

The Essential Guide to **ONLINE ADVOCACY** for Nonprofits

**Kristin DeMint
Jeanette Russell**

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The Essential Guide to Online Advocacy for Nonprofits

By Kristin DeMint and Jeanette Russell

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Finding Your Missed Opportunities

Sure, you have supporters. And you may even be getting results that suffice. But if you aren't leveraging your online advocacy strategy to its fullest, you're missing out on big opportunities to grow and leverage your people power. *Online advocacy* uses the Internet and other types of technology to promote policy change. This chapter shows you what you may be missing — and how your organization compares to other nonprofits.

Your Supporters Are Online — Are You?

We know you're a pro, so you know how to create a campaign plan. Many nonprofit professionals don't know, though, how to effectively leverage online advocacy. In a tech-savvy world with millions of issues vying for public attention, if you aren't integrating your offline strategy with the right online tools, you're missing out on *big* support.

Who's online?

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2012, the follow statistics were recorded about American people:

- 95 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds use the Internet.
- 89 percent of 30- to 49-year-olds use the Internet.
- 77 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds use the Internet.
- 52 percent of 65-year-olds (and older) use the Internet.

What do these folks do online? Here's a sampling:

- E-mail
- Use a search engine to find information
- Watch videos on sites such as YouTube or Vimeo
- Use social networks, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Google+

Well over *half* of all Internet-using adults participated in social networking, and 66 percent of American adults have a high-speed broadband connection at home.

Consider the mid-2012 endeavors by a New York City coalition to convince the NY City Council to mandate paid sick days. Using Twitter as its primary medium, the coalition capitalized on the public friendship of activist and actress Susan Sarandon and NY City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, rallying supporters to ask Sarandon to use her friendship with Quinn to promote paid-sick-time legislation. Within hours, Sarandon was looking into the issue and promising to talk with Quinn about it. Bada-bing, bada-boom. Online rapid response.



Regardless of your campaign or access to celebrities, combining your offline and online strategies gives your campaign more people power. If you believe the reason your campaign doesn't have more e-mails, fans, and so on is that your supporters aren't online, we implore you to think again. You certainly aren't alone in this assumption — but research does suggest you're amiss.

Some of the most common claims we hear are the following:

- *We know we should do a better job of online advocacy but just don't have the time.*

For nearly all nonprofits, time and money are the biggest concerns. Having the right online tools helps you cut down staff time by making it easy to create a sharable petition, send an e-mail to segmented supporters, and create donation pages. You don't need to use every social media tool out there, just the ones used by your unique supporter base.

- *We have unique supporters who aren't online or are hard to reach, and if they happen to be online, they tend not to take action.*

People most likely are online and willing to take action — they just need clear, efficient, and easy-to-access guidance for getting involved. Without tools that track participation, such as online petitions, you can't evaluate who takes action or how effective it is.

- *Online advocacy isn't a priority because our offline actions are the ones that matter most. Or, we don't need an online petition because we send real postcards and do a ton of other offline activities that work.*

Results are what matters. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. The most effective groups integrate both online and offline tactics. When you leave one area untapped, you're missing recruitment, fundraising, and engagement opportunities as well as super helpful metrics.

- *We can save money by just directing our supports to contact the decision maker through the official government site (or whatever).*

If you don't have online advocacy tools in place, you can't track your effectiveness — you have no idea how many e-mails were sent or who sent them, and you can't follow up with supporters who did take action to ask them to take the next step. (Your supporters are also actually unlikely to take the few extra steps required to go to a site's webform and send the message. And equally if not more important, you miss out on list-growth potential.)

How Do Your Efforts Stack Up to Benchmarks?

Early in 2012, the Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN) released “The 2012 Nonprofit Social Networking Benchmark Report,” compiled from responses by over 3,500 nonprofits. They found the following:

- Overall advocacy response rates in 2011 demonstrated a strong improvement over 2010, with an average increase of 28 percent.
- Advocacy e-mails had 14 percent open, 4.2 percent click-through, 3.8 percent response, and .16 percent unsubscribe rates.

What does this mean for you? More people are spending a ton of time online, and now online advocacy is on the rise. Social networking is quickly being adopted as a core communication channel for nonprofits and political campaigns. You need to participate so you aren't left out of the online conversation. If you aren't quite sure how best to leverage your time and dollar investments, head to Chapter 4 for some guidance.

