

The Tools and Tactics
of Digital Political Advocacy

Online Politics 101

Version 2.0 / January, 2011



Colin Delany

Epolitics.com

www.epolitics.com

Online Politics 101: Table of Contents

Getting Started	Page
1. Introduction to Online Politics	3
2. The Internet as a Political Tool	4
3. Eight Simple Rules for Online Politics	5
Using the Tools	
4. Choosing the Right Tools	8
5. Websites	9
6. Email Lists	15
7. Blogs and Blogger Relations	20
8. Online Social Networks	25
9. Twitter	29
10. Social Media	32
11. Video/Animation	34
12. Advertising	36
13. Cell Phones and Text Messaging	40
14. Political Databases	42
15. RSS	44
Online Tactics	
16. Spreading the Word	45
17. Search Engine Optimization	49
18. Influencing Congress & Other Decision-Makers	53
19. Working with the Media	56
20. Viral Campaigns	59
21. Raising Money	62
22. Conclusion: Now YOU Have the Power	64
About Epolitics.com/About The Author	65

1. Online Politics 101: Introduction to Online Politics

Let's change the world! But how? Robot/kung fu army? Too expensive. Zombies? Too messy. Online politics? A wise choice: the internet gives ANYONE — candidates, advocacy organizations, corporate interests and everyday citizens alike — powerful tools to mold policy, influence elections and shift the direction of public discourse.

But where to start? Online advocacy evolves just as fast as any other part of the wired world — the technology changes and so do its users and their expectations. As a result, techniques that worked brilliantly six months ago might yield eyeball-melting failure today.

That's where *Online Politics 101* and Epolitics.com come in. We'll look at every method of doing online advocacy we can think of and help figure out what's likely to work in a given situation. What should a candidate's website contain? What mistakes should it avoid? What are blogs good for? How can you use Facebook, Twitter or YouTube as promotional or organizing tools? How do viral campaigns catch on, and how can we get people to open their wallets to help fund our organization or campaign? In a sea of mass emails, what ways of reaching Congress actually work? Let's go through all of these questions and many others and see what answers we can turn up.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

A Brief Word About Terms

I'm going to use the word "campaign" a lot, so let's all get in the same boat real quick. In this context, a "campaign" is any organized or directed attempt to influence politics or policy, from a lone blogger howling in the dark to a multi-gazillion-dollar public policy juggernaut.

Some campaigns are purely educational ("we're going to tell you where blue fizzies come from"), though most "educational" campaigns in the political sphere have an agenda ("blue fizzies come from some place you really don't like"). More often, campaigns are about advocacy ("you should oppose the spread of blue fizzies and make sure your elected officials do too"). Finally, a specialized kind of campaign is designed to elect a particular candidate ("Rep. Bilbo stands firmly against the blue fizzie lobby and deserves your vote").

The tactics we'll discuss below are relevant to all three kinds of campaigns, though not always equally.

Next: The Internet as a Political Tool

2. The Internet as a Political Tool

Before talk about tactics, let's think about the medium itself. What are the salient characteristics of the internet as a political communications tool?

1. Ease. Anyone with an internet connection can set up a website or launch an email campaign — the only significant barriers to entry are knowledge and time. Of course, the deeper your pockets, the more you can do, but the internet is unique among communications media in the extent to which it allows citizens to participate as the equals of major corporations and interest groups. Little guys can look and fight like big guys in the online world — and vice versa (just who IS behind that “grassroots” site you were reading yesterday?). As a *New Yorker* cartoon [once put it](#), “On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog.”

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

2. Speed. An organization or activist can learn about a piece of legislation in the morning, get fact sheets and statements online by noon, generate thousands of emails to Congress by happy hour and spark bloggers and journalists to write about it all along the way. And, of course, opponents can do the same.

3. Reach. The internet does indeed span the globe, as all those nice Nigerian gentlemen who write me for help transferring money have found out. This wide reach gives bloggers and Twitterers a tall soapbox, but more broadly, it lets all of us gather together based on what we care about regardless of where we live. This tendency to cluster helps campaigns reach people more likely to respond to their messages, finding and aggregating supporters by interest rather than by location. In the process, the internet connects campaigns and activists with scattered supporters they'd never meet in the physical world, just as Ebay helps you find that ecstatic Singaporean buyer for your signed photo of The Fonz .

4. Interconnection. Linking is the web's vital technology and its essential characteristic. True since the first web page flickered up on the first web browser almost 20 years ago, it's still true today — the central brilliance of the latest generation of web tools ([Facebook](#), blogs, [YouTube](#) and the rest of the so-called Web 2.0 technologies) is that they rely on people's desire to create connections for their strength. On the web, links between ideas enhance the value of the individual pieces, just as the links between people create a web of relationships that enhance our lives. It's a classic example of the network effect (i.e., one fax machine is useless on its own, but two fax machines can hold a conversation, and 100 million of them make an indispensable business tool — at least until something better takes their place).

As we'll talk about next, the same idea holds true for the different parts of an online advocacy campaign: your website helps build your email list, which creates an initial audience for your hilarious-but-serious video clip, which sends traffic back to your site, which builds your email list even further, which helps you grow a donor base, which helps fund the website and your Facebook advertising. Just like a pyramid scheme, only distressingly legal.

Next: Eight Simple Rules for Online Politics

3. Eight Simple Rules for Online Politics

1. Think about the ends before you think about the means

I know it sounds obvious to say that you should think about where you're going before you decide how to get there, but I can't tell you how many times a client has come to me and said, "we want to hire you to build X," when a few minutes' reflection about the goals of their campaign shows that they really need Y and perhaps a dash of Z for flavor.

Maybe X is all they've ever heard of doing, or perhaps it's something their executive director's cousin is really keen on, or maybe another organization did and it looked cool. But is it what they really need?

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

BEFORE you start any communications project, online or off, ALWAYS stop to think about your ultimate goals and who your audience is — your goals and your audience should drive your tactics. Who are you trying to reach? What will you be asking them to do? Are there intermediate targets that need to be reached first? A campaign designed to motivate college students to vote will probably be structured very differently than a campaign designed to encourage senior citizens to pressure their state legislators about Medicaid long-term care coverage. Your online campaign, whether for advocacy or office, is much more likely to succeed if you've thought about these basic questions FIRST. Never be afraid to try something, but please please please THINK before you act.

2. Brilliance almost always takes second place to persistence

If you really want to succeed, be relentless — stab-in-the-dark campaigns drive me crazy. "We launched a website!" Woo hoo!!!! So did everyone else. "We sent out a press release!" Great, that was one of approximately five quadrillion press releases that went out that day. Most campaigns that succeed do so because they try many different tactics and never let up the pressure. With very rare exceptions, successful political campaigns hit their points over and over from as many different angles and in as many different venues as possible. I can't stress this point too much — if you want to fail, half-ass it. Your opponents will applaud you.

