

Affordable New Tools and Strategies for Online Activism

By Alan Rosenblatt, July 2007

Limited budgets don't have to substantially limit your online advocacy possibilities. Alan Rosenblatt describes the new generation of online tools that help organizations of any size cope with the increasingly complicated internet world.

The world of online advocacy is becoming more complicated. People are using a wider variety of online communications channels - not just email, but also instant messaging, online social networks, and SMS text messages via cell phones. Anyone can create and post media content online, and activists are more likely to see and respond to posts by their friends as opposed to organizations. Activists don't want to just take action - they want to feel part of a community that creates change.

Despite these changes, the strategic goals of an advocacy organization remain the same: inform the people, activate the people, and organize the people into communities dedicated to achieving your policy goals. While online tools to help with these efforts have long existed, the divergence of communication channels has eroded the effectiveness of many of these more traditional tools. Thus, we need new online advocacy tools that deliver messages across channels, leverage social media to promote a key message, encourage action, and build community.

Fortunately, the first generation of these new tools is already here. These tools are still evolving, but they offer some powerful functionalities and opportunities for creating creative campaigns to recruit and mobilize activists on a very limited budget. This article talks through some of the new tools (as well as a few old ones) that might be useful to you, and some tactics for using them.

Reaching Activists via Their Preferred Platform

Online organizers are facing a migration from email to social networks, instant messengers, RSS feeds, and SMS text messaging. While email remains the dominant channel for online communication, younger users in particular are giving up on email in favor of using the communications systems built into their MySpace and Facebook accounts, or relying heavily on instant messengers such as AIM, Yahoo Messenger, or Skype.

Organizations can sort their contact databases by preferred communications method and send out messages directly through each channel, one at a time, but this can be a time consuming chore for organizations with a big list. To remedy this problem, [CircleUp](#) allows you to distribute messages to activists all at once, via whatever channel each individual has setup as their preferred method. CircleUp currently supports email, AIM, and Yahoo messenger, and will soon support Facebook and SMS. The tool also aggregates the responses to your messages for easier management and allows for confidential forwarding of messages by your recipients.

If you're hoping to reach supporters via mobile phones, consider using [Mozes](#), a free online social network that connects to cell phones. One way to use Mozes is to set up your keyword and then ask people at an event to text message your keyword to MOZES (66937). Mozes will send your custom message back to them and capture their contact information for future alerts and messages.

Promoting Your Message with Social Media

Advocacy organizations often want to increase public awareness of their issue by encouraging people to view an article, story, or video – and then, hopefully, to take action. Since the web is filled with content useful to your agenda, even organizations with limited resources can take advantage of other people's content to promote their cause.

Social media sites can be very useful in driving people to high quality content. Sites like [Digg](#), [Care2 News Network](#), [YouTube](#), and [Flickr](#) not only allow anyone to post content, but they also present content ranked by how popular or useful it is to the sites' visitors. On YouTube, for example, the more views a video has, the higher it shows up on the site rankings. If you can drive a lot of people to view a particular video that you want people to see, the video might be featured on YouTube's homepage, leading even more people to see it.

Similarly, social media news sites like [Digg](#) and [Care2 News Network](#) provide you an opportunity to post a link and a description of any article online. As people read these articles, they are able to indicate if they liked the article ("digging it"), again driving it up in the rankings.

Organizations who want to ask their community to help promote content within these social media sites may want to

check out [Coliactive](#). This tool shows your activists both the content that you want to promote and an "action button" on the same webpage. The action button will take them to the appropriate page on a social media site to "vote" for the content – and in many cases, fills out any forms required. While most social media sites are not designed for activism, Coliactive adds a layer of functionality that makes taking action after viewing the content a breeze for any activist, regardless of their skill level. So whether you want to make a YouTube clip reach the "most viewed page" or put an article in the front page of a news site, Coliactive makes the "voting" process simple for your constituents.

Encouraging Action

The hallmark of online issue advocacy campaigns is often to generate emails and petitions targeted at public or private policymakers. While not every organization can afford tools like [Capwiz](#) or even [DemocracyInAction](#) to facilitate a campaign, there are a number of free tools that help even the smallest of non-profits take advantage of these tactics.

