

Five minute handbook on RKBA

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I've been a gun rights activist for nearly 10 years. I wasted a lot of time for the first 5 years because no one gave me the rule book you are now reading. Maybe that's because no one had written it. This is the stuff I wish I had known starting on day one.

If you've just arrived at this party, the next 5 minutes you spend reading this might save you 5 years of otherwise wasted time and energy. If you've been in the gun rights game for a while, this handbook will be the fastest refresher course you've ever taken.

This past year I've received a lot of mail from jittery gun owners who are finally waking up to what's happening to our right to keep and bear arms (RKBA). This handbook is mostly for them.

If the rules I list below scare off a few folks, so be it. I want to tell it like it really is -- to give a quick snapshot of the tips, tricks and tactics that actually work in RKBA activism.

The bad news is that this is not a complete list of the rules.

The good news is that there will never be a complete list of rules.

The rules listed below are based on my own experience from working thousands of hours with down and dirty RKBA activist pros. I am deeply grateful to all of them. They know who they are.

Some of these rules have been followed for so long by old-time activists that they have forgotten what the original rules were.

It's time to list them again.

And sneak in a couple of new ones.

So read them and weep, or read them and rejoice.

NO ONE IS AS INTERESTED AS YOU ARE.

Nowadays everyone's attention span and time are limited. Be grateful if you get anyone's attention on our issue, even for a few seconds. Some wannabe activists come in like a lion, then disappear faster than sh*t through a short dog. Take whatever you get from any volunteer. Praise and thank them. Don't be disappointed when they drift away. They will. But some come back. Keep the light on for them.

THE NRA STINKS.

So does GOA, SAF, JPFO, and any or all of the rest of the gun rights organizations. At the same time, all of these organizations are the best thing since sliced bread. We won't keep our rights without them. It's normal to love them and hate them at the same time. Be sure your complaints about them go to the person who can do something about your problem. Never give up your membership -- it's much easier to fix things from the inside. Avoid griping in public -- our opponents love it when we do. Always handle our dirty laundry behind closed doors. Always.

THERE IS NO MAGIC BULLET.

There is no single answer, rule, or solution. Never has been, and never will be. None of us will write the single brilliant letter to the editor or internet message that will miraculously turn everything around. Keep steadily busy. Do as much as you can, whenever you can. Anything you do counts, but some things count more than others. Find out what counts. Then do it.

THERE IS NO FINAL VICTORY.

Preserving RKBA is an ongoing PROCESS. We are winning and losing battles during this process, but the war will never be over. Becoming active to keep your gun rights is a lot like cleaning your house: it's thankless and boring work, but necessary. Like dirt, the antigun crowd will just keep coming back. Forever. Your activism will keep us winning more than losing. Our opponents count on wearing us down. They love it when one of us (not you, of course) gets discouraged and drops out. When you fully understand and accept the reality that RKBA is a never-ending struggle, you're automatically in the top 5 percent of all RKBA defenders. Congratulations.

RKBA ACTIVISM IS BORING.

It's especially boring when you are doing things that really make a difference. Most of us want drama. We want to be entertained. Phone bank calling, precinct walking, going to RKBA grassroots seminars -- suddenly, even a trip to the dentist for a root canal will start to look better. Sorry, but there is no workaround on this aspect. Freedom is not free. It's a pain in the ass. Get used to it, get over it, and get to work.

USE THE POWER OF FEAR AND GUILT.

Gun owners are susceptible to these emotions. Awaken sleeping RKBA activists by tapping these powerful emotions. Fear and guilt will move mountains -- and fill the collection plate, and recruit new members. If gun owners won't become active for themselves, ask them to do it for their families. For their children. For their country. And -- this tactic works! -- ask them to do it for YOU.

WATCH OUT FOR MISDIRECTED, TIME-WASTING EFFORTS.

E-mail to elected people is pretty much worthless -- unless the official already personally knows you. Internet polls are useless. Online polls make some folks think they are actually doing something. They are not. It's a false sense of accomplishment. It's like bringing a doctor to a dead man. Focus on the stuff that works. If you're going to hunt ducks, go where the ducks are.

POLITICIANS ONLY CARE ABOUT VOTES AND MONEY.

In-person visits, phone calls, and snail-mailed, handwritten letters to elected folks help -- because politicians know that if you take this much trouble, you and your family and friends will also vote.

HOT TIP: Make yourself known to politicians for issues other than gun rights. Don't present yourself as a single-issue person. Praise and help politicians on THEIR pet projects. Then, when a new gun control law comes up, your opinion will seem especially credible. Otherwise, you will soon be stereotyped and discounted as a single-issue voter.