How Left Action grew to 500K

We asked author and Left Action founder John Hlinko how he was able to grow his supporter base as a one-man show. Here's what he said:

"Actually, the story is pretty interesting and amusing. Initially, the Left Action network started to grow before Left Action itself actually existed. In April 2009, I was playing around with Facebook and doing some experimenting. I noticed that, at the time, when you became a fan of a page, it would be announced in your feed, 'John Hlinko just became a fan of Starbucks/McDonalds/etc.' I thought it would be amusing to have some fun with this, so I created a page called 'Not Having George Bush as President.' Sure enough, when I became a fan of it, my feed proudly announced, 'John Hlinko just became a fan of Not Having George Bush as President.' Well, other people apparently found it amusing as well, as the number of 'fans' quickly grew into the hundreds of thousands. I followed up with other pages, such as 'Telling Dick Cheney to Shut the Hell Up' and 'Telling Sarah Palin She's Full of Crap.' Those, too, quickly climbed into the hundreds of thousands."

Not every organization can use humor as John does to grow online support, but creativity of all kinds is rewarded by fans on social media channels. Clever thoughts, infographics and heart-touching photos and videos are shared and liked in the thousands. And, as John shows, it can all start with just one person and a good idea.

John continued his story: "It was only then that I followed up with the straightforward approach — that is, a Facebook page named 'Left Action.' My reasoning was simple. Although people had been drawn to the previous pages by the humor and snarky attitude, it was also clear that they were overwhelmingly Democratically-inclined activist types. I firmly believe that if I had launched the straightforward page first, it would've gotten lost in the dozens or hundreds of similar-sounding lefty activist pages. But by starting with a more creative, quirky, and noticeable approach, I was able to gain attention and more effectively reach the people I ultimately wanted to reach."

Left Action (LeftAction.com) is an activist network of over 1,000,000 progressives, including more than 500,000 fans of its flagship Facebook page (<http://Facebook.com/LeftAction>).

2 Implementing Best Practices

In every society, lasting change comes from the will of the people — individuals who stand up for what they believe or change their own habits for the better. To reach your goals, you need people power and a lot of it. This means you need a plan for both recruiting and engaging new supporters — the engine that propels your mission. To get that type of people power, you need 1) an issue that resonates with enough people, 2) a great plan, and 3) the right online tools. You simply can't scale quickly using the ways of old. (Don't believe us? Head back to Chapter 1 for the stats.)

In this chapter, we outline the foundational practices that underscore your tactical approach. If you follow these best practices, you can establish a solid core for your campaign.

Incorporate Your Theory of Change in All You Do

A theory of change simply lets your supporters know how taking action, such as signing a petition, helps you achieve a certain goal: It's a logical model that maps your process of change from beginning to end, which is easier for your supporters to understand. The map works backwards

from the outcomes you're seeking, stepping back to name the building blocks that are essential to get you from here to there, and being explicit about how you think change is going to happen.

Before launching a call to action, consider the theory of change behind it. Gone are the days when folks take action without good reason, so use your people power wisely:

- **Explain how your supporters' actions help solve the problem.** Just a short e-mail about why the call to action, why now, and why they will do.
- **Be upfront about your plans.** If your call to action is part of an e-mail series, let folks know. If it's for list building, explain that you're growing your supporter base to increase your people power. You get the idea.
- **Let your audience know the result of your action.** If you didn't achieve your goal, explain why. (That said, make certain to set yourself up for success with realistic, achievable goals.) Use the communication channels your supporters use — for most, it's probably e-mail.

Adapt Your Strategy to Your Target

Whether your advocacy is focused on Congress, state legislatures, regulators, or corporate campaigns, the basics of strategic targeting are the same:

1. **Know, in detail, the process for decision-making and who's most powerful at different stages of the process.**

Engaging the right target with the right process is key. Explain to your supporters that you need to make calls to your legislators now because your issue is coming up for a vote. This conveys a sense of urgency and strategic reason for asking them to take action.

2. **Learn who and what influences those powerful people, and build a power map.**

People decide policy. It's generally one person or a small group of people who have the power to change policy, and that's your primary target. Your secondary targets influence your primary targets and can include other stakeholders, local officials, and associations. You have to influence these secondary targets so they pressure your primary target. While we see a lot of petitions and the like going to the primary target, we encourage you to think of creative and strategic ways to nudge your secondary target.