3. Showing you're right matters more than knowing you're right

The internet is filled with people who think they're right; for a taste, look at the comments on a popular political story on any news website. But unless you just want to vent your spleen in public, or you happen to have a cable news channel handy in your pocket, certainty alone isn't enough — most of us in the political space will need to convince other people to join in on the fun.

Basically, in most cases politics comes down to persuasion. So unless you can resort to force ("vote for this bill OR ELSE"), you'll need to find ways to connect with people and bring them around. Sometimes that will involve appeals to logic or to facts (data presented in visual form can be a powerful persuasive tool), but at least as often you'll use emotion to sway opinions. Another consideration: sometimes you'll need to persuade a mass audience, but in many cases your target may be a single legislator, regulator or opinion leader. Fortunately, the internet can deliver

all of these kinds of messages to just about any target — your mission is to match the available tools with your particular needs and resources.

4. Look at every channel, but go where your audience is

Once you've identified the audiences your message needs to reach, [get out in front of them](#). If you're trying to reach opinion leaders, journalists and other "[network influentials](#)", you're likely to focus on connecting via Twitter or (if possible) back-channel email discussions. But if you're aiming directly at the general public, you're likely to end up using Facebook outreach, YouTube videos and Google advertising to catch people where they spend their time online. If dedicated activists are your chosen targets, you may need to look at political blogs and Twitter, since these are havens for the political class — likewise for other niche audiences, for instance targeting the "[mommy blogosphere](#)" to reach women who are parents. The trick is to figure out whom you're trying to reach and where they gather, and then to use those channels to persuade and recruit them.

5. Content is key

All of the sweet-sounding talk in the world probably won't do you a bit of good in the long run if what you're selling is resting on nothing more substantial than air. Unfortunately, I've built more websites (and posted more press releases and "fact" sheets) than I'd like to remember that were essentially puffery — they really didn't say a damn thing.

When you're starting a campaign, make sure that your content is going to be worth the effort — reward those poor suffering readers and activists with something substantive. I don't mean that all of your pieces should sound like a policy paper, but I do mean that you should have something to say or something to show. Otherwise, you'll be amazed at how fast your email updates will end up in the spam folder.

And may I put in a word for good writing? If you're trying to persuade people, please write like a human being rather than one of our friends and future masters, the robots. This is essential for bloggers of course, but it matters for anyone putting content up on the web. Over the years, besides grammatical errors that have brought me to tears of mingled sadness and laughter, I've seen sites that were so badly written that they were essentially incomprehensible. If people can't read what you write, you're not going to be persuading them of much.

6. Integrate, integrate, integrate.

Integration: more than good social policy, more than the better half of calculus, it's also an absolutely vital strategy for communications campaigns. All of the pieces of your online campaign should work together, and they should also integrate with your offline advocacy.

Yes, sending emails to Congress might help influence policy, but they work a lot better if your lobbyist (or your volunteer advocate) walks in to the member's office and delivers the same messages personally and printed out on paper. And they'll get even more notice if they're accompanied by calls from crucial constituents (i.e., donors) and if the issue is mentioned in an op-ed column in the legislator's main district newspaper. Online advocacy should integrate with offline grassroots organizing should coordinate with press strategy should mesh with direct lobbying — they ALL work better when they're done together.

Don't forget the details. Did that ad you ran in the *New York Times* mention your URL? If so, you'd better have something obvious on your site front page that ties into the ad or you're missing an opportunity to build on your offline advocacy.

If you pick up one idea from this website, let this be it — integrate or die.

7. The Tools Don't Care Who Uses Them

At various times over the past few years, one side or another has seemed to dominate some part of their online world. In the U.S., Libertarian/conservative websites outnumbered their liberal counterparts [noticeably](#) in the late '90s, but Democrats rallied online in the Bush years via blogs, email lists and online fundraising, culminating in the Obama campaign's [masterful and comprehensive](#) use of the digital tools available in 2008. Never fear, the Right roared back, with Sarah Palin turning Facebook into her own personal megaphone and Republicans of all stripes flocking to Twitter in 2009-2010. The tools are open to [anyone with the time and/or resources to use them](#), and any side that thinks it has a monopoly on internet activism is likely to be disabused of that notion sooner than it would like. This is a democratic medium, and I mean "democratic" with a small "d".

8. Selling an idea (or a candidate) is very much like selling soap.

How much is does online politics have in common with selling a product or service? The short answer: a lot, in that they're at least close enough that two can borrow each other's tactics. Pushing a candidate or a cause can be dangerously close to selling consumer goods, a statement that's been true at least since the advent of democracy (if Joe McGinniss's [Selling of the President 1968](#) doesn't get the point across, look up my distinguished ancestor's campaign slogan, "[Tippecanoe and Tyler Too](#)").

Many of the techniques we'll talk about either began in the commercial world or are equally applicable to selling ideas and selling, you know, stuff, and many of the resources brought up in this guide and on [Epolitics.com](#) originated in product marketing, not political advocacy.

One final note

Ignoring these rules will help your opponents spank you in public with your pants quite dramatically down, except when it won't — nothing is an absolute in this business. **Knowing when to break the rules is half the fun.**

Next: Choosing the Right Tools

4. Choosing the Right Tools

Okay, I'm sold — let's get started. So what ARE the essential tools of online politics, and are they the same for every campaign? I'd argue that the answer to the second question is pretty close to yes: regardless of their ultimate goals, most campaigns will end up needing three basic online components:

- **A central online hub**, usually a conventional website but sometimes (and particularly for citizen activists) a Facebook page, YouTube channel or blog.
- **Some way to keep in touch with supporters**, usually via email list but also including Facebook and other social networking websites, RSS feed, Twitter or text messaging.
- **Online outreach**, to connect with potential supporters and to influence the online discussion in your space, often meaning blogger relations but also including traditional media relations, social networking outreach, RSS, participation in back-channel email/IM discussions, online advertising, the production of podcasts and video pieces, etc.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

(By the way, I'm indebted to Josh McConaha, formerly of the Democratic National Committee, for that division: when asked on a panel in the winter of 2007-8 to name the three essential tools for online politics, he listed a website, email and blogger relations or some other way to influence the discussion. My list just expands on his.)

The exact mix of tools you use depends on the goals you're trying to reach and on actual means you have available to reach them. If you're trying to organize high school and college students to speak out about human rights issues, you're likely to use Facebook and (if it ever comes back from the grave) MySpace. If you're a think tank or policy-heavy nonprofit, or if you're just a good writer with something to say, a blog or family of blogs may be the right answer. If you're raising money for a candidate for office, you're likely to use email and a website that takes credit cards, with Google Ads helping to build the donor list over time.

The chapters that follow will look at the major tools available to political communicators as of January, 2011, along with tactics for specific applications like fundraising and influencing legislation or the media.

Next: Websites

5. Online Advocacy Tools: Websites

For most campaigns, a website serves as an online focal point. It's your virtual storefront, pulpit, recruiting office, library and begging center all rolled into one. Very often, it's the first impression people will have of you — it's your public face. And sometimes, it's a goddamn embarrassment.

