



Chapter 8

Online Organizing

Online Organizing: A Campaign Necessity

When Howard Dean's 2004 Presidential Campaign started effectively using online organizing, it was considered at best a novelty that works for a single candidate and at worst just a waste of resources. As the online campaign took off, more and more resources and planning were devoted to it. What originally started as a simple tactic developed into an essential component of the campaign's strategy. Dean's online campaign broke new ground with campaign messaging and engagement designed to recruit new supporters and increase campaign fundraising. While the campaign was unsuccessful at earning Howard Dean the nomination, its overwhelming online organizing successes forever changed the way campaigns are run at all levels of office.

The role of online organizing has evolved into a vital and necessary component of all well-run campaigns. Whether a small school board race chooses to have a limited and simple web presence or a large Congressional race chooses a robust universally integrated strategy, all campaigns must develop a comprehensive plan.

The best example of a comprehensive strategic plan is Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign, which integrated online organizing into all aspects of the campaign.

Goals of Effective Online Organizing

In developing a strategy for online organizing, all actions should be driven by how the action will help the campaign reach identifiable metrics for these five key goals:

- **Recruitment** - The paramount goal of any online strategy is to bring more supporters into the campaign. The simple fact is that the more online supporters the campaign has identified, the more effectively the campaign will be able to amplify its message, engage supporters and raise money.
- **Activation**- A successful strategy will focus on turning online supporters into campaign volunteers. Whether opening an email, contributing money, or signing up to volunteer off-line, each time a campaign supporter takes an action in support of the campaign the commitment to the candidate and the campaign becomes stronger.
- **Fundraising**- Online fundraising is a way to build a broad list of small and medium-sized donors. Supporters online can be asked for money more frequently and at less cost than most other ways of soliciting contributions.
- **Message Delivery**- Online outreach can be a great way to propagate your campaign message. It allows for a rapid response to an opponent's attack or reaction to a high-profile public issue or emergency. A well-executed online campaign can reach far beyond your own identified supporters if it becomes viral. All offline and online communication should reinforce your overall theme and message.
- **Retention**- There is a lot of competition for your supporters' attention, including negative attacks from your opponents, national issues like the economy, and community events like sports or even television shows. Your strategy should develop so that all supporters feel as if they own a piece of the campaign and are part of a greater community.

Calls to action sent online spread much faster than any other form of communication to a campaign or organization's supporters. An organization with a community-building ethic can utilize emails, websites and social networking platforms to enhance its ability to call its members to action or simply invite them to an event. Emailing a press release or a newsletter is not a call to action and will not engage your supporters. Emails that don't engage the supporter are spam that could hurt your campaign.

Major Online Organizing Tactics

Remember your five key goals of online organizing: recruitment, activation, fundraising, message delivery, and retention. Accomplishing these goals will require the coordinated use of different strategies, both online and offline. Different online tactics and tools have different strengths. It is important to understand what each tactic can do for your online campaign as well as what it can't do.

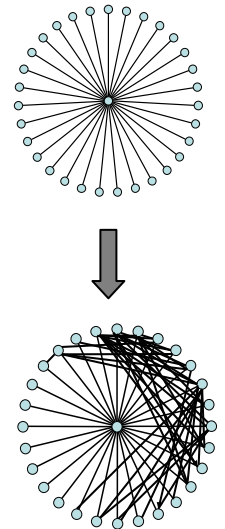
The fundamental tactics for online organizing are:

- **Email Communication:** The single most cost effective way to reach your supporters is through email. It is a compelling way to drive action and messaging, as well as create urgency and build community. It is also the only tactic that hits upon all five of the key online organizing goals.
- **Campaign Websites:** Your main website is the portal to the campaign. It is the online version of your campaign headquarters and should be treated that way. Campaign Micro-sites can be an effective way to brand an issue, an opponent, or combat false attacks without taking your main campaign website off message.
- **Non-Campaign Websites:** Actblue, Facebook, Daily Kos, Youtube and Flickr are all examples of third-party websites that can help your campaign reach new online supporters or generate additional media recognition. Identifying what your campaign's relationship should be with each of these "partners" is important to make sure resources are spent effectively.

Advanced Tactic: Growing into a Community

Your online supporter list starts out like a spoked wheel (at right); a series of individuals connected to the campaign. As the campaign or organization grows and expands its supporter list, more spokes are added, and campaign communication should be two-way between the campaign and supporters.

As your campaign grows, so too should the activity of your supporters. Your online and offline actions will allow supporters to *connect with each other*. Both online and offline activism create community. Connections develop not only with the campaign, but also among supporters themselves - which, in turn, leads to more actions. The spoked wheel begins to resemble a thick web. Activists become invested in the campaign and also in each other.



None of the strategy areas and tactics discussed above should be seen as standalone way to approach online organizing. As with most other aspects of the campaign, a strategy works best when it integrates multiple tactics and is coordinated with the campaign as a whole. Any of the above areas work well with the other online strategies, and any online actions should be coordinated with the campaign's other offline field, finance, and communications strategies.

Email Strategy

Successful emails campaigns will build your online community, increase activism, and raise you money. It is also the fastest most accessible way to send your message out to supporters (but always be aware that your opponents and the media frequently lurk on your list). Compared to the other online strategies, email is by far the most effective strategy to inspire action and raise money.