Influencing national change through local advocacy

Your campaign may have a headache the size of America. But local and county decision makers, properly “reasoned with,” can and do respond to both local and national problems. Either they solve the problems themselves, or they hammer on decision makers higher up the food chain to get results. The big fish respond because they know that local reps know the hometown, get things done for constituents, facilitate fundraising, and otherwise get them re-elected.

To win nationally by focusing locally, here are five key steps:

1. **Research everything you can about local and county policymakers, whether they’re elected or appointed, you want to influence.**
2. **Don’t go in with guns blazing — first ask quietly for what you want.**
3. **Do as much of the work for these busy people as possible.**
4. **If you need a broad base of support, start with the low-hanging fruit.**

Check out the new Salsa database of local and county elected and appointed officials.

5. **Follow through and share the glory.**

If local decision makers are key to winning the support of a national elected official, be sure to thank the local leaders with just as much enthusiasm as you do the big fish.

Good targets need to be movable, but on some topics, they aren’t movable. No amount of organizing will change their votes on the core issues and values they ran and won on — so when deciding on your targets, be honest about who’s with you, who’s against you, and who’s movable. And remember, following money is a great way to get someone’s attention — donors, advertisers, and investors are interested in how their money is spent.

Mirror Offline Tactics with Online Tactics

Effective advocacy campaigns marry offline and online tactics and should be seen as one and the same. Online efforts offer some major benefits that their offline counterparts don’t:

- **Right action:** It's easier to segment your supporter base and ask them to take action where they're located. Supporters can take a stand for your issue at different levels — signing a petition, attending a lobby visit, writing a letter to the editor. Whatever the action is, make sure they use a sign-in form so you can track results. You need to know who your most engaged activists are because they do the bulk of work for any given organization.
- **Wider audience:** Although most campaigns don't go viral, you certainly have greater potential to recruit hundreds, if not thousands, of new supporters by adding an online component. You aren't limited to the local folks. The world is at your fingertips, oh so literally.
- **Rapid response:** If your issue makes front-page news, you have a limited window to grow your base of supporters, fundraise, and impact future policies. Assuming you have a solution, with the right online tools, you can provide an action within hours.

Building a virtual online community — through social media, your website, and so on — is a powerful way to connect like-minded individuals and inspire them to interact and take action for your cause. These people do have a voice — one that can make a huge difference. So remember that online and offline tactics are like the left and right hemispheres of your brain: Both are necessary for getting your feet off the ground.



To marry your online and offline tactics, check out these tips:

- **Hand-deliver letters.** If you're sending e-mails to decision makers, turn those e-mails into actual letters and deliver them in person. Many advocacy tools allow you to generate PDFs of e-mail so you can easily do this task.
- **Encourage your supporters to pick up the phone.** Kick your strategy up a notch by using a "click to call" feature that connects your supporters directly to the right decision maker's phone when they click on a link in an e-mail. This feature makes calling easier on your supporter and lets you track how many calls were made and to whom.
- **Take opportunities at your events.** Bring along an e-mail sign-up sheet if supporters are gathering at a hearing or are volunteering. In terms of event registration, always provide a way for folks to sign up for live events online. If the event is formal, ask them to e-mail the host to RSVP. Many groups will have online event registration in addition to a Facebook registration. While it's important to grow your Facebook community, you also need the contact information of your supporters for e-mail, fundraising, tracking engagement, and so on.

3

Engaging Your Supporters

Just because your issue is front-page news and 5,000 supporters have signed your petition doesn't mean you've organized these people. They're not really supporting your mission until you inspire them to get involved. The great thing about online advocacy is that you have many ways to approach your supporters and give them options for taking targeted action. You just have to figure out how to best leverage your people power across all avenues. This chapter highlights your options.

Optimizing the Ask

Think about all the messages you receive every day via e-mail, the Web, Twitter, and so on and then the ones that actually make you do something — not many, right? The ones that inspire action are rare and typically speak to your emotions at a critical time. The message could be funny, inspirational, or sad. Or perhaps it's relevant — maybe you just read about that very issue in your newspaper and then received an e-mail from your favorite nonprofit asking you to take action in some way that actually made sense. Regardless, effective persuasion is contingent on three key factors.