If you want people to send a message to their Congressional representative, Capitol Advantage provides a free version of their Capwiz tool at [Congress.org](#). You could, for instance, send a call to action that asks your activists to go to Congress.org, find their local representative, and send a particular email. Congress.org can also be used to run a letter to the editor campaign. There is a notable downside, however: you can't capture the names or email addresses of those who take action on your behalf.

[CitizenSpeak](#) is another free grassroots advocacy tool that lets you easily create a campaign to send emails to any target for which you have an email address. It's not designed to deliver campaigns to Congress, but it works just fine for campaigns targeted at state, local, and private sector policymakers. Plus, if you pair it with the open source constituent relations management tool [civiCRM](#), you can harvest the email addresses of people participating in your campaign and grow your list of constituents.

Yet another free tool for helping citizens make their voices heard is [The Petition Site](#), provided by Care2. Just set up a petition, encourage your activists to sign it, ask them to spread the word to their friends and family, and then periodically download the signatures and send them to your campaign's target. The petition also accommodates personal comments from each signer, so the impact can be far greater than just a list of names. You can gather contact information for each signer as well, for an additional fee. Additionally, Care2 now offers a widget that allows you to easily integrate a petition campaign into your own website or social network profile page.

If you want to convince a public official or candidate to attend an event, try using [Eventful](#). This website lets you create a petition calling for any public person to appear at an event in "your" town. As the list of people calling for the visit grows, the invitee is sent an email indicating how many people are waiting. Presidential candidates including Barack Obama and John Edwards are using this tool in reverse, encouraging citizens to organize together to invite them to their town.

In order to create a community challenge, consider [PledgeBank](#). For example, if you want to clean up a park in your community, you can use PledgeBank to create a call to action that says you will come out and clean the park on Saturday next week, but only if 20 other people sign up to join you. You could then push the link out to your community via email, flyers, etc. Once enough people have signed up, everyone gets an email from PledgeBank calling on them to fulfill their commitment. This tool can be used for anything from local actions to fundraising for your organization (for example, "I pledge to donate \$100 to organization X if 500 other people will do the same").

Building Community

Activists don't like to feel that they're only involved when you need something from them. They want to be part of the action as well as just taking action. Online communities can be a powerful way to let them talk to other activists, discuss ideas, follow progress, and more.

While many organizations are tempted to build their own online communities, the truth is that new communities are unlikely to succeed. Most heavy internet users are already invested in existing online communities like [MySpace](#), [Facebook](#), and [Care2](#), so getting them to join yet another community can be a tough sell. Unless you have a compelling reason to build your own community from scratch, and even if you do, it is advisable to tap into existing online communities. A quick search on these large social networks will yield many established groups filled with people already organized around your issue and related ones. Since they are already there and engaged, it makes more sense to join them and mobilize from within.

If you have a compelling reason to try to form your social network community, check out [Change.org](#). This new free social network site includes tools to match your community members up with their lawmakers using a ZIP code match. Once matched, the site has tools for sending email or patching phone calls through to the right office. It also has built in fundraising tools that not only work on Change.org, but can be posted on any other webpage (such as MySpace, Facebook, your website, etc.) with an easy to use "widget." Change.org has also developed a Facebook application that will let you integrate many of their great features into Facebook.

If you feel you have to build your own social network, you can start one for free at [GoingOn](#). GoingOn hosts your network for free in exchange for letting them serve ads on your site. If several allied organizations have communities

on GoingOn, there are ways to connect these communities, adding to their potential impact.

If you prefer to add social network and video sharing tools to your own website, try [KickApps](#). KickApps lets you build customized widgets for video blogs, video sharing, groups, and personal profiles and add them to your own website, even if your website is a profile or group on a social network site like MySpace or GoingOn.

And Beyond

As these new tools evolve and others emerge, the potential of online advocacy grows. Creative use of these free tools can bring tremendous value for small nonprofits. The tools can help to effectively disseminate your calls to action, increase the effectiveness of these calls, and help grow your capacity to run more effective campaigns. With so much content available online, no organization should feel constrained if they lack the ability to produce their own content. With new tools emerging that can get your messages through to your target audiences and help them take action in response, the changing landscape of networked communications should not be a barrier to grassroots organizing.

This article discusses a specific set of tools, but these certainly aren't the only tools that might be useful to you. The key lesson is to think creatively about the available software, and especially how to use the tools in conjunction with each other. While there are many strategies possible using expensive tools, there are also many ways to creatively leverage free tools for your organization. In many ways, the only limits we face are the limits of our imagination.

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