What should your website be? For starters, it should be **findable, navigable, relevant, integrated, sharable** and **current**. It should accurately reflect the kind of organization you are, or at least the kind of organization you would like to be perceived to be. For 99% of campaigns, it's your most important single online asset.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

A Note about Audience and Tone

When you're designing your site and writing the content, think carefully about your audience. A site that's designed to wave a red flag in front of a bull, for a fire-up-the-activists campaign for instance, should have a different tone than one that's aimed at journalists, Hill staff and or uncommitted voters. For the former, red-meat, kill-the-evil-bastards language can be appropriate, but for the latter you'll want to sound much more reasoned and reasonable.

For a while, I wasn't much of a fan of campaigns and organizations creating a plethora of niche sites, since they do tend to dilute the effects of your promotional work. But if you have the resources to spread the word about each one, uniquely branded sites can help out in many circumstances. For instance, they allow you to use different branding, language and style when reaching different audience segments, and they can also help build a strong public identity for a short-term campaign. In the 2008 and 2010 election cycles, these "microsites" became a particularly popular tool for attacking opponents, since they allow a campaign to spread negative messaging without sullyng its main website.

A Note about Technology

One of the fun things about web technology is that it's always changing, and when we're lucky it changes in a good direction. For years, for instance, we were promised that straightforward Content Management Systems would make it easy to create and maintain websites, even for beginners, but the reality has frequently been disappointing (and expensive). We're now at the point, though, that campaigns and individual activists have a wide array of free or cheap site hosting options to consider, including open source and low-cost CMS's. Many individual activists find that blogs and social network profiles are more than enough, while a straightforward CMS can make a campaign or organization site into a live and editable communications tool for non-technical staff. For more on CMS technology, see the OP101 chapter on [Political Databases](#) and the [Tools, Time and Resources chapter from the Winning in 2010 guide](#).

Now, let's look at what kind of a communications tool most political websites SHOULD be and figure out how to get there from here.

Be Findable

This should be a no-brainer, though too often it's not — your site should be easy to find. First, let's look at addresses. Does your URL make sense? Let's say you're taking on those vicious enemies of all that is right and just, in a campaign called "Blue Fizzies Must Die." Is your URL "www.bfmd.org?" If so, you probably screwed up: people are much more likely to remember (and tell their friends about) a site called "www.bluefizziesmustdie.org."

Yes, the former is shorter, but the latter is much more memorable. Of course, if people are used to referring to you by an acronym (i.e., AARP), you're better off going with that. Also, do you have the .net and .com as well as the .org (if they're available)? It never hurts to have all three if you can — you'll lose readers if they enter the wrong one and can't find you, since not everyone will try another option.

Next, you'll want to [spread the word far and wide](#), making sure that anyone looking for information about your topics can find you. [Search engine visibility/optimization](#) is an important part of the game, but your own active self-promotion is vital.

Be Navigable

Okay, so people found you, but can they find what they're actually looking for once they reach your site? Readers get frustrated easily, and satisfaction is just a click away — a click away FROM your site. Good organization is key and so is clear labeling. Most importantly, you need to think about your site navigation from the point of view of the reader.

Organization (and corporate) sites frequently fall prey to org-chartitis — the tendency for navigation structures to be determined by institutional structures and institutional politics. Human Resources wants a button? They get a button, even if HR has NOTHING to do with purpose of the site. And that VP's pet project on nonprofit campaign synergy? Button!

If your site structure looks like your organization tree, stop to think about someone coming to your site who's never heard of you before. Not only do they not care about the welcome message from your president (unless he or she is famous, hot, unusually charismatic or is a candidate for office), the information they're trying to find is probably buried somewhere deep in your press section, if it exists at all.

Site search and a site map can be helpful, but if your readers have to resort to them frequently, you've failed — a good navigational structure should render them superfluous except on extremely large and deep sites. In practice, most campaign sites will end up with 6-12 categories and buttons: an issue or issues overview, an activism button, a donate button, a press section, a home button (a must), about us, and contact us (another must, even if your contact info is at the bottom of every page).

If you have a resource-rich site, you might also break out fact sheets and reports, video and audio clips, groovy games, etc. If you cover a lot of issues or want to make several points about your main issue, you could display a link to each in the navigation, but try to keep it from becoming too cluttered — solve your navigation problems elegantly.

And label those buttons clearly. Yes, if you're working on forestry issues, it can seem clever to call your resources section The Woodshed, but your readers don't want clever — the want to find

what they're looking for. Make it easy on them and they're more likely to reward you by actually sticking around long enough to read something.

Also, keep a consistent look-and-feel to the navigation throughout the site. You may add section-specific navigation to pages deeper in the site, but keep the top-level buttons in the same place on every page. For instance, in the press section, you might have secondary links to press releases, press contact names and info, briefing materials and advisories about upcoming events, but make sure that the Home, About Us, Issues and Contact Us links are where they were on the rest of the site's pages.

The same idea holds true, incidentally, for your entire site — consistency is usually key to a good user experience. If you're building a personal online art project on the conceptual role of squids in the development of a distinctive western aesthetic, do whatever you want — believe me, on personal projects, I've built some exquisitely cryptic navigation structures. But a campaign or organization site shouldn't jerk readers around or play with their expectations — if your layout changes from page to page or section to section, you'd better have a good reason.

In the earlier days of the web, as large institutional (and corporate) sites grew up willy-nilly, it was common for different site sections to have wildly different layouts, and I have colleagues who just recently were STILL struggling to bring different parts of sprawling sites into a ruthlessly consistent look-and-feel. Be right-minded from the beginning and you won't have to fight those battles down the road. Fortunately for us, modern site management tools such as database-driven content management systems and cascading style sheets make it easy for headings and pull quotes in one site section to look like headings and pull quotes in all other site sections, so that readers can say right away when they hit a new page, "oh, that's a heading and that's a pull quote."

Your site front page will often be a special case, since it's usually where campaigns and organizations highlight their most recent doings. In addition to your normal navigation links, you might have blurbs about recent stories, zippy buttons linking to active campaigns, a photo of a featured activist or a featured issue ("Blue Fizzies Stink!"), titles of recent press releases and a list of reports and fact sheets.

Try to avoid a cluttered look, though — use color to divide content by type or date, for instance, and keep the number of look-at-me promo pieces to a respectable number. For inspiration, look at the front pages of major news organizations, because they're usually trying to display a huge amount of information in a small space. What works? What doesn't? If you get lost on a site, always try to figure out why, and use that experience to improve your own site.

One final note — link your logo to your home page. It's a simple thing, but users who get lost will often peck at the logo to see if it takes them back to the start. (Note: it's also a rule Epolitics.com has long broken, and apparently for no good reason.)

