception are red hot at present. The war over birth control has now engulfed the administration, the Catholic Church, the presidential campaign, the Komen Foundation, numerous women's groups, cyberspace and more.

Because of the issues addressed by my group, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, I am now flooded with endless emails requesting that I and my group express public outrage at one or another party in this fight and sign on to various petitions, letters and screeds. Would we tweet about X? Call on our friends in states to contact their representatives in Washington to say Y and Z? Attend this meeting and be on that call? Activate our prominent board? And please send money.

A few years ago the hot issue was federal funding for abstinence education. Again, would we please email, call, organize, alert, write and opine, preferably in the major news media. And then there is the perennial battle over U.S. funding for international family planning efforts. And parental consent for teens to get contraception. And whether the issue of statutory rape should have a higher profile in family planning clinics that serve teens. And what about men? And...well.

As the CEO of my group, I am often in the position of deciding which battle to pick and what tactic to take, even if we do decide we want to enter the fray in a public way. Although I would like to say that I have an orderly process of deciding when to weigh in, it is as much intuitive as it is rational. Still, there are questions I ask myself before deciding where to plant a stake.

Do we have anything interesting and important to say about the topic?

If not, why put out a press statement or do some other public thing? Even simple statements take time to craft, and it's not worth the effort if I am quite sure that no one will attend to our views.

Even if we do have something interesting to say, will we be group number 59,034,985 saying it?

I have never been really impressed by petitions. It all feels very "me, too"-ish and therefore not that effective. I think this is a minority view. A major exception is if a close personal friend or colleague asks for the support. Friendship matters.

Will taking action be consistent with our organizational mission and our carefully crafted positions and values?

Case in point: From Day One (16 years ago this month), the National Campaign has said that we are a research-based organization. This sounds quite anodyne, but in the recent wars over funding for abstinence-only programs, this posture was not always popular. We said, in essence, "in the war between comprehensive sex education and abstinence-only education, we come down on the side of science." This has meant that we have been open to supporting abstinence programs if evaluation data show that they helped young people postpone sex. In many left/liberal quarters, this posture has been deeply unpopular.

I also ask myself whether taking action will violate or support another core organizational attribute, which is respecting the role of faith and values — in this case, in the areas of sexual activity and the use of contraception.

Returning then to the issues front and center this week — the Catholic Church, health insurance and contraception — I am not yet sure what we should or will do. We cannot stay silent, as contraception is critical to women's health and well-being, is used by almost every woman in America at some point in her life, and has been one of the main driving forces behind the remarkable decline in teen pregnancy since the early 1990s (down by more than 40 percent).

On the other hand, faith and values are deeply influential in sexual behavior, and virtually all major religions express

views about what constitutes moral behavior in this area. In addition, people of good will on both sides of the religious and constitutional questions make persuasive cases for their views.

While charting a course in this volatile area, I find myself reflecting on a bit of wisdom that a mentor of mine years ago used to say often: When you are not sure what to do, seek additional information and advice. It is terrific guidance, as long as it does not lead to avoiding tough choices, and it is one I have relied on often. So, today and this week, I will be on the phone a lot, especially with many members of our governing board, which includes a wide diversity of opinion on this very topic. (Stay tuned.)

And finally, I reflect often on the concept of less is more.

Our group cannot be effective advocates or spokespeople for too many issues. Part of the calculus of choosing battles is assessing overall organizational capacity and strength. It is often better to work hard in a limited number of areas than to become spread too thin. Sounds obvious, but I suspect that for most nonprofits, and surely for ours, drawing a clear perimeter around what we work on and what is peripheral is hard.

By the way, while on the topic of leadership, may I conclude by saying it is not lonely at the top? It is a privilege and an honor. I have often said that my issues — preventing teen and unplanned pregnancy, especially among single young adults — bring out the worst in people. It is all so personal, isn't it? Everyone has a story and a set of experiences and views, and although science is sometimes helpful in charting a path forward, few issues seem as sensitive and impervious to calm analysis or discussion as those that address anything between the navel and the knees.

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