Using the internet

Learn how the internet can help you become a more effective campaigner.

The internet is a massively important resource for campaigners. While some campaigns may be effective without use of the internet, the internet is vital in recruiting support, communicating with diverse audiences and disseminating information. It can also be useful as a fundraising tool.

In this section, we provide pointers to a range of information about how the internet can support you in achieving your campaign aims.

Further information

One of the best sources of information for 'e-campaigners' is the Fairsay website. It is a best practice guide to e-campaigning and has lots of resources, such as a downloadable 'e-campaigning tool'.

To supplement some of the excellent information already out there, we have written some additional information, which briefly explores the importance of websites, social networking tools, online petitions and video.

Online petitions

Online petitions are one of many tactics that you might consider. Here is some information about the different options available plus a 5-step guide for getting started.

Campaigning organisations are increasingly adopting online petitioning as a key tactic. Online petitions have clearly demonstrated mass support for issues, have raised awareness and have won new campaign supporters for organisations – important objectives for any campaigner.

The ability to change political policy has proved less black-and-white. On the one hand, 38 Degrees claimed their online petition caused the government U-turn on forest policy; on the other hand, the Express Newspaper's 'EU membership referendum' online petition was defeated by a three-line whip by the major parties when it was debated in Parliament.

Petitioning is certainly the most popular method for citizens to engage in politics between elections - and with online petitioning growing at 50% per year it is set to remain an important tool for campaigners.

Options for Managing Your Online Petition

Government

Government petition sites benefit from being well-known and trusted. However, they lack features that may be important to campaigners such as adding website links, community tools, data management, etc. Petitions also go through an approval process before being published.

There is no requirement to use a government site for online petitioning. The UK Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly and Scottish Parliament have no online system; and the 2011 Localism Act removed the requirement for local authorities to have any online system.

- [HM Government and Parliament](#)
- [Wales Assembly](#)
- [European Parliament](#)
- Most Local Authorities have petition sections on their websites.

UK - 38 Degrees

A campaigning organisation where members agree on what petitions to start.

Global - Avaaz

A global political petitioning site where members decide on what petitions to start.

General

These sites are used for political and non-political petitioning and do not have a UK-political focus.

- Change.org
- GoPetition
- PetitionBuzz

New to Online Petitioning? Here's a 5-Step Process for Getting Started

1) Choose a petition solution

There are two technology options for starting your petition:

a)   In-house: Build a web form on your website or use a petition software solution
Pros: Customisation, integration; Cons: Less functionality, legitimacy, IT cost

b)   Outsource: Use an existing petition website
Pros: Functionality, legitimacy, cost, support; Cons: Limited customisation

Campaign organisations are increasingly outsourcing their online petition requirements to reduce risk, increase efficiency and to take advantage of advanced functionality and support services.

2) Identify your Target

A petition should have only one target and that person should have responsibility for addressing the subject matter of your petition.

Most issue types have a hierarchy of potential targets – make sure you target local politicians for local issues, regional politicians for regional issues and national politicians for national issues. Take your time researching whether your issue may be devolved to a regional assembly.

Advanced petition websites can guide you through the target selection process.

3) Write your petition

Keep it simple but tell a compelling story. In no more than 4-8 sentences:

- What is the issue?
- What impact does the issue have?
- What evidence do you have?
- What is the proposed solution?

You may want to add a deadline – research shows the optimal duration for a petition is 6-12 weeks. Setting a signature number target can drive more conversions. Be sure to spell-check and have a colleague proof-read your petition. Sleep on it before you publish.

4) Promote your petition

Most advanced petition websites will provide you with marketing tools for your petition. Some will promote your petition to their members for a fee. Here a marketing checklist:

- Social media: Post to Facebook and Twitter – monitor mentions and keywords.
- Email supporters and ask them to post to Facebook, Twitter and contacts
- Create a prominent link from your website to your petition.
- Invite bloggers and websites sympathetic to your issue to link to your petition.
- Engage in online discussion forums and comment sections to link to your petition.
- Highlight your petition to local, regional and / or national media organisations.