ANOTHER HOT TIP: Politicians have to explain why they vote 'Yes' or 'No' on proposed laws. Sometimes they really need your help in composing explanations to their constituents. If you want your elected official to vote 'No' on a seemingly popular new gun control law, she [or he] might be more willing to vote your way if you give her a "back door" -- a good, common sense explanation that she can give to all of her constituents.

GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN OFFICE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

If we have the right people in power, antigun laws will not be passed. Period. The laws are what matter. This concept is so simple that many folks can't see it, just like they can't "see" the air they breathe. The anti-rights crowd can hold all the gun control seminars and news conferences they want, but nothing will happen unless they can pass more laws. This fact tells you about the how, what, where, when, why, and with whom you should be spending your time, energy, and money. Politicians pass laws. Therefore, you must get involved in politics to protect your gun rights. There is just no way to get around this. Sorry. I don't like politics either. Bummer!

STOP THE SABER RATTLING -- NOW!

Avoid those shrill folks who sound threatening or talk about doomsday. It's a waste of your time. These noisy folks remind me of a couple in a failing marriage who only talk about a getting a divorce instead of talking about their real problems. If they don't solve their problems, separation or divorce becomes the inevitable outcome. Some people get pumped up on silly fantasy scenarios. I do not.

ARM YOURSELF WITH ACCURATE INFORMATION.

Paradoxically, bad information or disinformation is a plague in the so-called Information Age. When you write or talk about firearms issues, use only the facts, the truth, and the provable. Verify any quotes that you use. Back up your generalizations with powerful and specific examples. Get on the internet, and get your like-minded friends online. Join several of the hundreds of net communities that will keep you informed instantly and completely about our special issues. Information is power!

IGNORE MEDIA SPIN AND THE NEWS WAVES.

It's far too easy to go bonkers reacting to the latest media-driven crisis. Don't let the media push your buttons. The RKBA grassroots pros I know do not overreact to crises. In fact, most of the ultra-pros that I know do not react at all to media hysteria. Bashing the media about their bias is not productive. Some gun owners use media bias as an excuse to do nothing -- because the situation seems so overwhelming and hopeless. Truth is, if you are a busy activist -- already steadily doing stuff that matters -- you will find the media reacting to YOU. Be friendly and polite with them -- not hostile. Become a reliable source of information for them. And just keep on being ACTIVE.

JUST SHOW UP.

It's been said that 80 percent of success is showing up. Being there. Showing up to vote. Showing up at an RKBA seminar. At your assemblyman's office. At a city council meeting. My father's favorite motto: "Your actions speak so loud that I can't hear a word you're saying." Your "silent" activism can be a model for others. What will your 3 hunting buddies think when they find out you spent an afternoon handing out brochures door-to-door for a pro-gun politician?

DON'T MESS WITH TRUE BELIEVERS.

In the time you spend trying to convert one hard core antigun person to our side, you could have gone out and motivated and organized 20 people who already think like you do. Go with the flow. It's easier on your nerves, and much more effective. Personally, I have converted several anti-rights true believers, but never again!

Lots of NRA members are not registered voters. A lot of gun owners aren't NRA members. Even more folks have no idea of their elected officials' positions on gun issues. Where is your time most effectively spent? Think about this before you spend an hour writing a clever response to a silly message you found somewhere on the internet.

SIMPLICITY STILL MATTERS.

The old rule, Keep It Super Simple (KISS), is as important as it ever was. It applies to internet postings, planning, speeches -- everything. And keep it short. And keep it sweet: don't ever ridicule or insult anyone. Did you notice that I did NOT say, "Keep It Simple, STUPID?"

YOU ARE ALL ALONE.

Well, not quite alone. You do have some help. The NRA has a staff of several hundred. There is no way humanly possible that "the NRA" can put out all the brush fires started by the anti-rights crowd. Pro-gun national organizations give direction and information -- but they cannot save your rights. Only YOU can save YOUR rights. You are 100 percent responsible. When you fully accept this reality, you are automatically in the top one percent of all RKBA activists.

THE HIDDEN BONUS OF GUN RIGHTS ACTIVISM.

The more involved you get with firearms freedom, the more you will realize that your single issue actually complements and protects other human rights issues. Personally, I am deeply offended by many aspects of today's culture. When I focus my activism on RKBA, I can often sense I am making a measurable difference. All rights -- like all humans -- are connected.

WHEN IN DOUBT, JUST DO SOMETHING.

Sometimes we don't know what will work. Sometimes the rule is that there are no rules. I once wrote an essay I thought was mediocre at best. Five years later, I'm still receiving mail about it. Don't hesitate to try something new and innovative -- get it out on the table! Often your finest essay or brilliant letter will not be acknowledged, or you will just get a form letter response. But that letter to the editor that you dashed off in a few minutes appears in tomorrow's newspaper! Go figure. Better yet, try not to figure. Trust yourself, trust your instincts -- and just do something.

I'll see you in the trenches.

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