The right message

Most people relate to other humans, not facts and figures. And the way to do just that is through the right message. Craft your message with your target audience in mind. Use language that meets your audience's level of knowledge about the issue and present your message in a way that addresses their interests. For example, tell everyday supporters about a proposed new law by directly addressing them in conversational language and telling them the possible repercussions of the law should it be enacted.



Here are a few ways to help your supporters relate to you and your campaign:

- **Show, don't just tell.** Share a short story that vividly shows how your campaign is making a difference in someone's life or is solving a problem. Use a powerfully written narrative complemented with photos or a short video to make your point.
- **Feature your supporters, not your organization, as the heroes of the story.** Explain how their donations or concrete actions brought about specific solutions.
- **Find a local hook.** Maybe your policies are really affecting citizens' lives at a local, highly tangible level. Or, maybe connect the dots to show how the issues impact their daily lives in the most basic ways.

The right time

In order to get people to take timely action, light a fire under them! (Please, I don't mean this *literally*!) Folks want to know "why now?" So explain why they should take action or make that donation today to add fuel to your campaign's fire.



When it makes sense, connect your ask to the timing of current events.

The right people

Another part of making the most of your ask is finding the right people. Every time you communicate online, you have an opportunity to engage folks. Try reaching out to supporters who have an interest or who've previously taken action in another similar cause. Think about demographic features as well as previous giving history and/or activity. For example, someone who supports access to midwives for mothers in Africa may also care about preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS between mothers and their unborn babies.

Don't burn out supporters with messages they probably don't care about. Sure, untargeted communications may gain a few supporters, but they're also a good way to lose people who will opt out of your online messages. (The typical e-mail unsubscribe rate is around 20 percent per year.)



You can significantly reduce the number of unsubscribers simply by segmenting your list. For example, in your e-mail list, send to people based on their interests, activity level, location, and donation history. Ideally, your e-mail tool should connect to your supporter database and other apps including advocacy, donations, and events.

Leveraging Your Advocacy Tools, Tactics, and Channels

Savvy organizing becomes real when you effectively match the right tools to the people and outreach channels. It's not about using every social media tool out there but only the ones that make sense for your people. The exact mix of tools you use depends on the goals you're trying to reach and where your supporters hang out. Here are some examples:

- Reach out via Facebook and mobile to organize high school and college students around human rights issues.
- Use e-mail (and probably snail mail) to contact wilderness groups (who typically have an older member base) to urge them to donate to your campaign.
- If you're trying to reform immigration legislation, a key channel is mobile because the Hispanic population has one of the highest adoption rates of mobile technology.

Success story: Protect Our Defenders

The right mix of tools such as e-mail, actions, sign-up pages, and reporting enabled Protect Our Defenders to reach out, build targeted lists, and track the performance of their campaigns. Since its inception in March 2011, they've captured seven survivors' stories on video, and as of December 2012 more than 40,000 supporters have joined their cause. For more information about this success story, visit www.salsalabs.com/successes/protect-our-defenders.

Your website

Your website is your hub for getting people engaged. If advocacy is a focus, design your site to recruit and engage supporters by providing easy ways to take one-click actions when possible. These calls to action should be front and center on your homepage, in addition to a "Take Action" section if you have one. Then, provide many opportunities, such as e-news, petitions, volunteering, and donations, for folks to take action and get involved with your organization at different engagement levels.



For optimal site navigation, present the information in layers, with an overview page containing a list and short summaries of available content linking to additional information. If you have a number of campaigns or projects going on, consider using a microsite for each campaign. Microsites are also great for sharing with coalition partners so each group doesn't have to create its own campaign site. For an example, check out www.salsalabs.com/successes/animal-legal-defense-fund.

Online petitions and targeted actions

Online petitions, with the right strategy and promotion, can help your organization recruit new supporters and engage existing ones. These strategies can also achieve a number of other goals:

- Take steps toward influencing policy and get on the radar of decision makers.
- Raise the profile of the issue, campaign, and organization.
- Provide an interesting angle and primary source for journalists.

And that's just the beginning. This section guides you in getting your campaign started with an online petition.

Drafting your petition

A strong petition includes several parts to get the signatures you desire. These portions include the following:

- **What you want to change:** Start by identifying an achievable and specific goal. If you can answer this prompt succinctly, you have a strong goal.
- **Who can make this happen:** Let supporters know who you're targeting with this petition and why. Consider including others who can influence your key target, such as legislative or communications staff.
- **Why your readers should care:** Here's where you make your case and convince readers to sign your petition. (See the earlier section "The right message" for guidance.)
- **What you're asking the decision maker to do:** This content is sent to the target of your petition. Be specific about the action you want taken, such as voting a certain way, cosponsoring H.R. 1234, and so on.