5) Submitting your petition

Government and advanced non-government petition sites will manage the submission process and publish the target's response. Basic petition sites will require that you find the email address for the target of the petition, send them a link to the petition and manually publish any response you receive.

More information

Twitter can be a useful petition tool. Here are a few websites which can help you set up a Twitter petition:

- [Act.ly](Act.ly)

- [Twibbon](#) (this website is slightly different in that it promotes awareness by overlaying an icon onto your profile picture to show support for a cause.

Social networking

Using the internet to network isn't as difficult as it sounds, and can work wonders for your campaign.

Social networking sites are used for a wide range of reasons. They can be really useful for campaigners as a way of recruiting support, raising money, publicise events or actions.

[Barack Obama's](#) first election campaign's use of the internet, and in particular, social networking sites to galvanise support and raise funding, demonstrates how valuable these merging tools can be. His campaign team raised $500,000 (£344m) in donations from 6.5million people, in part through sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

> *"Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president. Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not have been the nominee,"*
>
> *Arianna Huffington, Editor-in-Chief of The Huffington Post*
>
> *"When you are a housewife with five kids, a fulltime job, financial issues, and mismanaged stress, supporting Iran or Kyrgyzstan or China is not going to be your #1 priority. But you still care – so you RT a link. Or two. And then three. There is nothing wrong with that, it's actually encouraged to get involved in every "little" way you can, and tweeting counts. This is the only way you can tap into audiences that would otherwise not be inspired to think and possibly act upon these global issues that affect us all."*
>
> *Esra'a al Shafei of [Mideast Youth](#)*

So how can campaigners make effective use of social networking sites?

Your use of social networking sites should relate directly back to your campaign strategy. If it doesn't, and you are using Facebook, Twitter or other similar sites simply because you feel that you should, it probably won't help you achieve your

goals. Do you want to raise campaign funds? Is it to raise awareness? Is it to publicise events or actions?

> 'We won't ever stop protesting on the streets and outside embassies. But now social networks are where people are coming together to get fired up about issues and take action. The Unsubscribe campaign puts social media at the heart of human rights campaigning, bringing people together online and making our voice louder than ever.
> 'Online and on the streets, in social media and traditional media, Unsubscribe will engage with people who passionately believe in the right to a fair trial and the right not to be tortured.'
>
> *Kate Allen, Director, Amnesty International UK*

Twitter case study

In February 2009, The Woodland Trust used Twitter as part of their campaign against the Government's plans for increased passenger numbers at Stansted. They thought it would be a good idea if a tree was actually sending out 'tweets' using Twitter. The tree also came to the High Court. The tweets were re-tweeted by followers of the campaign, helping to spread the message.

You can read more about the benefits that the Woodland Trust reaped from using Twitter by clicking here.

Facebook

For an excellent guide on understanding how to use Facebook read DigiActive's 'Introduction to Facebook Activism'

Summary of Digiactive's 'Pros and Cons of Facebook as an activists tool

Pros:

1. Facebook has a massive user base, which easily enables 'viral' campaigning.
2. It's free!
3. Members of a Facebook group can easily add multimedia content (pictures, videos and their own commentary) to a group page, making it a truly interactive tool.

4. People that you target can 'opt-in', which means that membership of your Facebook group are interested. But you do need to bear in mind that they may quickly leave if you don't engage them.

Cons:

1. Facebook is saturated with content – you'll possibly be competing with other groups. But if your group does become popular, you will need to manage and sift through a lot of uploaded content information and highlight the best of it.
2. There's a 'low barrier' to entry so not everyone in your group is going to be a dedicated member. This makes it difficult to target those who will actually be active supporters.
3. Facebook isn't actually designed for campaigning. So it won't necessarily have the functionality you need. You should also think about creating your own website, linked to your Facebook group, which you can develop to do the things that Facebook might not be able to.

Another guide which offers advice on how to use Facebook effectively is John Hayden's Complete Guide to Facebook.