List growth

Obviously, the larger an organization's supporter list, the greater the response to an email will be. Since many supporters are on several campaign or organizational email lists and the campaign is competing with anything else in the supporter's inbox, the larger an email list is, the larger the number of responses it will deliver. Keep in mind that no blast email will ever be opened by 100% of the people to whom it was sent. In fact, it is not uncommon for emails to be opened by less than half the number of supporters targeted to receive it. List growth is challenging. Some supporters will unsubscribe from every email and all e-mail lists shrink over time unless the organization actively takes steps to attract new members.

Online list growth - Your email list grows primarily from two different sources: viral referrals from others to sign onto your campaign (through a petition, action or direct link) and campaign media exposure that specifically mentions your website. The lesson is that very little growth happens on its own - possible supporters must have a reason to visit your campaign online.

When an individual encounters a message from the campaign sent to that individual by another source – a friend or another organization – this is a referral. If the message interests the individual enough to take action on that message, and if that action requires the individual's email, the campaign can grow its supporters through other people's contacts. Frequently, emails will ask the recipient to forward the message to a friend exactly for this purpose.

A good online action - like an online vote or petition - can also be a great list-builder for the campaign. The campaign's list will grow even larger if the petition or vote becomes viral and is sent around to people not already on the campaign's list. Email forwarding, blog posts, media exposure or an outside organization/campaign email utilizing their own list to encourage others to take your online action are great examples of how a campaign message can go viral.

Examples of Referral-oriented list growth:

Petitions
Open Letters
Online Votes
Online advertising
Share Your Story Requests
Online registration for events

Inorganic growth, such as purchasing email addresses off of another list is another practice. Unfortunately, even if the sold emails addresses are active (many are not), these new acquisitions never asked to be on your list and, consequently, are less likely to take part in your campaign. In addition, purchasing emails can significantly increase the number of "supporters" on your list who will report your messages as spam. Too many spam reports can hurt your spam rating with Internet Service Providers who deliver your emails and may cause supporters who actually signed up on their own to not receive your messages. Email list purchasing is generally discouraged, and must be weighed heavily against potential costs before taking this action it as a list building strategy.

Media exposure is among the best avenues for list growth. Paid or earned media which prominently and repeatedly features the campaign's or organization's website will generate traffic to that website. Steering people to the campaign's website is a big priority for online organizing. As such, be sure that the website is set up to take people's information (discussed later). The more traffic spikes the campaign generates to its website, the larger the list will grow – provided that the website encourages visitors to sign up. Otherwise statistics show that very few people enter through the "front door" of a website. People need a reason to go to the website. Very few people will spontaneously end up at a campaign website and sign up on their own.

Offline list growth – A more traditional form of list growth comes from those supporters who are actively sought offline. These are people who give the campaign or organization their email address in person during some kind of offline interaction. Although the campaign is unlikely to build their list as quickly with a series of offline events as it would with a petition drive, the names it acquires in this manner are more likely to be active in the future.

This is especially true for emails acquired at an event or offline action held by the campaign itself, rather than gathered at someone else’s event or by an aggressive supporter. These people have already committed to an action offline and are more likely to continue to be active when contacted again. Because these individuals have had personal interaction with the campaign, they are more likely to recognize and take interest in an email from the organization.

This is another reason supporters who are already on the list should be encouraged to take offline actions. It is likely that they will bring their friends, family, or co-workers – and they are also more likely to encourage them to sign up. As attendees strengthen their offline interaction with the campaign or organization, they will feel a part of a community. This is a cycle that helps with retention and will reinforce itself over time if the campaign encourages it.

For offline organizing to work, the campaign must have a data capture plan at every event. Every individual – even if already on the list – should be encouraged to check in. This should be a requirement for any event or planned interaction (including rallies, ID’d supporters on the canvass, and even donor meetings). Always be sure to add a field for email and actively encourage people to fill in that field.

As mentioned above, traditional media is generally the best avenue for list growth. Coordinate your existing communications plan to feature your online properties.

The email campaign

The best emails are those which are a part of a larger narrative. Campaigns and organizations should let their members feel as though they are part of a larger movement. Movements are built on stories. Your email campaigns should involve a short-term narrative in a series of emails, which call the recipient to action and involve the recipient in that narrative. For emails that are not part of a series or campaign, make sure they still reflect the overall story of the campaign to reinforce your existing message.

Your email campaigns should feel like campaigns – they should have an objective. Each email in the campaign asks the recipient to take action and has a mechanism (online or offline) to follow up on that action. Supporters will go to a website if they want press releases or newsletters – you should use email for active communication only. Every email contains an action or request. Every email furthers a campaign objective. Email campaigns must be planned just as any other strategy in the campaign. They must begin with a goal. They should have a written plan and a timeline. You will want to set benchmarks and quantify your efforts.

Basic email campaign checklist

1. **Set Campaign Goal:** Engage, build membership
2. **What is the Action?:** Petition
3. **Select Target Audience:** All members
4. **Develop Message:** Pass the Jobs Bill
5. **Create Timeline:**
 - Monday:** 1st sign petition email
 - Wednesday:** 2nd sign petition email
 - Thursday:** Fundraising Ask
 - Friday:** ‘Forward to a friend’ Ask
 - Monday:** Message Success

First email message checklist

- 1) **Choose Sender**
- 2) **Write Subject Line**
- 3) **Write Email**
- 4) **Create Graphics**
- 5) **Develop landing page or campaign micro-site**
- 6) **Write ‘Thank You For Taking Action’ Email**
- 7) **Identify After-Action Ask: \$\$ or Pass It On**

Two kinds of email campaigns:

1) Proactive – These email campaigns focus on building a new and novel message to activate your supporters and generate media attention. The sender does not have the benefit of pre-existing buzz. Instead, the sender creates this buzz through his or her own campaign. Ideally, a proactive campaign ‘bubbles up’ and shapes the media and political landscape. The campaign or organization should be willing to take risks. Being the first to carry a compelling message can pay off in all aspects of the campaign, from media exposure to fundraising to viral messaging and list growth.