Short, well-researched, polite letters can inspire action, whereas long messages or threats may get your petition ignored or blocked. Your letter starts the conversation or a negotiation with your decision maker. It should be respectful and to the point. Oh, and don't forget to check your grammar and punctuation!

Optimizing your petition

Increase your chances that your petition makes an impact with these simple actions:

- Add multiple pressure points — people close to the decision maker who may be susceptible to pressure (company spokespeople, PR officials, legislative aides).
- Do not target press! Nothing kills your chances at a story faster.
- Include a compelling photo or video.

- Share the petition on social networks.
- Make other signatures viewable.

Targeted actions engage your readers by collecting more from them than just a signature — you get a compilation of letters (e-mail or fax) expressing the need for change from myriad perspectives. You can use online advocacy to engage readers in target actions by, for example, creating content for them. While you should still encourage folks to personalize their petition letters, this option makes your supporters' work easy for them. Create alternative letter versions, if your advocacy tool allows, so not everyone has to use the same letter (and so your decision makers aren't reading a bunch of form letters). Keep in mind that if you leave the content blank, often folks will send in blank letters.

"Thank you (and tell a friend!)" messages

Thank You pages achieve more than just goodwill. Their true power lies in the new opportunity you give someone who just helped to continue the giving trajectory by telling her friends. Every time someone takes action, send a thank-you message with an easy way to spread the word about that action. The best places to include a thank-you message are on the redirect page of the action and via e-mail; your online tools should easily allow you to create redirect pages and automatic reply e-mails that are triggered after someone takes action.



Consider asking for a donation after someone takes action. It may seem bold, but this strategy has worked for a ton of other nonprofits. You also have momentum on your side because things in motion tend to stay in motion.

E-mail arc

E-mail is still one of the best ways to communicate and fundraise. An *e-mail arc* tells a story about why you, why now, and what to do over the course of a few weeks. The average conversion rate (that is, how many people take action) for an advocacy e-mail is about 10 percent, so you get more mileage by repurposing and sending your e-mails in a three-part series.

Here's an example of a trigger series from a group who engaged their members around lobbying for healthcare:

- **E-mail 1:** We're coming to a city near you!
- **E-mail 2:** Can you join us at a local U.S. Senate meeting to talk about healthcare?
- **E-mail 3:** We're going to the U.S. Capitol today — back us up online!

Mobile devices and messages

The majority of people in the U.S. use mobile technology, with nearly half accessing social media through their phones. It doesn't take a peer-reviewed report to predict that with the rapid increase of mobile usage each year more folks will make donations, register for events, and take action through their phones. Mobile devices also give you a new mode of reaching supporters. In today's world, here's what to keep your eye out for:

- **How does your petition or e-mail look on a phone?** The current mobile technology doesn't allow the average user to easily optimize e-mails, advocacy, and donation pages for mobile. Keep this challenge in mind because the e-mail design has a significant impact on the success of any call to action.
- **Is your audience highly mobile?** If so, consider using text messaging with integrated tools like Salsa or stand-alone group text services like MobileUs or Revolution Messaging. These services allow you to send segmented group texts. New supporters who sign up to join your organization via SMS can automatically be imported into your CRM, allowing you to build your lists through a new channel.

Social networks

After you've determined where to reach your supporters, decide how you can use the major social media channels most effectively:

- **Facebook:** Find out what kinds of status updates (videos, questions, photos) generate interest in your community. Keep your updates to once or twice daily unless you have critical messages your people want to hear.

- **LinkedIn:** Spell out your campaign and sync up some of your other social media accounts, like Twitter, so people can see your latest tweets right from LinkedIn.
- **Twitter:** Use this medium for conversation and listening. Offer value by pointing your followers to other information resources, highlighting what your volunteers and coalition partners are doing, providing status updates about the places or people you protect, and retweeting often. Respond to tweets and connect with your supporters throughout each and every day.



Commenting when you have something to say is a great way to engage folks. Position yourself as a friendly authority on your issue as each relationship unfolds.

