

What Can John Oliver Teach Us About Issue Advocacy?

FEBRUARY 11, 2016 | KRIS FETTERMAN, BLUE ENGINE MEDIA

More than laughs, John Oliver's segments on *Last Week Tonight* follow a multi-step method that issue advocates can follow too.

Don't laugh – but a late night TV host could teach us something about issue advocacy. On HBO's *Last Week Tonight*, comedian John Oliver aims his wit (and sometimes adult language) at complex issues that fall outside the full spotlight of the 24 hour news cycle: food, net neutrality, U.S. territories, military interpreters, and for-profit prisons. More than just laughing, he wants to get his audience thinking. And as *LWT* returns from a mid-season hiatus on Sunday, February 14, he's got us thinking about more than those *issues* – but better *issue advocacy*.

Why? Because Oliver's routine on *Last Week Tonight* isn't just setup and punchline. His segments follow "[Monroe's Motivated Sequence](#)": a multi-step method popular with politicians, government officials, and now TV comedy hosts, to persuade audiences. The steps? Grab attention, present the problem, sell the solution, and ask for action. Following this sequence, Oliver and his staff create engaging, often illuminating TV. And it works. One of Oliver's segments helped drive 300,000 emails and 45,000 comments to the Federal Communication Commission, [breaking the record](#) for FCC comments and even [breaking the FCC's website](#). That's engaging an audience. Issue advocates everywhere can do the same, making their case through compelling op-eds, speeches, and other message-driven products. Here's how:

For more on John Oliver, [check out another BE Insight](#) from my colleague Allison.

1. Grab Attention



Last Week Tonight/HBO via YouTube

It starts with the opening line. Oliver often tells a joke, but as professional advocates, not professional comedians, we should use comedy more cautiously. Instead, present a counter-intuitive concept, an eye-catching statistic, or an engaging anecdote. Because on TV and online, once audiences are bored, they're gone. So like Oliver, pique your audience's interest, stir their curiosity, and grab their attention – right from the start.

2. Present the Problem



Last Week Tonight/HBO via YouTube

Once you've got their attention, tell them what needs to be fixed. Like Oliver, show your audience what's wrong with the world – a mindset, a behavior, a law – so you can move them to make it right.

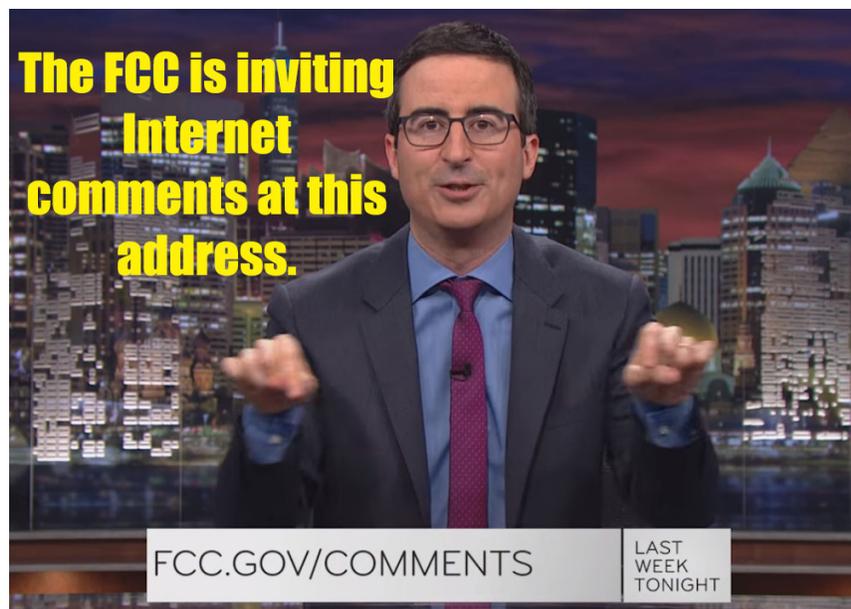
3. Sell the Solution



Last Week Tonight/HBO via YouTube

Don't just tell them the problem, sell them the solution. Oliver sells his audience on a solution to address food waste. As he explains: "*Large corporations already get one. But annoyingly, that same break for small businesses is not a permanent part of the tax code.*" A law needs changed? An agency needs to act? Explain the fix.

4. Ask for Action



John Oliver is British, but not perfect. Sometimes, he doesn't ask his audience to take action. He – and issue advocates everywhere – should. It's the all-important final step. And when Oliver does ask for action, his audience responds. Remember the *LWT* segment that crashed the FCC's site? In it, Oliver asked the audience for an easy, immediate action – comment on a website. Even better – ask for an action that your campaign could capture and activate again later – like tweeting with a hashtag or signing an online petition. But ultimately, like Oliver, if you're trying to move your audience, they have to take a step.

Issue advocates don't have to make their audience laugh, but they should make good use of their words and make their audience think. And hopefully act. John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*, shows us how to do all three. So if you're interested in creating compelling op-eds, speeches, or blog posts, try this multi-step method. It's no joke.