Some prominent DFA email campaigns which have shaped the political and media landscape include the Dump Tom Delay campaign in 2006, the DFA All-Stars endorsement competitions, and the 2008 Let the Voters Decide campaign calling on Democratic super-delegates not to overturn the will of primaries voters. For example, our 2006 Grassroots All-Star endorsement was recognized by the National Journal as the turning point for Jerry McNerney’s long-shot campaign -- which then became one of the hottest Congressional pick-ups of 2006. However, the best online campaigns spawn copycats as these successful tactics catch on.

Over-used tactics can lose effectiveness. Mix up email actions on a regular basis. Organizations or campaigns with long timelines should include more non-fundraising email actions than fundraising requests. Short urgent fundraising campaigns to reach a certain goal, like “we need 100 donors by the FEC filing deadline on Friday”, can be an exception where fundraising requests may be the only action in a series of asks.

2) Reactive – These email campaigns leverage an existing media narrative on a national or local issue by turning a current event or an attack from an opponent into an opportunity for campaign action, fundraising or growth. A campaign is more likely to become viral if it engages in all three and helps build your campaign community. People are more likely to pay attention to a campaign built on a current media narrative because it adds third-party legitimacy and is more likely to already be in the minds of supporters when you call for action. Tapping into the right message at the right time will significantly improve the chances a given supporter feels empowered enough to take action.

An organization should always be ready to engage a reactive campaign. In order to respond quickly, develop easy-to-set up actions like pre-created petition pages and fundraising pages that are easy to modify for a specific campaign. Even if an unexpected opportunity arises, a slightly sloppy reactive campaign can be more effective than a perfectly polished one that waits too long. Reactive campaigns rely on the feeling of the moment. If that moment passes, the strength of the campaign diminishes.

In both types of email campaign, the best online organizers are always looking out for the best new tactics and ideas. But tactics are not the campaign; you always need to address an issue people care about with achievable goals that involve your supporters.

Targeting and segmenting your list

Just as with any other campaign communication, online communication must be targeted. Although it’s easy to send an email to your entire list, it’s not always the best way to maximize impact. A number of factors may make a message more appealing or appropriate for a particular segment of your list. Most common among these factors are geography, indicated interest, and past activity.

Emails meant to drive offline local action should consider where people live, and cater events and notices to that geographic location. Collecting people’s zip codes when they sign up allows you to channel their activity locally. This helps build community offline as well as online. Similarly, members who indicate an interest in a particular issue might continue to receive emails about that issue, while others do not. This kind of targeting speaks to the specific motivations of members without flooding everyone’s inbox at once.

One of the most important segmentation criteria is a recipient’s past behavior. A basic application of this kind of segmentation is when a person receives a thank-you or confirmation email. The recipient did something that generates a personal response. A basic two-part segment might be members who signed or didn’t sign a petition. Signers may get a request to pass the petition on to friends or family. Non-signers may get a second email from a different sender or based on a different message point asking them to sign the petition. Other segment targets might be based on previous off-line action or the activists’ contribution histories.

Frequency of communication

Many campaigns and organizations are uncertain how frequently they should contact their members via email. The key is to only send an email when there is a reason to send an email. The message matters. If the supporter feels you are wasting their time, they will stop taking action, opening emails, or worse -- unsubscribe. However, keep in mind that no matter how strong your message, every email sent to a large list will generate some number of unsubscribes (which is one reason always be building your list).

The only way to send too many emails is to send emails that aren't engaging or empowering – but going too long with no contact can hurt too. Think of it as out-of-sight -- out-of-mind. The campaign should be working to build a relationship. As with any relationship, the campaign needs to make an effort to stay in touch with the supporter. Make sure emails are frequent enough that supporters remember what your goals are and feel connected to the campaign community. Two-way contact adds another level to the relationship. As with other forms of campaign contact, the campaign should have a mechanism to offer feedback and comments, or ask questions.

Supporters are busy and email inboxes get stuffed or go unchecked for days. Mixing up email actions, senders, and even subject lines can help attract different supporters to different emails. It will also make multiple emails in a single week seem less like spam to the supporter who doesn't check their email daily. Track metrics like open rates, click-throughs, and completed actions to know if your campaign is working. You may find a typical campaign message will be opened by 40% of the supporters sent the email, while less than 10% of openers continue on and follow through with the campaign's requested action. If your current campaign exceeds the average in any of your metrics, then your campaign is working. Likewise, failures are easy to spot, and a campaign's timeline may need to be revised based on your metrics.

Finally, email can be a relatively impersonal form of contact. The campaign needs to always work at making contact as personal as possible. If your message is compelling, it is worthwhile to risk more frequent and consistent contact. One almost never feels over-contacted by a friend. If you are connecting with your supporters and building a community, your email should feel like a message from a friend.

Timing and Timeliness

As much as possible, relate the message to something in today's news or popular culture. The most effective campaigns are synergistic with current events. Reactive campaigns do best when the issue the campaign is reacting to is immediate. Waiting even a couple of days to react will diminish the momentum of your email. Ideally, you want a reactive email to respond to something that the recipient might see in the evening news.