Be Relevant (and Readable)

Getting back to the earlier point about content being key, if you're promoting your site as having resources about a given subject, you'd better have them and they'd better be useful. For instance, if you're running a candidate's site, be sure you have the kind of resources that potential voters and donors are looking for, including the candidate's positions on issues, his or her bio, instructions on how to register to vote (it never hurts), speeches or audio/video clips if you have them and easy and obvious opportunities to volunteer or to give money. It wouldn't hurt to show some of your opponents' positions in a compare-and-contrast format — voters often appreciate it

and it gives you a chance to put your own oh-so-objective spin on what the other guy says (“Us Vs. Them: Why We’re Right and They Suck”).

If you have a lot of content to present (too much is better than not enough) and are afraid of firehosing readers, remember that the web makes it very easy to present information in layers. Think of your issues section as an onion, with different levels of detail defining the layers. The first layer could be a short, readable introduction to the most important points, with links to more detailed pieces about each point (the second layer). Those detailed pieces in turn link to more details and to primary sources if you have them (the polling data that your piece on public opinion is based on, for instance, or a spreadsheet of your opponent’s campaign contributions from well-known evildoers). Presenting information in layers lets your readers absorb it in amounts that THEY determine.

Also keep in mind that readers generally won’t move through your site in a linear path — they’re much more likely to jump around from topic to topic, and if they’re coming from a search engine, they may drop directly into a page deep in your site. You can hate them with the power of a thousand blinding suns for skipping your immensely literate and engaging introduction, but that won’t stop them from doing so. In response, make sure your content is organized such that it’s easy for readers to find their way around (cf. navigability). If a page is one in a series, make sure that it links to the previous and next pages and that there’s an obvious link back to the main page about the topic. Cross-reference relevant articles! Never miss a chance to keep someone on your site for an extra few minutes — the longer they’re there, the more likely they are to sign up or to give you money.

Be Integrated

Just as your online outreach should mesh with your work in the real world, your website should be integrated with the rest of your online presence. Your site should feature prominent links to your social media channels, for instance, and it should also connect in an easy and straightforward fashion with the signup form for your email advocacy/Constituent Relations Management system, as we’ll discuss in more detail in the list-building section of the [chapter on email as a political tool](#).

One way political campaigns in particular typically try to connect website visitors with opportunities to get involved is through a “splash screen,” a simplified page or tab that pops up when someone first encounters the site. Splash screens generally encourage email signups, donations or volunteer opportunities, and one interesting development in the 2010 election cycle was the extent to which top-level political blogs began to use them to capture email addresses. Sites like DailyKos that had focused almost entirely on being online publishers and communities saw the value in forging a sustained connection with their readers via email, and splash screens were a good way to intercept visitors on their way to the articles they actually wanted to read.

Completing the connection, every scattered piece of your campaign’s online content should refer back to your main website or the appropriate microsite — people shouldn’t be able to encounter you online without also finding a way back to your main online home to find ways to get involved. Done right, online content is more than than a persuader: it’s also a recruiter.

Be Sharable

Another potentially potent recruiting source? Your own readers, supporters and activists, each of whom has the power to be your ambassador in their own online circles. Of course they can always post your content to Facebook, Twitter or “social news” sites such as Digg on their own,

but you can make it easy on them by including the increasingly common “share” buttons in your page layouts. Some of these applications are site-specific, such as the popular Facebook “Like” button that many publishers now feature, but others (like the “AddThis” button on Epolitics.com) allow people to spread your link through many different online outlets or even email someone about your content. The rule of thumb? The easier it is for your readers to spread the word through the online channels THEY like to use, the better.

Be Current

Keeping sites up to date is a constant and usually thankless battle, and just when you think your content is current, some section just got stale. If you work for a large organization or campaign that’s constantly producing words and pictures, to some extent you’re in luck — you’ll probably have a steady stream of press releases, reports and white papers to pad things out. Though of course, that’s just more content to slip out of date when you’re not looking.

Some tips:

- **Try to distinguish between time-sensitive and evergreen content.** Most political issues don’t change THAT much from day to day, so try to keep your issue overviews as time-neutral as possible. When you have breaking news, keep it in a separate part of the page if you can, so that you don’t have to constantly root through the deep issue descriptions to make changes. I’m a big fan of the blurb-and-overview approach to a top-level section page — a series of blurbs about recent events at the top, followed by rarely-changing essentials about the issue.
- Except in press releases and other time-stamped documents (letters to Capitol Hill, press advisories, action alerts), **avoid words like “tomorrow” and “yesterday” and “next week”** — these go out of date quickly (as in, tomorrow), so use absolute dates as much as possible.
- **As you post documents, try to keep notes about which pages talk about things that are expected to happen or could happen** (i.e., “a vote on the bill is expected next week”) and go back to update them as necessary. It drives me crazy when I’m going through my own sites and find something from last summer that was “expected to happen” — argh, I should have told readers what happened or at least killed off the page off when it was no longer in use. If you’re really organized, make little alerts for yourself in your time-management program (Outlook, etc.). If you’re like me, you remember haphazardly.
- **Put a date on documents.** You may be tempted to leave dates off (“if they can’t see how old it is, they won’t know it’s out of date!”), but it’s generally a bad idea — if readers can’t see how old it is, they can’t know IF it’s out of date and won’t know whether to trust it or not. I started doing this religiously on an environmental site I managed for years after a friend was poking through it and got frustrated because she didn’t know whether the information was current or not. A useful side benefit has been that it’s easy to point out to the campaign staff when their content is grossly out of date (“hey guys, you realize that the last substantive thing you did was six months ago? Hmmm, THAT will look good to the executive director....”).

Final Thoughts About Your Site

We'll talk more later about specific tactics for integrating your site into your overall online campaign, but let's leave with this for now: as you build and develop your site over time, never lose sight of what it's FOR. Are you trying to build an activist list or activist network? Elect a candidate? Promote your organization or your own ideas? Influence press coverage? Help move a bill through Congress? Most likely, several of the above? Then your site should DO them, and not get bogged down by the superfluous.

Next: Building and Managing Email Lists

6. Online Advocacy Tools: Email Lists

If you're an online organizer, your activist list is often your most precious possession outside of your website — its members are your supporters, your regular readers and frequently your source of precious cash. You're likely to spend an enormous amount of effort building the list, and you SHOULD spend a lot of time thinking about how to maintain it. Traditionally, email has been the primary tool for keeping in touch with supporters, but as Facebook, Twitter et al become more prominent and email deliverability become more of a problem, email may find itself dethroned in the future. As of this writing, though, email is still by far the most widely used online supporter-contact tool — despite [constant predictions of its imminent demise](#).

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

[As an aside, back in 2000 I briefly flirted with a national campaign for a certain third-party candidate, but the dalliance ended for good when they lost a hefty chunk of their activist list to a server crash — I was already a little turned off by what seemed to be a dangerous level of disorganization, and I ran away in disgust when they didn't even have a backup copy of the one database they desperately needed to hold on to. Anyway...]

