



Getting Heard:

How to deliver your message in a way that will successfully affect public policy

Overview

Many traditional grassroots organizations have asked the same questions regarding online advocacy work. Do Decision-Makers really listen to online advocacy efforts? And can online advocacy really shape public policy?

The Internet is exploding as a channel for civic participation. Citizens are more informed and involved through the Internet and government is being held more accountable. Within minutes of a critical vote in Congress, constituents are being alerted through email, phone, fax and their palm pilot with a call to action. This kind of instant information and communication thwarts efforts by decision-makers to make important deals behind closed doors. In other words, government knows that through the Internet, the people are watching. The more people that are reached through the Internet and brought into civic participation, the more decision-makers are forced to listen. (Remember that great bumper sticker "If the people lead, the leaders will follow?")

Decision-makers are listening, but not all of them, all of the time. What you say, when you say it, how you say it and to whom you're saying it, help dictate whether or not you get the response you're looking for from your target. You probably already know that grassroots organizing is most effective when it is integrated into a broad campaign that implements all kinds of activities, such as media outreach or "grasstops" lobbying. The same holds true for online organizing. Decision-makers will listen to online advocacy efforts and these efforts will affect public policy when they are part of an overall, well-organized campaign that includes many different and complementary components operating together.

Knowing Your Target(s)

Decision-makers respond differently to different tactics, at different times, on different issues and with different constituencies. As activists and organizers, we need to be strategic in our efforts to move decision-makers in the direction we want them to go. People usually associate Internet organizing with email alone. While email can be an

important tactic in your campaign, it may not be the right one, and it definitely should not be the only one to rely on. Knowing your target and how they respond and deal with email will help you organize, online and off, more strategically.

The President and Vice President

On average, the President and Vice President receive anywhere from one to ten thousand emails per day. This number peaks during important times -- like after the State of the Union Address, or when Vice President Gore announced Senator Lieberman as his running mate. Under the Clinton/Gore Administration, volunteers and entry level staff skimmed through emails daily and categorized them by issue. Once per week, the President received a tally of issues with the number of emails received on each issue. The White House also emailed a generic auto response message back to each person.

So, now you know that the President is not going to read your personalized email message. No big surprise. However, a massive flood of emails, at a specific time, may get your message on their radar screen. In the summer of 1999, Al Gore's staff received 170,000 e-mail messages over a two month period with a "save the trees" theme, courtesy of the Heritage Forests Campaign (www.OurForests.org). Was it effective? The campaign received a personal call from Gore's office asking what was going on. In addition, the campaign received free media coverage from all the activity. This online campaign, as part of a broad, grassroots effort, generated over 300,000 emails to the Clinton/Gore Administration to protect our nation's roadless forests. On January 5, 2001, Clinton announced that he would protect up to 60 million acres of our country's most pristine wilderness areas.

INCLUDEPICTURE "http://www.ourforests.org/webtour/99results_files/washpost.gif" *
MERGEFORMATINET

Federal Agencies

Any time the federal government proposes new or altered regulations, it is required to solicit public comments, which then must be considered in formulating final rules. Traditionally, such comments have been delivered by mail or more recently, fax. All too often in the past, comment periods have been dominated by special interest groups and lobbyists who take advantage of an unaware public at large. Because of the short time frame for some public comment periods (30–90 days), grassroots organizations found themselves at a disadvantage to educate, organize and deliver results in so little time. The use of email and the Web, however, have revolutionized the public-comment process, making it easy for the general public to become informed and involved in federal rulemaking. Today, most federal agencies accept public comments via the Internet. (See the success story below on how Internet Organizing secured the safety of organic food standards.)