Proactive campaigns also need to stay relevant to the current political mood. Even if the campaign is trying to change the current landscape through an online campaign, the message needs to relate to something familiar and current to the recipient.

The timing of the email itself is also important. What time a recipient receives an email is a factor in whether or not they open it. In general, people check their email most frequently when at work. The open rate can decrease dramatically if an email is sent too late in the day or overnight. Emails sent at odd times, like over a weekend or holiday, are more likely to take several days to reach their full open rate.

Silence *CAN* be golden.

There is such a thing as bad timing. A message that's tone-deaf to the real world or current events can make the campaign look irrelevant or asleep at the wheel.

For example, launching a petition drive campaign for paper ballots on the same day as a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina would look out-of-touch.

Supporters might be turned off to your message. It could create negative press coverage. An attack from an opponent might take the campaign off-message and put it on the defensive.

Develop a timeline for your campaign

Once the organization figures out what kind of campaign to wage and targets recipients, online organizers will need to figure out a timeline or calendar to bring it all together. Having a calendar organized ahead of time will allow the campaign to take control over the progress of the campaign and better respond to changes in the media and political landscape.

Ideally, your online campaign will complement offline efforts. Planning with other people in the organization will allow your work to be integrated. In the sample email timeline below, the online campaign must coordinate with the field, finance, and communications teams to execute the effort effectively.

Week / Day	Message/Action	Target segment
Week 1, Mon	Launch petition drive	Segment: entire list
Week 1, Wed	Petition follow up (signers update, recruit others) Petition second appeal (sign list before deadline)	Segment: signers Segment: non-signers
Week 2, Mon	Fundraiser: next step Fundraiser: your chance to take action	Segment: signers Segment: non-signers
Week 2, Thurs	Petition follow – up: progress and next steps	Segment: signers
Week 3, Tues	Action Alert: offline activity – deliver petition signatures	Segment: entire list
Week 3, Thurs	Action Alert: LTE regarding media coverage of petition delivery	Segment: signers and activists, also geographic segments
Week 4, Mon	Victory email! Fundraising ask	Segment: entire list
Week 4, Wed	Action alert: Victory conference call with special guest	Segment: activists, donors

As with any plan, it is important to have explicit goals and benchmarks plotted along a timeline. The calendar should provide enough flexibility to enable your group to act on unplanned events as they arise. The next steps for the above sample calendar are to prepare goals and benchmarks for each of the communications. There is still work to be done to on writing, design and layout of email drafts, landing pages, etc.

Sender, Subject, and Recipient

After figuring out targets and timelines, the campaign must write one or a series of compelling emails. After the prospective reader opens the email, the content and the format of the emails should catch the reader’s attention and compel him or her to take the requested action.

Start with a strong subject line. The subject line has a big impact on whether someone opens your e-mails. You will see the best results with action-oriented subject lines that are less than 50 characters in length. Subject line should give the gist of an email’s message but be vague enough to give the supporter a reason to open the email. Think of it as a teaser that should grab someone’s interest. However, be careful not to trick someone with a subject line that has nothing to do with your message.

The sender listed in the “From” field can also have an impact on the open rate. Prominent or familiar senders are more likely to get a person’s attention than a stranger. For this reason, even large campaigns should have only one or two people sending emails. This builds a rapport with your community. Write your e-mails in the tone of your sender. Each sender should develop a “voice.” The person sending the email isn’t necessarily the person writing it, but an effort must be made to match sender and “voice” to create personal rapport and brand identity.

Without fail, every email sent by the campaign should sound as if it is sent directly and personally to that one person. It should never sound like a newsletter or a press release; it should never address a crowd or a list. It should only address one recipient. Make the email seem exciting and personable. Sometimes being playful, humorous, or witty can give your emails some personality. Just remember not to force it. And be mindful that your email is still a public communication. All emails are on the record and anything sent out may be quoted in the media.

Effective Messaging and Format

One email -- One ask with multiple links that all lead to the same place. Ask for one specific thing in each email and never use a newsletter format. Often groups use a newsletter format that lists many upcoming events and volunteer opportunities. While this format may *feel* like it will work because it includes so much information all at once, it doesn't. It actually works in reverse, making the email impersonal and educational instead of inspiring and empowering.

Readers have a short attention span and lose interest quickly. New campaign items, actions, or events hidden deep in an email will not be read by a significant number of your supporters. You will get a stronger response by simplifying the email and focusing on one priority. The email should make a strong "ask" that makes it very clear what will happen if the supporter clicks through.

Email communication should move the campaign forward, not just give updates on what's happening. As such, the email should use strong, action-oriented language. Avoid passive language in your emails. Instead of saying, "If you have time, it would be great if you could..." say, "Write a letter to the editor today."

Give content precedence over form. In general, graphics do not make much difference unless they serve a specific purpose (e.g. campaign or organizational branding). Image-intensive emails can make the email look less personal (your everyday friends would not normally send an image-intensive email. They may also trigger spam filters. Many Internet Service Providers block images by default, making an image intensive email look broken and ugly.

The most effective emails offer hyperlinks early. Keep the paragraphs short and vary the length of the sentences. Even though the people who receive your emails are almost certainly intelligent people, it's important to write your email in a way that is quickly digestible. People do not have a long attention span for email and will gloss over anything to complex. It's best to write with punchy sentences at a simple reading level.