Supporter management

One of the most critical tools in your campaign and organizational development is supporter management, aka Constituent Relationship Management (CRM). The ability to easily capture and organize supporter information is key with advocacy, and your CRM needs to seamlessly connect your advocacy and engagement efforts, such as petitions, e-news, donations, and so on.

The most common way to get contact information is via webforms. Collecting contact info should be easy for the user (prioritize capturing e-mail address, first name, and zip code) and ideally should automatically go into your CRM when a form is submitted. (Your CRM also serves as your donor database so you can match giving history to activity level.)

Planning Your Delivery for Maximum Impact

Successfully delivering your petition depends on three main elements: when it happens, who's there, and what it looks like. Not every petition delivery needs to be splashy, though a noticeable delivery can help your

campaign gain attention or make a complicated issue easier to understand. Some examples of possible petition delivery events to consider include the following:

- **A scheduled meeting with your decision maker:** If your decision maker has been friendly and cooperative, simply scheduling a time to meet and deliver his constituents' signatures may make the most sense.
- **A scheduled public event:** Is there a community hearing, public planning meeting, or town hall on the calendar relating to your petition? Delivering petitions at public events showcases community support and pressures decision makers — especially if they're elected officials.
- **An externally planned event (crashing the party):** Are you having trouble getting through to your decision maker? Sometimes the most powerful way to get a person's attention is to be where he is, whether that's a closed City Council meeting, an annual corporate "General Meeting," or a ribbon-cutting ceremony.



When crashing the party, consider seeking legal advice so you know what you're in for. This way of petition delivery is the riskiest because you have the least amount of control. However, when done well, it can be extraordinarily powerful.

If you plan to invite the media to your delivery event, make sure you have an attention-catching delivery. Is there a creative visual that relates directly to your campaign? For example, if you have a petition to save a supporter's home, perhaps turn your signatures into a paper house. Working to free someone from jail? Turn your petition into chain links. Supporting workers' rights? Print the petitions on pink paper to make "pink slips." Regardless of your delivery scheme, map out your delivery plan including all variables. Appoint a media and possibly a police liaison, brief your supporters on talking points, and prepare for your decision maker's response. Designate one person who's attending the event to document what happens with photo and video. Then, when all is said and done, share the photos, videos, and plot summary with your supporters — and if you want the result to be public, do press and blogger outreach about the event right away.

Raise the Bar engages Hershey

The Raise the Bar campaign effectively incorporated many of the concepts reviewed in this chapter. Notice, in particular, the campaign's effective use of

- **Targeting:** Instead of waiting for Congress to legislate fair trade policies, the campaign targeted Hershey, which has 40 percent of the market share, to take meaningful steps to combat child, forced, and trafficked labor in its supply chain.
- **Engagement:** One clever way Raise the Bar engaged their supporters was by asking them to create a logo and message for the campaign that played off the Hershey brand. Instead of the campaign staff coming up with their own message or hiring a consultant, they drew on the collective intelligence of their supporters (that is, crowdsourcing), who produced an array of amazing commercials, ads, videos, and slogans. The winner received \$1,000, and his work was featured at nationwide festivals and on T-shirts, buttons, and bumper stickers.
- **Delivery:** The announcement of the "brand jamming" winners coincided with Hershey's Annual General Meeting for shareholders in Hershey, Pennsylvania. To reinforce the campaign's message to shareholders, on the day of Hershey's annual meeting, concerned consumers across the country sent e-mails to Hershey and posted on the company's Facebook wall, joining the 30,000 people who'd already contacted the company to proclaim that cocoa made with forced child labor is unacceptable. As a result, Hershey took notice and began discussions with the Raise the Bar campaign.

4 Using Advocacy to Grow Your Base

A handful of stories exist of that lucky guy or gal who created a petition around a hot, timely issue and now has millions of supporters (for example, MoveOn.org) — but most people aren't so fortunate. Most likely you'll have to build your supporter base by developing a smart organizing plan combined with even smarter tools. Given that only about 10 percent of people complete an online action (like signing a petition), you often need thousands of supporters to effectively leverage grassroots power online.

One of the best ways to grow your base is through advocacy. In this chapter, we share the most effective means of growing your supporter power through your advocacy efforts.

Make All Actions Shareable

One reason that friends tell friends is because humans are highly influenced by others — most people really aren't as independent and unique as they think. Turns out, if you find out one of your friends likes something, you're far more likely to support it, too.