Case study

Over the space of a couple of months in 2011 there were over 1,000 cities across the world that were occupied in one way or another. This worldwide movement started in Spain followed shortly by Occupy Wall Street in New York. This movement has been undeniably helped by the use of social networking, not just to gain support and numbers but also to help find provisions for the occupation. The Occupy London group located outside St. Pauls Cathedral used twitter and Facebook to ask for donations from the public.

Video sharing websites

Using video is a fantastic way of communicating your messages and reaching out to your (potential) supporters.

Video-sharing websites, have become massively popular over recent years. Indeed, such is the popularity of YouTube that it has become the second most popular search engine on the internet, after Google. This means that people searching for information on the internet will first use Google to search the entire net, and next they're likely to use YouTube, to search just that one site!

So a presence on YouTube, can be very useful if you have a campaign to promote.

Of course, YouTube is not the only video-sharing website, or even necessarily the best. But it does currently dominate the video-sharing marketplace.

You can also create your own channels on YouTube, free of charge. What this allows you to do is post up videos that relate to your campaign all in one place. You can also personalize the page with your logo and other information about your campaign, including links back to your website, or any social networking tools you use.

Example of a campaign using video-sharing site

Friends of the Earth have a [YouTube channel](). One of the videos they have posted is part of their ongoing campaign against various aspects of Tesco's practices. It's a pastiche of a Tesco TV, and therefore a video was the natural medium to use.
It communicates its message, about how the dominance of large supermarkets can potentially decimate local businesses, with humour, satire, and is arguably more memorable than if they set out this campaign message in text form.

Of course, Friends of the Earth might have a much larger budget than you to produce a sophisticated video. But many campaigners do post up interesting low or no-budget videos such as this one about [SOCPA]().

You can also 'embed' online videos on to your own website, so that people who visit your website can look at your videos directly from your website, rather than being redirected to the video-sharing site where you posted it. It might sound complicated but is quite simple. The video-sharing website you use should tell you how to do this.

Websites

A website isn't essential, but it could be really valuable. And it's easier than you might think to put a simple and effective site together.

A campaign doesn't have to have a website, but these days, even the smallest campaigns can greatly benefit from having some kind of web presence. The internet is now the easiest way for you to connect with your potential supporters and the 'change makers' you want to influence.

Creating a simple web presence very quickly

A website could be a single webpage, which explains what your campaign is about and gives people your contact details. This is certainly better than nothing. You can set up one for free in a matter of minutes – there are lots of different websites that enable you to build simple yet attractive websites. They even make it easy for you to upload photos and video.

Many people use free 'blogging' sites such as http://wordpress.org/ to create content-rich, attractive websites.

A good example of this is the Atheist Bus Campaign's website. They provided links to their social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter, and to their fundraising page on the Justgiving website. While simple, free websites generally won't have the built in functionality that allows you to do these things, you can easily 'embed' links to external sites. So, through integrating a range of free tools on a free website, you can set out your campaign vision, recruit support, raise money, reach the people you want to influence.

Moving up to the next level

Once you've got a website, there are at least three things you can do to make it more effective:

- **Keep it updated**. Visitors can get turned off if they feel that there isn't a live, active campaign behind the website. So, set up a blog, or post news/updates on the front page of the site regularly.
- **Make it look good**. Good design is an important aspect of a good website. If it looks amateur-ish, it may turn off potential supporters. Don't worry if you haven't got a great eye for design. A lot of the free websites that you can use for creating your own website provide you with templates that make this very easy.
- **Make it easy to find**. While people may get to know your website because you give them its address, you also need to make sure it comes up high in the list in search results. Use Search Engine Optimisation techniques to do this properly and you will find that you don't just have to take the campaign to people – people will come to your campaign.

Examples of good campaigning websites

What makes a good campaigning website is, of course, a matter of opinion, and even very good websites will have minus points. But below, we have listed a few campaigning websites and stated what we think is good about them.

1. Protect the Human Good use of images; attractive, contemporary design.
2. Asthma UK Provides a blog on the front page; gives easy access to research behind their campaign; gives a wide range of options about how to get involved.
3. No2ID Very clear what their campaign aims are – it's in the title and tagline.