What About Listservs?

Though we're going to spend most of this chapter talking about blast-email lists, which campaigns use to send messages from a central source to many subscribers at once, interactive email-based discussion groups are also a valuable tool. Listservs have been around since the early days of the 'net, and as of 2011 they're still going strong — I belong to several back-channel discussion groups composed of online campaigners and communicators, and many, many similar communities connect activists, journalists and bloggers. One example, the reporter-heavy *Journalist*, even blasted into the news in 2010 when messages featuring comments from a prominent libertarian blogger [appeared in public](#) and angered his conservative colleagues enough to [cost him a writing gig](#) at the *Washington Post*.

Besides illustrating the danger of putting ANYTHING online that you wouldn't want printed on the front page of the *New York Times*, this episode demonstrates the continuing utility of an old tool. Campaigns should look for opportunities to join existing communities to learn from others and connect with important or influential voices, and in some cases it will make sense to start a new discussion group or listserv to connect with and organize activists.

The Basics of Email List Management

Back-channel messages and listservs can be useful, but campaigns typically focus on email's power as a mass-communications tool. Let's look next at some basics about lists and list management.

List-management software

You can run a small list through a normal email program (BCC your recipients, please, to protect their addresses), but it'll become a serious pain once you reach a certain size. Even worse, you're likely to see at least some of your messages get caught in spam filters. Better option: plenty of companies will be happy to provide specialized software help you with mass emails, as [we discussed earlier](#). At the very least, you should be able to find a system that automates the subscription/unsubscription process and allows people to update their information without having to go through you (not that that will stop them from asking you, the needy bastards). (For a more-detailed examination of mass-email/Constituent Relations Management software, see the "Tools, Time and Resources" chapter in the [Winning in 2010 guide](#).)

One note: be sure that YOU keep ownership of your names and email addresses, not your provider — a serious problem historically in working with Yahoo groups.

The next step up the ladder is to move to a system that also lets your list members send emails to their congressmembers or to other targets (governors, federal/state agencies, corporate CEOs) that you specify. These modules will match people to their elected officials by zip code and generally will let them edit a sample letter or even assemble a letter from suggested snippets of text that you provide. Many of them, particularly if they're designed for political candidates, will allow you to raise money as well. More sophisticated systems plug social networking outreach, email and even text messaging together to reach supporters through whatever channels they prefer.

We'll discuss some secrets for effective email advocacy below, but for now keep in mind Two Golden Rules of email organizing: if you're contacting Congress or another representative body, you generally should only let people contact their own legislators through your system (rather than spamming all of Congress). Second, that a personally written email is much more effective than a mass message — the value of an online action is often inversely related to how easy it is to take.

List Building

The big question for many organizations and campaigns — how do you build a list from nothing? The frequent answer — by ruthlessly [promoting yourself](#) and never missing an opportunity to get someone's email address in the process. Most of the time, your main source of new list members is your website, and successful campaigns make every effort to convert casual visitors into active supporters.

EVERY page on your website should have a signup button at the very least, for instance, and it's even more effective for every page to have a little blank that visitors can fill out with their addresses and start the process right there (generally, the more steps you put between the invitation to join and the actual joining, the more people you're going to lose along the way).

Asking people to join is great, but if you have a full-scale legislative action module, it's even better to have an action alert posted — people are on a page because they're interested in the subject, so a standing alert (i.e., a link that impells them to "Tell Congress to Stamp Out Blue Fizzies") lets you catch them when they're in high dudgeon.

If your site covers a lot of subjects, try to have topic-specific actions for readers to take. If you don't want to be bombarding Congress with random emails (they get more than enough as it is), try posting a petition or some other alert that doesn't immediately send a message to a target — people will feel like they've done something, you'll get new names, and you won't be bothering that legislative staffer whose just a bit hacked off at being pestered by your messages. Shh, don't tell — even if you never do anything with the petition itself, you'll still have captured the names.

If you have staff or volunteers working with people in the real world (meatspace) rather than the virtual world, you can get them to gather names as well. Are you getting supporters' names and phone numbers at local events? If so, snag their emails and add them to your database.

And as people spend more and more of their lives on Facebook and other online social networks, these have become potent sources of new email-list subscribers. As you build your fan base on Facebook, for instance, always think of ways to move people from the fairly loose connection they'll have with you on the site (your updates won't exactly be the only things in their news feeds) to a more robust connection via email. Post links to your actions on your profile as well as on Twitter, of course, but also try to integrate the actual alerts directly into your Facebook pages, a feature that online advocacy providers increasingly offer.

As an aside, I once worked with an organization that aimed to mobilize hunters for environmental advocacy, and they grew their list amazingly fast at gun shows and sportsmen's events by offering signers a chance to win a free elk hunt. Of course, since folks signed up out of something other than zeal for the cause, not many of them were inclined to actually DO anything the group asked them to do or even to read the emails, but at least the list got built.

Another trick to remember is that advocacy itself can build the list — when you send an email alert out to your list, assuming that your system makes forwarding easy, enough of your activists will usually send it to their friends, neighbors and pets that your list will grow. Most of time, you'll only see slight growth, but if you happen to catch a wave of public indignation you might see a massive spurt of signups — I heard a presentation in 2005 from a group that had gone from zero to over 100,000 names in just a few months (if I remember right) because of outrage over gay marriage (they were on the let-us-marry-dammit side).

Finally, if you need names and you have cash, you can buy them. If you're on the progressive (left) side of the spectrum, companies like [Care2](#) and [Change.org](#) do an excellent job of gathering names from their massive list of eager activists. Plenty of other consultants will be happy to work with you to build your list in exchange for large bags of cash. Always be sure that the names you buy are opt-in! (i.e., that people voluntarily agreed to be a part of your list). If you're planning a big buy, you might try getting a smaller sample first and testing to see how well those names work (i.e., sending an alert or two and testing the response rate).

A second way to use money to build your list is through online advertising, which we'll discuss in more detail in the [appropriate chapter to come](#).

List Management

List management and list building are fundamentally intertwined — using the list the right amount can build it, but using it too much or in the wrong ways can erode it. Some basic observations:

Balance your message frequency

Too many messages and you risk burning out your audience, too few and they won't remember who you are when you DO send. List exhaustion and list erosion are the twin enemies of email campaigns — exhaustion from too many messages, and erosion from email addresses joining the dinosaurs and Southern Democrats (i.e., going extinct) as your subscribers leave school, change jobs or just get sick of you. One message per week is pushing the limit for some lists, between two and four per month is about right for others, though if you have rabid supporters you'll be able to bug them more often. Particularly around fundraising deadlines and Election Day, you'll typically be able to deluge people with fewer consequences, since they'll understand that respite is right around the corner.