Capitol Hill

Picture an energetic and arrogant 19 or 20 year-old intern, fresh out of college, and you'll see who's reading your email message to your Senator or Representative. What they do with this email message is pretty much at their discretion. Congress still has no real system for dealing with email. Phone calls, faxes and letters from constituents (noting their concerns) are entered into an antiquated database system that spits out a form letter mailed back to the constituent. In many offices, emails are treated like regular mail and the constituent will receive the same kind of form letter. In other offices, however, bulk emails with the same generic message are

often deleted and unrecorded. Depending on the Member of Congress, some receive a weekly report of constituent communication that tallies up the different issues and how they are communicated with the Member's staff.

Congress has not adapted well to the information age. Congressional staffers blame it on their finite budgets, small staff, lack of time and the age of their boss. Newer and younger Members of Congress are creating new systems to use technology to communicate with their constituents. Older Members still don't know how to use a mouse.

According to *Email Overload in Congress*, a report released in March 2001 by the Congress Online Project, Congress has yet to use tools readily at their disposal for handling the ever-increasing influx of email:

The standard congressional practice of printing out e-mail, entering data by hand into the correspondence management system (CMS), and responding on paper is becoming an ever-increasing drain on office resources. But it doesn't have to be.
- from "Email Overload in Congress: Managing a Communications Crisis"
2001

Indeed, Congress now has available several tools to help them manage email correspondence, though they are slow to adopt these tools. In the fall of 2001, a New York Times reporter sent an email message to 65 Senate offices. According to the December 13 article by Rebecca Fairley Raney, "The messages identified the sender as a reporter sending e-mail to members of Congress to see if, when and how they answered. Aside from 27 automated responses, only 7 Senate offices sent a reply within two weeks."

Some members of Congress have successfully integrated email into their offices though. The Congress Online Project report cited a dozen Congressional offices as "model: offices, "for managing constituent email that meet[s] – and often exceeds[s] – office and constituent expectations."

Targeting Congress through email may be effective with some members while, at the same time, go unnoticed by others. A few things still hold true, however, for most Congressional offices:

Volume matters. A former communications director for a Member of Congress, who wanted to remain anonymous, bluntly summed it up: "volume counts. Its harder to lose or misplace."

Voters matter. Congress only responds to voters in their district or state. If you email your Members, include your local address. Don't waste your time targeting a Member who does not represent you.

Tone matters. Despite the irreverent nature of the Internet, when addressing your Members of Congress remember to be respectful and courteous, even if you disagree with them.

State and Local Governments

As with any form of communication, the more personal it is, the better, especially in smaller-scale efforts. In choosing your target, the more local your target is – from your school board to your governor – the more accessible his or she is likely to be. Many local officials use their own personal email account to communicate with constituents. Whereas on a national level, tens of thousands of emails are needed to get a blip on the radar screen -- on a local level, you may get your target's full attention with a few hundred personalized email messages. In addition, local officials regularly attend local or community-wide meetings. Online organizing efforts prior to such a meeting can take little time, but reap big rewards.

A good example of this was with the DC Chapter of Planned Parenthood. A day before a critical vote on a "conscience clause" which would have exempted insurance providers who cited their religious beliefs against contraception from providing coverage, Planned Parenthood emailed local activists asking people to make an urgent phone call to their city council ward member. The day after the vote, they followed-up with their activists, sending them an email to let them know their efforts were not in vain; all but one of the city council people voted against the clause.

Different Online Methods to Deliver Your Message to your Target

This may seem like "grassroots organizing 101" to you, but for many people, the basic principals of organizing are soon forgotten, once they go online. Those same grassroots techniques that are tried and true still work in influencing policy makers. Online organizing can help make them work even better.

Online organizing is about more than putting up a web site and sending out an email. It's about using new Internet technology to increase your organization's or campaign's

overall effectiveness. It's about using the Internet to increase your capacity to mobilize your constituents quickly, efficiently and effectively. For example, in 1998, The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) launched a highly successful online campaign that included a number of different delivery methods using new technology to mobilize people in a variety of ways. EDF's Scorecard Project, [HYPERLINK "http://www.scorecard.org"](http://www.scorecard.org) www.scorecard.org, attracted millions of Internet users to a web site on toxic emissions by U.S. industrial facilities. Their site provides detailed emissions information, including regional and local maps of polluting facilities, sample faxes to send to individual polluters, emails to send to the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as ways to connect with local environmental groups.