Format your email in a way that allows the reader to quickly absorb the message before being asked to take the requested action (usually clicking a hyperlink). Consequently, your first link should be "above the fold" -- or above the area where a reader would have to scroll down to read more. This is typically two short paragraphs' worth of text before the first link. You can continue to elaborate further down on the email for people who do need to read more to take action. Typically the most clicked links are the first link and the last link. When in doubt, link liberally.

Develop a clear unsubscribe process and privacy policy. Most Internet Service Providers require a method for people to unsubscribe themselves from your list directly in the email. Your group has an obligation to post and adhere to a privacy policy. The privacy policy should describe how you will use personal information and should be publicly available on your website. Democracy for America's privacy policy is available at: www.democracyforamerica.com/privacy

A common but effective email format is:

- Paragraph
- Paragraph
- Link
- Paragraph
- Link
- Signature
- PS

Zephyr Teachout's Tips and Best Practices for Emails

Zephyr was a lead contributor to the online community organizing during Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign. Here's what she learned:

- Draft drunk, edit sober.
- Aim for the amazing. Shoot for the moon, and if some fall flat, so be it.
- Tell a story! Each email is a short story with a moral.
- Think in images! Plunge people into a world. Make your message visceral.
- Read your emails out loud to someone before sending them. Reading out loud will force the cadence.
- Experiment! Be willing to try new stuff and fail. It's a relationship - push the limits.
- Involve a short-term narrative. i.e., a 5 email series in which something from the last email is always engaged – this is a serial publication, and a connection from one email to the next - storytelling over time - is one of your strongest suits for establishing connection.
- Imagine yourself writing TO someone at all times. Never address a crowd – address a member of the crowd. If you wouldn't send this email to a friend, why not?
- Length doesn't matter – should fit the purpose of the email. That said, when in doubt, be very short.
- Use short punchy paragraphs.
- Link early and often. The same link over and over. In this way it is like a poem or song with a refrain.
- Write for a 7th grade reading level– people read fast online. It will improve your writing, making you less abstract, more concrete, and with fewer clauses.

Post- Process: Evaluate your email strategy based on data.

At the end of the day, you need good data to evaluate your strategy. You should use open rates, click-through rates, action rates, and qualitative responses to guide your strategy.

Your open rate is a measure of how many people open your email compared to how many people received it. The open rate is the first basic measure of email performance. A recipient opens an email because the subject line, sender, or sender's organization is appealing to the recipient. A recipient will also open an email if the recipient feels that he or she has a relationship with the organization or if the recipient appreciated earlier emails sent by the organization. If an organization finds that its open rates are declining, it should analyze what factors contribute to this decline.

Open rates are measured by counting how many times a small, one-by-one pixel embedded in the email message is downloaded. Everyone who opens the email must download this invisible picture. An email program counts these downloads and calculates the open rate. Many email clients block image downloads by default (notably Gmail, iPhones, etc.). This decreases reported open rates, but not the actual number of supporters reading your email.

Click-through rates and completion rates are more accurate measures of activity from your online community. When a recipient clicks on a link in the email, this is called a click-through. This link takes the recipient to a landing page on your main campaign website or an alternative micro-site. The best landing pages are specifically designed for that email and for what the email asks the recipient to do.

The completion rate is the percentage of visitors who successfully complete the form or action on the landing page. Finally, qualitative responses from the email you send out can tell you a great deal about what members of your online community think or perceive. Have someone on hand to read and respond to these messages, even if it is not the sender. This kind of responsiveness will help your organization stand out and build loyalty among your community.

Benchmarks

An organization's benchmarks are unique to the type of organization and the composition of the organization's email list. In general, larger groups can expect higher benchmarks. Smaller, more intimate groups must work to keep their lists engaged in as personal a manner as possible to maintain high numbers.

Groups should experiment and tweak their content and format to see what works well for them. Often an organization will test emails to small segments of the list to figure out which senders, subject lines, or even which messages yield better results. These test results can then be used to modify an email before it is sent to the entire list.

Some of these segments will perform better than the list as a whole. For example, a localized message or one that is targeted to a certain group of supporters may have open rates and response rates well above the potential for the full list performance numbers.

Cost/Benefit Analysis

Always consider the costs and benefits of using your email list to drive action. Sometimes the process of sending an email can take hours. We tend to think of email as easy. Yet drafting an email, creating graphics, segmenting the list, preparing a landing page, and loading it for launch may not be the most effective use of time. For example, if you have 50 members to reach out to about a nearby event, picking up a phone for an hour might reach more people in less time with a greater impact.

Technology Options for Sending Emails

It is important to find the tool that suit the needs of your organization. Large lists require much different tools than smaller lists. A good tool should enable you to send a multi-part email with both html and text content. It will also enable you to analyze the effectiveness of your email by tracking open rates, click-through rates, and other metrics.

