Several organizations played key roles in making the infant formula controversy into a national and international cause celebre. Although the early seeds of the infant formula controversy were planted in Europe, the movement was initiated in the United States by the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) and subsequently fostered and managed by the Infant Formula Action Coalition (INFACT). During the period spanning between 1978–1984 when the public awareness and involvement in the infant formula controversy were at their peak, a great many activist groups were involved both in the United States and abroad. They ranged all over the spectrum in terms of their political and ideological orientation, religious beliefs, understanding of the issues, financial resources, and intensity of commitment. They also included groups from many walks of life: health care, education, public services, groups concerned with Third World issues, as well as those involved with the poor and disenfranchised in the United States, to name a few.

It would be extremely difficult, however, to provide a reasonably accurate measure as to the number of people or groups who were actively engaged in some facet of the Nestle boycott or other anti-infant formula campaigns. Since these groups generally required no formal membership or listing, any number of people could start any number of groups (including in theory a group with only one member).

It was also in the interest of the boycott movement to project as broad a level of support as possible and thereby suggest greater legitimacy for its
actions. This was indeed a calculated part of the activists’ strategy of domain offense in the early stages of the campaign and that of boundary expansion during the problem identification and remedy and relief stages of the issue life cycle. Doug Johnson, the national chairperson and executive director of INFACT, defined seven phases of the boycott. He referred to the objectives of the early phases as: making the infant formula controversy, embodied by Nestle and its actions, a legitimate issue in the eyes of an educated, grass-roots base of support; converting local endorsements of the boycott into national support in preparation for the International Meeting on Infant and Young Child Feeding; and developing a specific international marketing code for breastmilk substitutes, and compelling Nestle, through pressure from consumer groups around the world, to implement such a code.1 The fact that there was widespread public and news media antipathy to the industry’s position also helped the activists’ efforts in projecting a larger-than-life image of the magnitude of public support for their cause.

Notwithstanding the large numbers and highly amorphous character of the groups involved in the boycott movement, the nerve center of the strategy remained with INFACT and was concentrated in the hands of a small coterie of committed leaders with a well-developed understanding of organizing and managing mass movements. They were successful at creating two apparently contradictory public personae for themselves. One, they were the money-short, unsophisticated volunteers who were fighting the greedy and uncaring corporate behemoths. Two, they were the disciplined organizers who could effectively control and direct a large number of diverse voluntary groups and mold them into a cohesive force of public advocacy. It is a testimony to their strong strategic sense and tactical competence that they succeeded in achieving these twin objectives. It also demonstrated the relative crudeness of the industry’s response patterns, which lacked similar skills in exploiting their own strategic advantage in the marketplace of public opinion. However, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two groups weakened as the issue moved to the remedy and relief and prevention stages. In the subsequent stages, the companies were able to capitalize on their learning experience and gained greater momentum through mobilization of substantial organizational and financial resources. The activists, however, failed to build on their earlier momentum and thereby lost their earlier tactical advantage. The fact that they lacked sufficient organizational resources also contributed to their problems. Thus the strategies and tactics employed by the opposing sides in the infant formula controversy offer ample lessons for corporations and public advocacy groups to emulate.

The primary focus of our enquiry in this chapter will be the two major groups, ICCR and INFACT. To be sure, there were a number of other groups that were either sponsored or co-sponsored by INFACT to direct and coordinate certain facets of the campaign. In addition, there were other groups,