Tried and True Methods

Personal Letters

There are two approaches to influencing policy makers: quantity and quality. Those individual letters, personally written by constituents are still considered most effective when communicating with decision makers. Letters that are short, substantive, well written and compelling get passed on from the 20-year old intern who "tallies" constituent mail, to the actual Member of Congress. Think of it this way: If personal letters from constituents weren't effective, large scale corporate lobbying campaign wouldn't try to copy our efforts through "astro-turf."

Many organizations are realizing that you can still deliver quality, personalized letters using the speed, efficiency, viral effect and low cost of the Internet. For example, you can email sample letters to your supporters, who can then cut and paste them into their own personalized letter to be mailed to your target. Include a viral message to have your supporters pass this on to their friends, and have them do the same. You can also post sample letters on your web site for individuals to copy, personalize and mail out.

Some organizations have become frustrated with their efforts to generate personalized letters because they never really know how many letters were mailed in. For example, even if your organization supplies a sample letter for activists to use, you're still assuming that that person found an envelope, addressed it, bought a stamp for their letter and sent it out. Or maybe that letter was never mailed, and is still sitting on that person's desk at home, in their stack of things to do! It's hard to gauge your success when you can't accurately measure how many letters you've generated. Some organizations, however, are writing, sealing and stamping those personalized letters for their activists to guarantee it gets done and to accurately measure their success. It works like this: An activist may receive a sample letter via email or by viewing it on an organization's web site. The activist can personalize the message, email it back to the organization, and give the organization their approval to sign their name for them. The organization then prints out the letter, signs the letter (on the behalf of the activist), and mails it off to the target. They even cover the cost of postage.

Whether a letter is email or web generated, your target will never know as long as it is personalized. You can have your constituents do some simple things like tell a personal story, include a "P.S." in hand writing, or send a photo of their family to reinforce the personal nature of their letter.

Phone Calls

Like writing letters, phone calls can be a very effective lobbying strategy, especially if you get through to your target, or the staff person who works on the issue you care most about. They differ from letters in that they present a greater sense of urgency and, as one congressional staffer put it, "are not easy to weasel out of." Once you have someone on the line, they have to listen to you. When calling your target's office, make sure your ask to speak to a specific person. Your calls should be knowledgeable on the subject, respectful and brief.

New online tools can make it cheaper, easier and less intimidating for people to call their target's office. Now, through some web sites, a person can click on a "phone alert" which, through a special "switching station" will pull up their own phone number, dial it and patch them through to their target, at no cost to the person (the organization may be charged on average \$1.20 per call). These calls are personalized and can be a powerful tool, in that the caller, while still in front of his/her computer, has talking points, fact sheets and background material on a given issue, easily at hand while making the call. In the summer of 1999, HYPERLINK "<http://www.GunFreeKids.org>" www.GunFreeKids.org emailed their supporters with a call to action: click on the link and get patched through to your Representative. They generated over 30 patch-through calls to specific swing Members of the Judiciary Committee and successfully attached language to a bill that allows background checks for gun sales at gun shows.

Faxing

Imagine this scenario: Your state representative receives a fax from you - a concerned constituent - with your message, and your name and address. But did you fax it? No, you don't even have a fax machine. Instead you went online and through a web site sent an email that stripped the html from the email and converted it to a fax, that looks just like a regular fax. Your state representative can see immediately that you're a constituent, without needing to open a letter or an email to know.

Many organizations are using this technique effectively because it's as simple and fast as email and can easily generate both "quantity" and "quality". For example, when the Heritage Forest Campaign received word that the Tongass National Forest in Alaska might be excluded from forest protection measures, www.ourforests.org generate over 4,000 faxes, in less than three days, to John Podesta, Clinton's Chief of Staff. A short time later, the Tongass was included in his directive.