- **Lists with less than 1,000 people:** There are a variety of free or cheap email services for lists with less than 1,000 people. Wired for Change (www.wiredforchange.com) is an inexpensive service that enables you to send multi-part emails and track several metrics to analyze their effectiveness. Listbox (www.listbox.com) is another service that enables you to send multiple emails, though it has fewer analytical tools available. You can also use Yahoo, Google, or MSN email groups.
- **Lists with between 1,000 and 10,000 people:** There are a variety of very cheap email services for lists with between 1,000 and 10,000 people. You could use Democracy in Action or Listbox. You can also install a program like Civic Space or PHP-List on your own web-host.
- **Lists with more than 10,000 people:** For larger lists, you should use a more robust (and expensive) service to send your emails. These services will help ensure that your emails are sent successfully. They will also enable you to test your emails more extensively than cheaper services and use sophisticated mechanisms to track the effectiveness of your emails. Some of the best services are:
 - Democracy in Action: <http://www.democracyinaction.org/>
 - Blue Utopia: <http://blueutopia.com/>
 - Blue State Digital: <http://bluestatedigital.com>
 - Convio: <http://www.convio.com/>
 - Echo Ditto: <http://www.echoditto.com/>
 - NGP Software: <http://ngpsoftware.com/>

Some of these services offer several tools for free, so it's worth checking each of them out. One useful service is Lyris' content checker. It analyzes the content and format of your message and tells you the susceptibility of your message to overly aggressive spam blockers.

This tool can be found at <http://www.lyris.com/resources/contentchecker/>

Website Best Practices

Email should be a major component of your online strategy. It is the best way to build your online community and activate your supporters. But it is also important to build a good website and blog to help mobilize your supporters and propagate your message.

A simple website is a good way to engage new people and speak to the press. It can also become another home for people who want to talk about your work publicly if you have commenting enabled. It's a great place to keep a campaign calendar.

Keep in mind that most people visit a website not because they have been randomly searching for it, but because they have been directed to it. The most frequent referrers to the campaign or organization's website are your email list and the media attention you generate (media hits which include the website's URL). The website should reflect this reality.

At the very least, the campaign's website should have contact information for the campaign, a means for the campaign to contact and add activists who visit (data capture), and actions for donors and activists. Ultimately, slick designs and fancy graphics are secondary in importance. The organization's website should serve a purpose, not just look pretty.

Basic Website Tips

Your message should be obvious immediately. Include a form so that people can sign up for your email list. At minimum, you should collect their email address and zip code. Additionally, name, address, phone numbers and issues of importance to the website visitors will be helpful in engaging these visitors in your campaign or organization in the future. Include a prominent link to your yahoo group or blog so people can easily become high-level activists. Include pictures, but not so many as to overwhelm the page. Prominently show ways for people to get involved (e.g., next meeting time and place). People should be able to easily find out how to contribute to the campaign, add themselves to the email list, and find nearby events or activists.

Tips to drive traffic to your web page:

- Call reporters and tell them about it when there is a breaking story.
- Include link to page in press releases.
- Include link in all promotional materials.
- Include multiple links in your emails. Create pieces of the website specifically for online and offline actions for people on email campaigns. Be sure to include the website in your email campaign. Both emails and websites are most effective when used together.
- Regularly change content (daily) and include new pictures, especially of other people.
- Find other websites and blogs with similar interests. Post comments on them (with a link to your blog in the comment). Link to these sites in posts on your own blog, and then email them to let you know that you just wrote about them. Regularly.

Landing Pages

Landing pages are a critical component of any online campaign. These are pages set up to receive visitors who have been lead there for a specific reason. Email and blog campaigns set up these separate pages so that people can quickly and easily take a requested action. Instead of telling potential online activists to navigate a webpage and find the page where they can take an action, the emails and blog posts lead the activists directly to a dedicated page (bypassing the home page and any other site).

These websites are simple and to the point. They provide a means for an activist to take an action, and should, ideally, allow the activist to invite others to take the same action. The best landing pages manage to be both simple and exciting, motivating people to take action, allowing them to feel like part of a larger community, and possibly showing progress toward a goal as more people take that action.

Landing pages should be thoroughly tested out before launching any campaign which links to the page.

Blogging Best Practices

One of the pioneering features of Dean For America, and now Democracy For America, is the organization's vibrant and constant use of blogging and bloggers in political dialogue and action. Because the political blogging world has grown so much since the beginning of 2003, simply starting a blog and hoping for the best is hardly an effective strategy. Making effective use of a blog in a way that serves its publishers' goals and strategy takes careful planning and diligent effort — and much more than the casual attention of one or two staff members or interns. A good blogger or organization can still cut through the clutter to make its blog a must-see destination that spreads a clear message. Success requires focus and persistence.

Have a Point of View

Before beginning to blog, know what you want to say. Keep your goals, your message and the key points on your agenda in mind with every sentence you write — and remember that when a statement somehow fails to advance your agenda, or steers the discussion onto different or distracting territory, it might be better left unpublished. Also remember that a strong blog has to provide more than a recitation of well-known facts or well-used arguments. After all, for straight news, Internet users always have the option of browsing for free through mainstream media web pages. The greatest asset a blogger brings to the Internet is his or her unique perspective. It is a waste to let that asset — your perspective — go unused.

Have a Voice

Just like email, think of building a community when building your blog. Blogs are more interactive than email, so it is important to develop a personality for the blog. The blogging community appreciates candor and scorns stodginess and seemingly homogenized statements. Without sacrificing professionalism or discipline, bloggers from law professor Eugene Volokh (<http://volokh.com>) to the team at Think Progress, the blog for of the Center for American Progress (<http://www.thinkprogress.org>), have managed to project themselves forcefully and grow their readerships successfully — and to maintain a playful, personable tone at the same time.

Update Frequently

If your blog has the resources to keep up a manic pace of updates, go for it. If the campaign can only update a couple time a day, that's fine. As long as readers can come to expect a steady stream of new commentary or information and can visit your site for updates on a regular schedule and come away gratified, you've done your job. Adopt a fairly structured schedule for blogging.

