

## **THINK LIKE A ROCK BAND: HOW TO USE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES FOR POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS**

By Justin Perkins and Heather Holdridge

Care2

Originally published by the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet in a book by 21 leading experts: *Person-to-Person-to-Person: Harnessing the Political Power of Online Social Networks and User Generated Content*, available for purchase online at <https://ipdi.politicalgiving.com/>

It would be so convenient if launching a viral message campaign, political or otherwise, on a social networking platform were as easy as just adding water. But, the truth is that as with any grassroots campaign, it takes persistence, lots of online and offline effort, and the right tools and the right message in the hands of the right people at the right time. Oh, and a little luck, too. Basically, you need to be scrappy, flexible, and think like a rock band.

As silly as it may sound, successful independent musicians are the masters of grassroots organizing and one of the best examples for nonprofit or political organizers to follow. Especially when it comes to the use of the web and social networking sites. Although the rock bands' messages are obviously different, their objectives, and the formula for reaching them are strikingly similar. When it comes down to it, musicians want people to listen to their message, sign up for their mailing list, buy their albums & t-shirts, attend their concerts, and tell their friends – who then in turn repeat the same cycle. This is accomplished most effectively through a mix of online and offline strategies facilitated by the mailing list. Sound familiar?

**[FOR BOX/SIDEBAR]:** Care2 ([www.care2.com](http://www.care2.com)) is a progressive online community founded in 1998. It has more than 6 million individual members and 200 nonprofit organizations. In May 2004, Care2 launched Care2Connect (<http://www.care2.com/c2c>), the first online social network for progressive organizations. In June of 2006, Care2 launched the Distributed Discussion Board Network, (see <http://www.movingideas.org/boards/>) which syndicates Care2 discussions to other nonprofit sites and enables conversations from multiple entry points across the web. Care2 donates 5 percent of its net Web site revenue to nonprofits.

Before you even think about joining the pioneers in the social networking gold rush, make sure you have already maximized your own e-mail list or e-mail lists from other organizations that are complimentary to your campaign strategy. This is a much easier and proven strategy than trying to mobilize a network, and the medium is already in a form that can easily go viral: e-mail.

That's not to say it hasn't been done, or you shouldn't take a calculated crack at using social networking tools. Just look at the success of some recent examples, which include the Dean campaign phenomenon of self-organizing Meetup.com groups and the recent mass immigration walkouts staged by high school

students who used MySpace and cell phones to spread the word. Or on a non-national level, nonprofits have been formed and city candidates have been created from connections made on more active-oriented social networking sites like Care2.com and Tribe.net.

While social networking platforms can accelerate the organizing process and eliminate geographical barriers, tapping into these social networks takes time. Unless you already have the name recognition of Bono or a sizable digital rolodex of MySpacing 18-year-olds, then you've got some work ahead. And there are a few questions worth answering before attempting to head down this new path of social network organizing:

- Can you give up some message control?
- Do you have sufficient staff or volunteer resources to cultivate and nurture a presence in multiple online social networks?
- Do you already have a large network, perhaps including some who already have established an online presence that might help you spread your message?

### **Tool Talk**

Let's talk about tools, and how one might devise a strategy for tapping into existing networks of people through social networking platforms, just as rock bands do on MySpace and other social networking sites. First, get an overview of the playing field. Take a look at the list of social networking sites listed on Wikipedia by searching for "social networking sites." While the list is daunting and some of the membership numbers sound tempting, the following questions will help you prioritize which tools are worth your time:

### **Crucial elements for effective messaging in an online social network:**

1. Does it provide demographic and geographic information available in the member profiles on the site (at least age and state)?
2. Are there enough people in your demographic and geographic targets to be worth your time?
3. Can you create a personal profile?
4. Can you search for people on the site?
5. Can you contact anyone on the site with a public profile, at least to invite them to be a "friend" in your network?
6. Can you view other members' networks, ideally as a network map?
7. Can you directly contact "friends of friends"?
8. Can you directly contact "friends of friends" en masse through the social networking platform, or ideally, via a message that's pushed to their email?
9. Are there existing and active groups or forums relevant to your cause or campaign?

10. Is there a place to post content that has potential to go viral and be visible to the entire network, and beyond, either through tagging or a community voting system?

If these basic tools aren't available, you may as well just throw the dice and run some banner ads. These tools are crucial prerequisites for a message to go viral, or in other words passed word of mouth at an exponential rate within a network. That said, even with all of the elements above in place, you've got some work to do and some dice to throw.

**Tools are a commodity. Fish where the fish are.**

First, **build your network**. Get friendly with the community's "yellow pages." Target your searches for people within the social network based on geography and keywords related to your cause. Invite people to join your friends' network. Post interesting content in your profile and community areas. Approach your new "friends" as human beings, and build relationships. But also prioritize your efforts by seeking out the "mavens" and "connectors" who are constantly online and posting quality information, leading discussion boards, and amassing large amounts of friends. Pay attention to content, however, that makes it to the "front page" and note how and why it gets there.

**Be transparent and honest with your objectives**, and invite people, especially well-connected network nodes in the social network, to help you with your campaigns.

A sense of urgency and the willingness to share ownership of your cause and message are important. Though one needs to balance the need for controlling message with speed of dissemination, which is no doubt more art than science, approaching people as an impersonal organization with a tightly-controlled message to tout will fall short. The message needs to be malleable, and you need to allow for people to communicate with their own networks on their own terms. This is what enabled the Dean Meetup campaign to take off at an exponential rate, whereas an attempt to control the message would have most likely taken away the grassroots energy.

And most importantly, recognize that **trust is the currency of success with any social network**. Trust is why word of mouth marketing is more powerful than any other medium for selling an idea or a product. In an age of information overload, advertising overload, and spin from all sides, an authentic message is valuable. Human beings make decisions based on information from sources they trust, and their most trusted sources are usually people they respect as experts or with whom they share close relationships.

Finally, keep in mind that **one advantage of social networking platforms over email is the ability for people to self-organize based on interests**. From an organizer's point of view, this is key – especially when you can see and tap into these networks. Social networking platforms also meet the need for people to

express their opinions and be creative, and to receive social recognition in return. People also want to be part of an important cause or event, and feel ownership in the message – this is a phenomenon observed time and again with fans of the most popular rock bands, and a potential leverage point for political organizers as well. You should be aware of these needs that social networking sites tap as you come up with ways to engage people in your campaign. This can be done through creative photo or video contests, as MoveOn and other nonprofits have demonstrated, or even by running a compelling petition or a virtual march or rally.

### **Conclusion**

As you rock your way through your social networking initiative, don't forget to do the obvious things that are tried and true: call your friends and family, hold fish fries, post fliers, send direct mail, get on TV and the radio, hold rallies, write letters to the editor. Though social networking tools are an exciting new opportunity, especially for tapping a younger audience, and a targeted, more activist audience, it should be considered part of a broader, multi-faceted strategy. If you can be patient and persistent, dedicate the resources to develop a strong and trusted presence within the right community, and are willing to be flexible with ownership of your message, you may have a shot at putting together a winning network-centric campaign.