The one downside to this method, is that your target's fax machine could get flooded, resulting in a backlash effect that angers your target and his/her staff. To avoid this from happening, plan and time your efforts around other campaigns so that others are not jamming your target's fax line at the same time that you are. In addition, it is helpful to call your target in advance, and give them a "head's up." With some advance notice, they won't get upset and they can make arrangements to handle the influx of constituent faxes.

Keep in mind that there are plenty of other ways to generate faxes using the Internet

and the fax machine. You can email your activists who have a fax, with a sample letter to use or direct them to your web site where you can post a variety of sample letters, with different messages for people to choose from. You can also ask your activist to forward the sample letter on to friends with the message that if their friends don't have a fax, you or your activist will fax it for them. You can also "blast fax" the same letter to a variety of targets, and instruct your activists to do the same.

Postcard Campaigns / Petition Drives

Postcards and petitions are less personal in nature than individual letters but can still be effective in communicating with decision makers. During time sensitive campaigns, "quantity" may be more effective than "quality," in raising your issue. Some decision makers view postcard campaigns and petition drives as "proof" of wide public support on an issue. They are likely to get your target's attention, especially if it's clear that every signature is a constituent.

If quantity is one of your campaign's goal, the Internet's speed and viral nature can make all the difference. Postcards and petitions can easily be downloaded from a web site, or attached in an email and distributed locally. Petition drives can happen online and offline, simultaneously reaching different constituencies. The postcard itself can be an html email where the person adds his/her name and address, emails it back to the campaign, while forwarding it on to a friend.

Email

Generating massive emails can fall with the category of "quantity" and "quality" depending on your target. A Congress member, if they see them at all, will most likely see them as similar to postcards or petition, and in return, likely email you a generic automated response. If your email is exceptionally well written, and brings to light a new perspective on an issue, it may get passed on to the Representative or Senator. However, if your target is a more local level official, emails can produce the personalized letters and the proof of wide public support at the same time. It may also generate a personal response from your actual target.

Letters to the Editor

There's nothing more likely to get a decision maker's attention than press (except of course, a campaign contribution!) The Letters to the Editor section of a newspaper is, on average, the most frequently read section. Most Congressional offices receive weekly clippings from local papers, as well as national papers like the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal. Letters to the Editor should be relatively short, straight to the point, coincide with a timely event or article and mention your target's name and position on your issue. If your target's name is printed, you can be sure it will be read by him/her or their key staff people.

With online tools, writing a letter to the editor is as easy as cutting and pasting! You can email your supporters a sample letter to the editor, which they can then, personalize and email to their local paper. Web sites are becoming more sophisticated in that with a click of a mouse, a letter to the editor can be emailed and faxed to every major paper in a

district or state.

Be sure to tell your supporters that if their letter is not printed, not to be discouraged. They are still educating the editorial staff of their local paper. Keep trying! If their letter is printed, ask them to mail or fax a copy of it to your target's office and to your organization. You may want to collect these and if there are many, distribute them to key decision makers.

In the fall of 2000, a coalition of groups in Colorado were working to pass an anti-sprawl initiative on the November ballot. They built a special section of their campaign Web site (found at [HYPERLINK "http://www.voteeyes24.com/lte1.asp"](http://www.voteeyes24.com/lte1.asp) <http://www.voteeyes24.com/lte1.asp>) where supporters could write and submit a letter to the editor. This feature of their site helped them generate a continued presence in the newspapers and get the message out in their communities. Additionally, because users could submit their LTEs through the online form, the coalition had a record of every letter submitted, helping them measure the success of the tactic.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are often held by federal agencies proposing new regulations or by local or state officials that are interested in soliciting public opinion. They are open to everyone, and anyone can submit their comments, either in writing or by signing up in advance to speak. They can be a powerful tool in allowing your message, or a specific constituency's message to be heard.