Establish a Niche

With so many well-established blogs already serving up information to satisfied readers, a new entrant to the blogging world needs to avoid the trap of adopting a model already used to perfection by someone else. Instead, newer blogs need to fill a void — even if that happens to mean filling a void that no one knew existed. Be specific and don't be afraid to narrow the focus of the blog to your particular niche. If that niche attention becomes the reason people flock to your blog, you will do a disservice to your readers if you digress too frequently.

Prominent niche examples:

- ***One-Stop Shop for Expertise.*** A great idea for any person or organization able to provide specialized, valuable knowledge. That can mean academic expertise, as with Informed Comment (<http://juancole.com>), a major source of analysis on the Iraq War, or Semi-Daily Journal (<http://j-bradford-delong.net/movabletype>), an opinionated source of commentary on the economy by a Clinton administration appointee to the Department of the Treasury.
- ***Becoming a Clearinghouse/Nerve Center.*** When a big controversy or story comes, a smart blogger can position a site to profit by moving to own that topic. This approach was successful at the Washington Note (<http://thewashingtonnote.com>), where Century Foundation fellow Steve Clemons conducted a one-man whip effort to persuade Democrats in the Senate to vote against John Bolton as ambassador to the United Nations. His site turned into a back channel for damaging information about Bolton — and when it drew members of the press who were hunting for leads and stories, that constant stream of negative stories helped to turn the tide against the White House’s efforts to push Bolton through.
- ***Delving Into a Topic that No One Else Features.*** Going after a market without its own forum offers a proven route to growth. A number of blogs, for instance, have scored big by focusing on the politics of their states — for instance the Burnt Orange Report (<http://burntorangereport.com>), which covers the full sweep of Texas politics. Blog publishers can take that concept as far as their hearts desire, from a blog that trades in Washington gossip (<http://wonkette.com>) to one that deals entirely with women’s shoes (<http://shoewawa.com>).

Get to Know Others

Networking always helps. The Internet is simply a giant network. It links together people at nodes scattered around the world — and through building relationships with these people, a blogger can grow his or her audience. Other sites can provide not only a rich source of material, but also much-needed attention and a steady stream of new visitors. The more a blog publisher communicates with, writes about, or gives credit to writers at other sites, the more those writers — either actively or merely by joining the dialogue — send readers in your direction.

Blogs that build moats around themselves, by contrast, can expect to stay lonely. With so many sites jostling for attention, breaking through that cacophony takes heroic effort — unless a publisher uses generosity to encourage others to participate.

Find the Right Technology for your Website or Blog

It is important to find the web and blog technology that suits your needs.

Several good options:

- **Blogger.com:** Free hosted blogging service.
- **WordPress.com :** Excellent blogging software. Requires installation on a paid hosting service.
- **Movabletype.com:** Excellent blogging software. Requires installation on a paid hosting service.
- **CivicSpaceLabs.com:** Comprehensive content management and blogging software. Requires installation on a paid hosting service. Requires a fairly high degree of technical sophistication.

Case Study: DFA Takes On Tom DeLay

In April 2005, Tom DeLay was under mounting political pressure for his ethical violations and ties to Jack Abramoff. DFA decided to put up billboards in his home district to remind voters about DeLay's ethical violations. DFA executed a 10-day campaign to solicit billboard ideas, vote on the best idea, and then fund it.

What is your campaign goal:?

To remind voters about Tom DeLay's ethical violations and build DFA's grassroots community

What is the moral purpose?

We deserve an ethical government!

Who will care?

TX-22 voters, TX-22 media outlets, national media outlets, Progressive activists

What is the campaign timeline?

10 days to gather ideas and vote on them; then a month to run the billboard

Schedule:

1) April 12: Campaign launch to gather billboard ideas

Subject: Beware of Falling Congressman
 Segments: DFA's national list
 DFA's Texas list
 Results: 15,000 ideas were submitted. DFA picked the top 20 slogans for the final vote.

2) April 18: Vote on top slogan from among the top 20.

Subjects: Did Your Tom DeLay Billboard Make the Top 20? Find Out Now, Pick the Billboard for DeLay's Backyard: Vote Now
 Segments: People who submitted ideas
 People who did not submit ideas
 Results: 35,000 people voted to help select the winning idea.

3) April 20: Announcement of winner and fundraising solicitation

Subject: And the Winning Billboard Is...
 Segments: Non-activist, non-participant
 Activist, non-participant
 Idea submitter or voter
 Results: DFA raised \$40,000 to pay for the billboard placement.

4) Billboard Placement

DFA placed 2 billboards in Tom DeLay's district that ran through the month of May with the message: "Lobbyists sent Tom DeLay golfing and all you got was this billboard"
 The billboard was covered by every Houston TV station, the local newspaper, and national media like the New York Times.

A later fundraising campaign referenced and built on the narrative started the with DFA's DeLay campaign. A sampling of these emails is included in the following pages.

From: Tom Hughes, Democracy for America
To: Supporter
Sent: Thursday, April 21, 2005 8:36 AM
Subject: And the Winning Billboard Is...

Dear Supporter,

The votes are in, and out of the 20,000 billboard slogans, you chose this one:

"Corporations spent millions to send Tom DeLay golfing, and all you got was this billboard."

This was the fan favorite -- both in Texas and nationally.

Now, the next step is simple -- if you want to see this billboard in Tom DeLay's backyard, give a few dollars to put it up:

<http://democracyforamerica.com/contribute>

The thing about DeLay Republicans -- because they can't defend him, they smear you. DeLay's camp says that we're "outsiders" who have no business in Texas.