Also bear in mind that most activists will burn out eventually, and that your list consequently is in a constant state of churn — jaded activists drop off, dewy-eyed newbies take their places. It's part of the natural chain of life

Never forget that your subscribers are in it for what THEY want, not what YOU want

You may want them to open their wallets repeatedly and with the enthusiasm of a biker thug reunited with crystal meth after a long drought, but they probably joined your list just to keep up with your issues. If you ask and ask and ask without keeping their needs in mind, this relationship can't last, you never buy me flowers and I'm leaving.

Keep a close eye on your statistics

Every time you send to your list, a certain number of people will unsubscribe. It's usually not personal (they may be cutting back on emails in general, though I'd double-up on the deodorant just in case) but they're lost to you nonetheless. If a certain kind of message tends to cause an unusual number of folks to bail, stop sending them! Or at least try to isolate what it is that's causing them to abandon you.

For instance, when I was running the National Environmental Trust's action list, I usually got about about a 1/5th of one percent (.2%) unsubscribe rate for an action message (i.e., "Tell Your Congressman — Pass Some Bill or Another"). For email-newsletter-like issue updates that didn't contain a call to action, that number would double or even triple. Clearly, our list was into pestering elected officials and not so much into hearing what we'd been doing around the office, so I became sparing with the update emails and much more profligate with the action alerts.

At other groups, you may find a very different situation — your monthly e-newsletter may have the highest average open rate of any of your full-list messages, meaning that your people are actually hungry for the issue updates. Every list is different, so watch those numbers carefully to see how yours behaves.

List members can be needy

They'll often ignore your handy automated ways to take action, change their user profile or unsubscribe and instead will demand that you take care of these processes for them, which will usually take you approximately ten times as much time as it would have taken them to click on the damn link. They can also be quite rude in the process, particularly if they've forgotten that they signed up and think you're some kind of spammer (this happens all the time).

Your job: suck it up and be nice to them — this IS politics, after all.. If you're working for a candidate or an officeholder and they're constituents, certainly be nice, but do so even if they're casual supporters of your cause or fellow travelers. Your job is to change minds, and a rude answer to a list member or to anyone else who writes you does your cause no good — and you never know who's about to slag you on a blog with thousands of readers. Remember your grandmother's advice: if you don't have anything nice to say, keep your mouth shut and do what you can to help smooth things over. At the very least, send a polite non-answer — you can quietly plot the recipient's demise on your own time.

One final thought about email lists

Are they doomed to diminishing returns? Spam blockers are our enemies, for one thing, since they have the potential to cripple email advocacy (the spambot at one of my old day jobs sometimes caught our OWN advocacy messages, reminiscent of the early B1 bombers jamming their own radar).

Longer term, younger folks don't seem to be using email as much as those of us over thirty (damn kids, get off my lawn). College students in particular live on Facebook and Instant Messaging, with email apparently seeming about as hip as spats and starched collars. As they move into the professional world, will it change or will they? My money's on the latter, particularly as they get their hands on Blackberries, but we won't know for sure for some time. Also, the sheer volume of email limits the effectiveness of each individual list — I don't even KNOW how many lists I'm signed up for these days, but it's a lot, and I don't have time to read most of them.

Next: Blogs and Blogger Relations

7. Online Advocacy Tools: Blogs and Blogger Relations

Blogs, one-time sweet darlings of the political internet world. I can still remember the first time I figured out what a blog WAS, back in the spring of 2003 (I was at [South by Southwest](#), listening to a presentation and no doubt recovering from a hangover).

Okay, so what IS a blog? At one level, blogs are just websites that are easy to update — and simply because blogs are such convenient publishing tools, people use blogging software for all kinds of applications that don't involve sharing body parts or secrets with strangers. But the more common conception of a blog is a site that's frequently updated and that is the personal product of one or more authors. It can be a diary, an op-ed column, a corporate house organ, a community center, an outlet for art, photography, fiction or investigative journalism, a place of philosophical musing or a venue for shameless self-promotion (hello, e.politics!).

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Most political blogs function as opinion columns, though some do feature what looks suspiciously like original journalism. The biggest, like Daily Kos or RedState.org, particularly if they have a variety of columnists and allow comments from readers, become the center of entire online communities. A common approach is for a blogger to discuss a story from the mainstream media or from another blog, with readers contributing their own opinions as comments.

Though they often lack access to sources and documents themselves, blogs can still be news sources even when they can't indulge in their own investigative journalism: they certainly can help promote a story that's getting lost in the shuffle or keep a fading story alive long after it's disappeared from cable news. And, acting in concert or in competition, they can also leverage the collective intelligence of widely scattered sources to discover truth faster than traditional journalists ever could.

Bloggers' opinions have certainly become a major part of the political discussion — an issue raised by Instapundit or Josh Marshall can reach tens or hundreds of thousands of politically active people in a day. Daily Kos and several other of the leading progressive blogs have also worked very hard to raise money for candidates whose opinions and approach they favor.

Working With Blogs

First, should campaigns start blogs? Most bloggers would say yes — they would argue that anyone trying to influence politics should participate in what they see as the collective conversation about politics. But of course they'd say that, since if they didn't think that blogs mattered, why would they have one?

My answer would be a qualified "yes" — a blog can be a useful tool for just about any kind of political campaign. For one thing, because of the tools that have grown up to allow bloggers to communicate with each other (trackbacks and [rss](#), for example), a blog allows you to respond quickly and effectively to bloggers in their own sphere and using their methods, both to promote your ideas and to answer criticism.

And here's the qualification to my "yes" — you definitely CAN become part of the conversation... assuming you have something to say. A blog that's obvious hackery or clearly an afterthought isn't going to do much good and may do a lot of harm, particularly if it's so bad that people make fun of you (the blogosphere can be a tough playground). Politicians and political candidates should be particularly careful, since few will have time to write their own blogs, just as few write their own speeches. A good candidate blog can help connect with voters, but a bad one will make you look phony. An out-of-date one just looks flat-out bad. Advocacy blogs seem to work best for organizations that have either a very strong policy side (and hence a good stream of content) or a particularly strong voice or personality.

Even if you don't feel comfortable starting your own blog, you may be able to find a place on the big "community" sites that are increasingly common and popular. HuffingtonPost is a great example on the Left, since it features literally thousands of authors and is updated constantly throughout the day. Starting a HuffPo account usually requires a blogging track record of some kind, or at least a prominent presence or big name, so those on the Left may want to consider starting a "diary" first on a site like Daily Kos that takes all comers (though be careful about what you post — these sites' readers are typically viciously protective of their online homes, and blatantly promotional posts can get flamed fast). If you do start a blog of your own and are publishing consistently, cross-posting on a HuffPo account can be a great asset, in part because it has a large and active audience and also since it ranks highly in search engines.

Interestingly, many corporations and corporate trade associations have used blogs successfully — they're very sensitive to how their brand is perceived by customers and by opinion leaders, and they see blogs as a way to respond to criticism quickly. Also, to the extent that blogs can help put a personal face on a corporation or industry, they can help build an emotional connection with customers.