Organizing your supporters to attend a public hearing – whether to speak at one, or just show audience support – used to be a challenge. Not any more. Through a well-organized web site, you can sign people up for specific roles from testifying to carpooling, email sample statements for supporters to use, and have supporters download posters and signs from your site. During the Heritage Forests Campaign, [HYPERLINK "http://www.OurForests.org"](http://www.OurForests.org) www.OurForests.org invited activists to view their clickable map, where you could click on a state, or congressional district, and find the nearest public hearing, along with specific directions to the location site and the length of time it would take to get there. Based on the data available, we estimate that 10,000 people visited the hearings resource page and that about 5,000 people registered to receive automatic email reminders about the hearings. Though we were not able to collect data about hearing attendance by OurForests.org activists, these are 5,000 people who may otherwise not have know about, let alone attend, the Forest Service hearings.

Success Story: The Anti-Globilization Campaign Using Online Efforts to Mobilize Constituents OffLine.

A Washington Post staff writer hit the nail on the head when he said, "This revolution

will not be televised. It will be downloaded.” For the first time on a large scale, economic policies of the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and other institutions which make up the international economy, are being directly questioned - not just by the people whose lives and cultures are being affected - but by an enormous movement around the world. Two massive mobilizations, in Seattle and Washington, DC, were extremely successful in raising public awareness. Organizers used the Internet as their primary tool in educating people on the issues, recruiting them to their events, and networking them with other individuals and organizations -- locally, nationally and internationally.

One of the major strengths of the campaign was that their efforts were not centralized. A massive coalition of groups established a collection of web sites run by individual organizations, which were all inter-linked in an easy to maneuver manner. Just some of their online activities included:

- learning about and registering for workshops, trainings, issue forums and actions;
- downloading posters and fliers to post locally
- participating in virtual chat rooms;
- hearing live radio Webcasts;
- donating money, props, materials, etc. online;
- signing up for activists that need housing or can offer housing;
- information and resources for youth, seniors, the disabled, parents, etc.;
- volunteering for a committee.

One of the campaign's lead organizers, Nadine Bloch, raised an important lesson to keep in mind with any online effort. While the Internet is a useful tool in making information accessible to your supporters, the same information is accessible to your opponents. Any campaign that faces opposition should not allow everything to be available via the Internet.

Success Story: Campaign for Organic Food Standards Using Effective Email Advocacy

In the first few months of 1998, public comments delivered through the Internet played a major role in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) decision to abandon changes it had proposed to federal standards for organic foods. The success of this campaign effort was a landmark event in nonprofit, grassroots Internet organizing.

In December 1997, USDA proposed to relax its standards in defining organically grown food. In response, the nonprofit Pure Food Campaign launched the Save Organic Standards (SOS) appeal, sending out thousands of flyers to food cooperatives, organic-food markets, farmers, and consumer groups. The flyers prominently featured USDA's email and Web addresses, and encouraged recipients to submit comments opposing the proposed standards.

The response was extraordinary. By late March, at the close of the normal, 90-day public comment period, USDA had received more than 40,000 comments,

close to half of which arrived electronically, and had published nearly 25,000 of them on the Web. The agency then extended the comment period by one month. In early April, the number of comments passed 60,000 -- more than ever received on any proposed rule in the agency's seven-decade history -- and by the end of that month USDA had received more than 237,000 comments, the majority opposing the agency's proposal.

Faced with such overwhelming public opposition, USDA backed down from its proposal, stating in a press release, "The bulk of the extraordinary number of comments opposed including the products of biotechnology, the use of irradiation in food processing, and the application of municipal sludge in organic food production." Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman said that the public comments made it clear that such production methods do not "meet current consumer expectations for organics," and pledged not to include such products among those the department would define as organic.

Getting Heard