They try to divide us -- by race, by religion, by region. But the Texans who chose this billboard want the same thing as every American -- clean government that solves real problems, and politicians who are accountable to the people.

Help Texans send DeLay and his apologists a message:

<http://democracyforamerica.com/contribute>

Republicans in Washington continue to close ranks around DeLay. They can't help it. They defend DeLay because he built their party and the money-for-influence system that they thrive on.

Congressman Roy Blunt -- DeLay's chief deputy -- drew a line in the sand for DeLay this weekend, saying that he "will stay as leader" no matter what and "is not going to run away from a fight."

But neither will you.

You chose the message -- now send it to Tom DeLay:

<http://democracyforamerica.com/contribute>

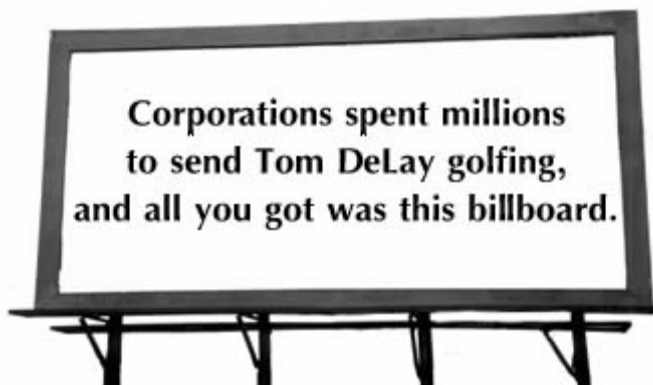
Thank you.

Tom Hughes
Executive Director
Democracy for America

P.S. -- Desperate Republicans yesterday tried to head off the consequences of their leader's actions -- offering fake investigations rigged to never rule against DeLay. Don't let his constituents be fooled:

<http://democracyforamerica.com/contribute>

COMING SOON TO TEXAS:



YOUR CHOICE FOR THE
MESSAGE TO TOM DELAY

----- Original Message -----

From: Richard Morrison

To: Supporter

Sent: Tuesday, May 03, 2005 10:52 AM

Subject: The View from Here

Dear Supporter,

You know what I call this? A sign of better things to come:



Your winning billboard on display in Texas

Democracy for America stood with me long before telling the truth about Tom DeLay became fashionable. You made a difference in Texas -- with your support last year, my challenge brought Tom DeLay closer to losing his seat than ever before in his political career.

You can see every day on the news that your courage sparked something big. You helped make Tom DeLay the national symbol of Republican excess. He and the machine he built are on the defensive. And they should be -- DeLay and his party must be held accountable for the corruption and abuse of power in Congress.

So keep fighting the good fight. Here in Texas and across the country we're onto DeLay and his special interest allies -- and we want our country back. Count on me to keep fighting, too.

Your work has made a deep impression on me, and on this district. Keep it up -- and keep showing the whole country what you can do.

Sincerely,

Richard Morrison

Resident of Texas's 22nd Congressional District
and Democratic candidate for Congress in 2004

P.S. -- I hope to see you firsthand here in Texas for DemocracyFest in June. I'll be there -- along with DFA supporters from around the country and national figures who support us. Learn all about it:

<http://www.democracyforamerica.com/democracyfest>

----- Original Message -----

From: Tom Hughes, Democracy for America

To: T.

Sent: Monday, December 05, 2005 1:58 PM

Subject: Match Dick Cheney and Tom DeLay Today!

Dear T.,

"Congressman Tom DeLay has been an exceptional leader on Capitol Hill and Vice President Cheney looks forward to helping his re-election effort."

Think about that. Tonight Dick Cheney goes to a ritzy district in Houston to host a fundraiser for Tom DeLay -- in spite of DeLay's felony indictment in a Texas court. Regardless of our disgust at the wave of indictments, investigations and resignations among Republicans in the last few months, for DeLay and Cheney it's business as usual.

And what a business it is. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, "for \$4,200, a donor gets an invitation to a VIP reception, a photograph with Cheney, and recognition at the event. For \$2,100, attendees can rub elbows at a 'congressional reception' and have their photo taken with DeLay."

DeLay and Cheney make it clear that money is the only language they know. So it's time for us -- working together -- to raise their cost of doing business. DeLay and Cheney use money to maintain their corrupt hammerlock on Washington, so to beat them we have to match them candidate for candidate.

<http://www.democracyforamerica.com/29candidates>

When we brought the bat back last week, you responded overwhelmingly, raising over \$20,000 in a day. But we're not done.

DeLay has funded 29 candidates for Congress this year. Once we raise \$34,800, we can tell DeLay and Cheney just how we feel about that -- to the tune of \$1,200 each for 29 progressive candidates of our own. Make it happen:

<http://www.democracyforamerica.com/29candidates>

Is this a momentary lapse in Cheney's judgment? Not a chance. Right now, his ex-chief of staff faces spending the rest of his life in jail on perjury charges. So Cheney riding to the rescue of Tom DeLay arrives as no surprise. The two are peas in the same, ethically challenged pod.

His mission to support a man under indictment sends a message that top Republicans don't care about the law. They only care about power, and about the money that makes their hold on power possible.

But guess what? We have power in numbers. By coming together we can break their hold on power, and give this country the ethical, progressive leadership it deserves.

So let's get started. Swing the bat:

<http://www.democracyforamerica.com/29candidates>

Thank you,
Tom Hughes
Democracy for America