Shifts in public opinion are most often *not* influenced by thought leaders, facts, or charismatic individuals. Instead, opinions are often influenced by a critical mass of “easily influenced” individuals. People pretty much do whatever their friends are doing, which they learn about these days through social media. Most people would rather have a friend recommend a product, a nonprofit to get involved with, and so on. Just think of how many businesses like Ask.com, Change.org, or Care2 that have made it big based on this one idea.

To grow your supporter base, and leverage friends telling friends, your content *must* be shareable:

- Use tools that allow your readers to easily share (with one click) with their friends on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, or whatever social network your supporters use. (Save time and money. Many online organizing tools have these functions baked into the system — try the Salsa online organizing platform.)
- Create custom messages for your supporters to easily send to their networks.
- Include powerful images in your messages. Of course, keep your target audience in mind when choosing an image for them to share.

Create Compelling Content

Just like location is the key to the success of a brick-and-mortar business, great content is key to the success of online advocacy. Ask yourself how you can capture someone's interest in a few seconds. Think how quickly you read online versus print material: online text is direct yet personal and conversational. Great content should influence your readers — quickly — to care about your issue, inspire action, and motivate them to share with their networks. When creating a shareable action, your content should tie to your Theory of Change and quickly answer the questions *Why me?*, *Why now?*, and *What do you want me to do?* Remember to keep your content relevant, brief, and conversational.

Provide Sign-Up Pages

This one's short and sweet: By providing the opportunity for would-be supporters to share their information with your organization (ideally by connecting your sign-up pages to your supporter management system), you're expanding your base with very little effort. Try to get the contact info of everyone taking every action. This includes sign-ups to volunteer, attend a hearing, pledge to oppose Proposition Y, and so on. Make these calls to action prominent on your website so it's an effective way you recruit new supporters (and engage the ones you have). Ensuring you capture the information of people interested in your cause allows you to engage them further in the conversation and process for change.

Find and Thank Your Messengers

A small number of people are usually responsible for spreading content. Find out who these people are and get to know them. Are they influencers in their profession or community? What motivates them to spread the word? Most people want to look good, and for many it's being smart, funny, or the first one to post something. Like any favor, make sure to thank them, and forward their messages when appropriate, especially if they are bloggers.

"Like" and "Follow"

Start with the people you know and the people you want to know who could be influential individuals or targeted groups such as a local animal group, the state chapter of the Sierra Club, and so on (generally people who are interested in your cause). Make sure you're the helpful friend who also "likes" what they do and provides useful comments. Keep in mind that building a supporter base is no small task because of the on-going maintenance — this is where your engagement plan comes in.

Online Ads and List-Building Services

If you have the budget, some groups have found success with targeted Facebook or Google ads. The goal is to purchase the right keywords and develop an effective landing page that inspires strangers to take action and give their contact information by doing so.

List-building services are excellent options for organizations with a budget that are stuck with organic growth. We highly recommend working with Care2 or Change.org. Both organizations can send a targeted message on your behalf, allowing their supporters to essentially opt in to receive future communications from your organization. Note: Using a list-building service is not the same as purchasing an e-mail list, which is typically ineffective.

Have a Rapid Response Plan in Place

Although you can't really plan for them, be aware of current events in the news that you can ride, and develop a rapid response plan to hop on the moment. For example, when the Komen Foundation announced it would cut funding for Planned Parenthood, women's organizations got a huge opportunity to respond with related announcements or commentaries to connect the dots to their related issues. The Komen Foundation reversed its decision in large part due to the quick response from many organizations and supporters.

Cross-Promote with Other Organizations or Coalitions

Finding like-minded organizations to cross-promote isn't list swapping; it's agreeing with another organization to send a message on its behalf for the purpose of list growth, usually around a call to action. The average conversion rate is around 5 percent, so cross-promotion is an excellent way to rapidly and inexpensively grow your list and help another organization whose mission you support.



Whatever you do, don't rent, purchase, or swap lists with another organization. To discover more about why, download the "Emailing in a Spammy World" whitepaper at www.salsalabs.com/build-your-base. You can also find more resources there on how to grow your online supporter list.

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As a nonprofit, you know that gathering support is key to your organization's success. But once you have that support, how do you mobilize them into action? Traditional advocacy techniques can be effective; however, combining them with online efforts truly maximizes your impact. Using the Internet offers opportunities to reach more people and grow the leverage you have to enact policy change.

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- THE RIGHT TIME
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