Working with Bloggers — Blogger-Relations Programs

Whether or not you start a blog, you can certainly work with bloggers to promote your ideas or your candidate. The basic rule: treat bloggers as journalists because they ARE journalists — they just happen to have a particularly cheap printing press. A good blog relations program is a whole lot like a good press relations program. Let's look at the basic levels.

RSS

First, you should have an RSS feed for your site if at all possible (we'll cover the [specifics of RSS](#) later). Many bloggers (and journalists) use RSS feed aggregating software or web pages such as [Google Reader](#) to keep track of articles from many sources from a single place, and having your own feed lets them add your content as well.

Issue monitoring

You should definitely be using blog-specific search tools (Google's Blog search is a good place to start) to keep an eye on your issues and to look out for any mentions of your group, candidate or campaign. It's far better to catch an emerging rumble of approval or disapproval THIS way than when those blog stories have led to *New York Times* coverage and a call from your funders. Google (email) Alerts can be a great way of finding stories in blogs (and publications) you don't normally follow.

Blogads

If you're promoting an issue or candidate, consider advertising on blogs. Blogads are usually quite inexpensive for the number of people they allow you to reach (though prices on popular blogs have gone up significantly in the past few years), and they're putting you before a targeted audience: activists on a red-meat wave-the-bloody-flag political blog, pacifists on a peace-oriented site, enviros on a green energy blog, and so on. Candidates have used blogads for fundraising, advocacy groups to build their email lists, authors and publishers to promote books, and campaigns of all stripes to publicize their positions and to help launch viral campaigns.

Sites like [Blogads.com](#) list potential advertising targets by their readership and by cost; you'll usually pay by the week. Pick your blogs carefully and try to balance the breadth versus the selectivity of their audiences: a popular political site may have more readers, but a site that focuses on your topic may have readers more primed to respond to your ad.

Design is critical for a successful blogad. The visual part of your ad should catch the eye and give enough information to intrigue a reader but without dulling his or her appetite for more. Don't just adapt your print piece! You're speaking to a different audience in a different medium, and design for the size and placement of the ads.

If you can, have several versions ready — you can usually change an ad's content at any point in the run, and you'll find that your results are better if you rotate your visuals. You can even run several variants at once and see which garners the best response. Also, pay close attention to your text, since you can embed links to several sites or pages and expand on the message in your visual component. For inspiration, the blogads site has a list of [good ads on different topics](#).

Once your ad run begins, watch its statistics throughout the weeks of your buy. As with most advertising, blogads give you some benefit just from exposure, but you'll probably be most interested in the number of clicks your ad gets. If you're advertising on several sites, compare the amounts you're paying per click on the different sites — you may find that a relatively cheap site is giving you the best results.

For more about getting the most from a blogad campaign, see [this e.politics article](#) and [follow-up piece](#), though bear in mind that they're now several years old.

Blogger Relations

Another way to work with bloggers is to contact them directly to promote your issues, just as your press team works with the reporters who cover your beat at major newspapers and the tv networks. Like most writers, bloggers are hungry for fresh topics, particularly if they're among the first (or absolutely the first) to write about them, and a good number will be eager to hear from you.

To contact blogs, you'll need to find them first. Google's a good place to start, both through the specialized blog search and through the main search function — try googling your topic or topics along with the word "blog" and begin reading sites and keeping notes. Not every blog will have contact info, but grab email addresses where you can. I've found that a big spreadsheet can be very useful for keeping track of sites and for breaking them down by the topics they tend to cover. Be glad you got that intern for the summer.

Once you build your list, you can start pitching stories. You'll want to reach the most influential blogs first (more bang for your buck), but which sites those are isn't always obvious. You can try to use Technorati.com or some other tool to rank the sites you're tracking by the number of other blogs that link to them (ranking them by authority), but these aren't always as helpful as one would hope. Another tactic: identify a few blogs in the space you're targeting and then see who THEY link to frequently — that'll help you find the sites that are actually driving the conversation.

Some cautionary notes: before you contact a blog, make sure you've read enough posts to know that the author actually might be open to your story — he or she's going to ignore off-topic pitches and may think you're an idiot for making them. Craft your messages carefully, since you want each email to be a personal contact and not a form letter. ANY time you contact a blogger, write professionally and keep in mind that your message may end up in front of his or her entire audience verbatim.

Also, ALWAYS let bloggers know that you're with a group or campaign. You may get away with hiding your affiliation for a while, but if you're found out, your credibility and that of your campaign will be shot — and often skinned alive in public. Paying bloggers to post stories is completely out of bounds.

Once you get coverage, you'll want to keep track of it, both to help fine-tune your blog-relations project and to justify its existence to higher-ups. Again, Google and a spreadsheet can be useful tools. As you work with bloggers, you'll begin to build the kind of journalist-source relationships that good P.R. people treasure. Note that a serious blog-relations project can take an enormous amount of time, as you've probably already guessed.

Twitter

As of this writing, many bloggers are also using the social network/micro-blogging site Twitter, a good reason to start a Twitter feed and use it to promote your content and actions. As we'll discuss in more detail in the chapter on Twitter, "retweeting" bloggers and using "@replies" can help bring you to their attention, and if you happen to have a blogger following your feed, you can also send him or her a Direct Message. As Twitter's usage grows, it may lose some of its effectiveness as a blogger-outreach tool (more @replies and DMs = more chaff in which your wheat can hide), but for now many online communicators have found it to be a good back-channel into the blogosphere.

Reaching the Top Political Blogs

If you're working with an issue or electoral campaign, wouldn't it be a good idea to get in front of the audience of the top national political blogs, sites like DailyKos or RedState? As a communications person for a political nonprofit put it to me once, "it's like trying to get a story in the New York Times." What she meant was, very high payoff, but it requires a lot of work and the chance of success is relatively low.

Journalists, Congressmembers and national political figures do often pay a great deal of attention to what's discussed on the most popular blogs, but placing or influencing a story on one of these sites is extremely difficult. Some political communications companies on both sides do specialize in outreach to the authors and audiences of the big-name political bloggers, but this exercise is not for the empty of pocket. Some groups have seen success by working up the food chain on the largest sites, contacting DailyKos "diarists" and other lesser-known writers and hoping that the resulting story gets "promoted" to the site front page.

Niche Political Blogs

A growing consideration in blogger outreach is the continuing strength of niche blogs, often (in the political world) tied to particular cities, states or regions. Niche political and/or issue blogs have often turned out to be fruitful ground for political candidates and issue campaigns alike — their audiences may be small, but they're by-definition HIGHLY targeted. And stories in niche political sites may [climb the communications food chain and get much wider distribution](#).

