

Internet Advocacy

**It's all about access ■ Not a magic pill
■ Ask yourself why ■ What's in it for you? ■ Where
can I go for help? Resources for Internet advocacy**

It's all about access

With millions of people surfing the World Wide Web each day and the numbers of online users growing steadily each year, the Internet has become a powerful tool for sharing information and getting things done. More and more people are turning to the Internet as a key source for news, shopping, entertainment, travel and communication.

Businesses and non-profit organizations alike are discovering the advantages of doing business online. Particularly after the Sept. 11 tragedy, online giving to charitable organizations has exceeded most expectations. And, in the wake of the attacks, many Americans turned more frequently to the Web for the latest news and information than any other medium.

No primer on advocacy would be complete without a discussion of the Internet and its uses. The Internet can be a valuable tool for advocates to spread the word, mobilize support, network with other advocates and even raise money. Unfortunately, there is often as much misinformation and misunderstanding about the Internet as anything else. This section will offer some basic information on Internet advocacy, along with some valuable

resources for you to find more detailed information.

Not a magic pill

One of the most important things any organization should remember about the Internet is that it is simply another tool for getting things done and sharing information - a marvelously powerful tool but a tool nonetheless. It is not a panacea for what ails an organization, such as lack of focus or vision. And it is not a replacement for the basic ingredients of good advocacy - good relationships, good information and positive action.

Too often, organizations go online expecting users to beat a path to their website, with thousands of new volunteers, donors and converts coming over to their cause. When that doesn't happen, they are understandably upset and disillusioned. But any online venture is only as effective and successful as the planning and thought that goes into it - long before the first visitor signs the online guest book.

Ask yourself why

Before you register your domain name and pay big money to develop a website with all the bells and whistles, consider first your goals for going

Online boom

By some estimates, nearly 100 million people have access to the Internet and are using it a combined 65 million hours each day. By 2003, the number of users is expected to grow to 350 million. By 2005, the number may reach 1 billion!

*Source:
ephilanthropyfoundation.org*

Online advocacy: the rules still apply

When it comes to using the Internet as a tool for advocacy, remember the old rules of networking and communication still apply. It's all about relationships, not technology or fancy graphics.

online. The questions you and your organization should ask are similar to those you would ask before any major new venture. What specifically are you hoping to achieve? Who needs to be involved? What audience are you hoping to reach? How much will it cost? How will we measure our success? Who is responsible for ongoing maintenance and upkeep?

Other questions are more specific to the Internet, its capabilities and limitations. For example, do you simply want to provide information for people to learn more about your organization or issue? Or do you want a more interactive presence, where people can sign up to volunteer or make a donation? How quickly will information related to your issue become outdated or obsolete? How frequently would you be able to update your site? How would you inform people about your presence on the Web and get them to visit your site? Would email be a simpler way to keep your supporters informed? The answers to these questions will help you plan an effective online strategy.

What's in it for you?

Once you have an idea of what you or your organization hope to achieve by going online, there are numerous ways to put your Internet presence to use. Here are some of the most basic ways advocates can use email and the Internet to achieve their goals:

Spreading the word—With a website, information about you and your organization is available to the public 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Supporters can keep up with the latest happenings (if you update the site regularly) and people who are just curious can get information without you ever

having to lick a stamp or pick up the phone. A good website should include all the basic information about your organization, its mission, goals and activities, along with how a visitor to your site can get involved or contact you offline. Online newsletters are another great way for small advocacy groups to save on printing and postage costs. Information about web development is available through many online sites (see [Resources for Internet advocacy](#)) or your local Internet Service Provider.

Mobilizing the forces—Many advocates have taken to putting out email newsletters and e-bulletins as a way to mobilize their supporters to take action in a more timely and effective way. This can be a great way to remind busy people of upcoming events or to get supporters to write letters before a key vote is taken or decision made. But be sure to use email bulletins wisely. Only send to users who have requested your information. You do not want your organization to become known for sending junk or unwanted email messages. It is acceptable, however, to invite your supporters to pass your e-bulletin on to friends and family who might also be interested in your issue.

Signing up new recruits—The Internet can be a great way to allow prospective supporters to check you out on their own time and with no obligation. Whenever you are at an event or speaking to a group, give out your website address as a source of additional information. Integrate the website into everything you do, whether through print media, radio or television. Once a potential supporter or volunteer sees what you are all about through your website, they may want to sign up via email for specific

projects that fit their interests or request additional information or a personal contact with someone from your group.

Managing event registrations—Using the web as a means for people to sign up for events is a great way to manage your time and your events more effectively. People can browse your organization’s website to find out about your events, then send an email to ask a question or register online for those events that interest them. Website registration gives people a convenient alternative for signing up and getting involved. It can also reduce hassles for you as an organizer. You will have access to a quick and easy headcount, along with any other information you need to collect about who

will be attending your event.

Raising money—Fundraising online is a subject about which many books have been written recently. The Internet presents many new opportunities but also many challenges for non-profit and advocacy groups. Do your homework (**See Resources for Internet advocacy**) and get expert help if you need it. Remember that a website can do nothing for you or your organization on its own. Only by driving people to your site in everything else that you do, then giving them a secure and convenient way to make donations, will your online fundraising efforts be successful.

Networking with like-minded groups and individuals—More than anything else, the Internet presents a

For important information about Federal laws governing non-profit organization involvement in public policy advocacy, visit Independent Sector’s web site at www.IndependentSector.org/clpi/

Where do I go for help? Resources for Internet advocacy

Here are some valuable resources for getting your organization or issue online. Again, this list is not comprehensive but will help get you started.

General advocacy

- E-Philanthropy Foundation
www.ephilanthropyfoundation.org
- Network for Good
www.networkforgood.com
- NetAction www.netaction.org
- Organizers’ Collaborative
www.organizenow.net

Email campaign services

- www.getactivesoftware.com
- www.localvoice.com
- www.4charity.com

Online donations

- www.helping.org

- www.charitywave.com
- www.guidestar.org
- www.workingforchange.com

Legislative advocacy

- Capitol Advantage
www.capitoladvantage.com
- Capitol Connect
www.capitolconnect.com

Networking

- Charity Channel
www.charitychannel.com
- Handsnet www.handsnet.org

Web discussions and forums

- www.ezboard.com
- www.yourbbs.com
- <http://cafe.utne.com/>

wonderful opportunity for like-minded groups and individuals to learn about each other, share information and get the help they need by networking. Again, relationships are everything in the online advocacy world too. By linking your organization's site to other similar organizations and encouraging them to link to your site, you will increase traffic to your site and build relationships that can help promote your cause.

Taking action—Many advocacy organizations are tapping into their supporters' desire to take action immediately by encouraging them to send an email letter to a legislator directly from the group's website. There are a number of larger advocacy groups that will allow you to hook into their site for this purpose at little or no cost.

(See [Resources for Internet advocacy](#)).

A place to chat—More and more organizations are discovering that online forums and discussions can be just as effective as town hall meetings and a lot less cumbersome or costly to organize. A number of online groups specialize in developing these sessions for non-profits and advocacy groups.

(See [Resources for Internet advocacy](#)).