Next: Social Networking Sites

8. Online Advocacy Tools: Social Networks

If you want to build a following online, a good strategy is to go where the people are — and in 2011, plenty of them have flocked to online social networks, particularly (in the U.S.) on Facebook. Earlier versions of this guide focused on strategies for MySpace and the plethora of other social networks, but over the past two years Facebook has come to dominate the social side of online advocacy to an unprecedented degree. Facebook (and to a lesser extent, niche social websites like [Black Planet](#)) have in some ways become the modern equivalent of town squares, places where people from all walks of life can mingle and connect in a public environment and where campaigns can fish for support in a pond both broad and deep.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at [epolitics.com](#)

Since 2008 edition of this guide, political campaigns and nonprofits have hit social networks hard, but before we dive in, let's answer the basic question of what a social networking site is. An online social network is a website on which people and organizations can set up profile pages with basic information about themselves and then link to other people's pages — it's that simple. Readers typically browse profiles by searching by keyword or name or by following links from one person to another, and they can also leave comments behind as they go.

Getting "friends" is as easy as going to a someone's profile and requesting a link. You can also use social networking profiles as a mass communications tool by sending a message to many of your friends at once (if the site allows it), by posting a link to an outside piece of content or by starting a conversation on a page. Facebook's audience — 500 million strong worldwide as of this update — is particularly diverse, taking in a big swath of ages and demographics, though it does still skew somewhat on the younger side.

Facebook as a Political Tool for Organizations and Campaigns

I'm reluctant to go into too much detail about Facebook in this guide, because the company changes features often enough that anything we cover has the potential to go out of date quickly (for the latest, check the main [Epolitics.com](#) site or specialized social media trackers like [Mashable](#), [AllFacebook](#) and [InsideFacebook](#)). But as of early 2011, Facebook wants campaigns, organizations and corporations to create "pages" rather than profiles, while individual activists can use either their own profiles or create a page. Facebook groups, the early version of pages, are fading out fast.

The advantage of pages is that they can be customized to a certain extent, plus they're free from the limitations on the number of individual followers that profiles encounter. To highlight content or brand themselves, campaigns can create "tabs" that effectively function as sub-pages within their main page. Commonly, tabs might feature different issues and actions, and many of the email-advocacy vendors now offer the ability to incorporate action alerts into tabs. And just like individual profiles, pages include "walls" to which administrators can post content such as videos, photos and links to blog posts or websites — besides being a powerful tool to engage people over time and draw them into your issues, Facebook has also become a crucial path for videos and other pieces of creative work [to spread virally](#). Also, since followers can leave comments on a page's wall and engage in conversations among themselves, pages have become a truly interactive venue.

Besides walls, another function shared between profiles and pages is the ability to post “notes,” which are longer pieces of text that work much like blog posts (MySpace pages also automatically include a blogging function). Notes allow for more elaborate content than a wall post, and [Sarah Palin in particular](#) turned her Facebook notes into a message-distribution tool followed by millions in 2009-2010.

Tabs can also include more advanced features: for instance, Facebook has opened its system to let outside programmers to create software applications (“apps”) that allow for much more complex kinds of interactions than those native to the site itself. Some advocacy groups have created their own apps, but most turn to outside vendors to handle the complex coding needed.

Finally, Facebook is one of the few social media channels on which organizations and campaigns can “buy” support, since Facebook Ads have turned out to be a very effective way to build a following. For more, see the [political advertising chapter](#).

General Considerations for Social Network Outreach

Sometimes, a social networking profile will be simple “brochureware” — little more than an online business card and a chance to get your name in front of potential supporters. To get more out of it, try adding links to your individual campaigns (if you’re an advocacy group) or to more information about each of your issues. Always include a way to join your email list, and a donate button wouldn’t hurt, either. Many MySpace sites are garish and assault readers with sound and flashing graphics (hello, late-90s Tripod and Geocities sites), so you’ll probably want to use pictures or other graphics to illustrate your links, but be sparing — having a “clean” site may actually help you stand out. Facebook pages and profiles are “clean” by their basic nature, though tabs allow for more customization and creativity.

A few other things to keep in mind:

- Friend lists tend to build exponentially (the more people who see you, the more people who are going to link to you), so **try to build a healthy list right away**. If you have an email list or newsletter, mention your Facebook page to your readers when you launch it and invite them to follow you. Also, look for organizations that work on related issues and try to connect with them, since being shown on their page will put you in front of a friendly audience right away.
- **Use social networking sites to promote your action alerts!** Send a mass message out to all of your friends (if the site allows it) and also post notice of it on your wall or profile. Readers are more likely to sign up for your list if you present them with a specific action to take. Encourage them to spread the word, through direct messages to friends, Facebook status updates, profile photos, etc.
- Additionally **explicitly ask your friends to post your alert or other content on their profiles**. If they really care about your issue, they’re often eager to help out. Plus, it gives THEM some interesting (you hope) content for their space. Your fans are your best online ambassadors.
- **Political campaigns in particular should use badges, buttons, widgets and other content snippets that supporters can place on their own sites**. Let THEM promote YOU even when they’re not actively adding more to their profiles. Have a clear download

section on your profile page and on your main website, and encourage people to change their profile pictures to your badge or otherwise promote it prominently.

- **MySpace users in particular are a diverse bunch, and many people use the site for dating and self-promotion.** You may end up with some “friends” with an exhibitionist streak, so try to decide in advance how to handle friend requests from less-conventional parts of your audience. This consideration is probably more important for a candidate than for other types of campaigns! On Facebook, advocacy groups and candidates should consider in advance how they plan to handle conversations on their pages or posts that get out of hand.
- As with every other website, **don't let your content slip out of date.** If you're afraid that you're not going to have time to keep your profile updated, stick with evergreen content.
- Finally, don't just assign some random intern or junior staffer to create and run a social networking profile because “they're young and know about these things.” **A Facebook page or MySpace site is just as much a part of your campaign's public front as your main website is, and it must be on message.** Make sure that it meshes with your overall communications strategy.

Building Social Networks on Your Own Site

Several vendors now offering to help organizations set up Facebook-like functions on their own sites. I haven't worked directly with any of them yet, but it's a tactic that shows some promise. For a lesson from the 2008 presidential primaries, Barack Obama's custom social network (MyBarackObama.com) [was terrifically successful](#), gaining a couple of million members and sparking plenty of real-world behavior, but John McCain's original 2007 soc net failed completely. In 2009-2010, custom networks [spread to statewide races](#), but organizations thinking about creating their own social networks will want to consider carefully the scale they'll need to reach in order to succeed — without enough members, soc nets fade fast.

The Future of Social Networking

As of this writing, the future of online social networks as a political tool seems to hinge around Facebook, though the real question is its ability to spark concrete action in the real world — social networks tend to create “soft” ties that don't necessarily convert into commitment. As a fundraising tool, for instance, Facebook has largely failed so far, with most Facebook “causes” raising a few dollars at most — even the successful campaigns have generally raised far less money than a well-tended email list would yield from the same number of members. Likewise, posting an advocacy action such as a “send an email to Congress” message to a Facebook page usually yields some results, but generally with a much lower action-rate than you'd expect from an email list of equivalent size.

But as an initial recruiting tool and a means to engage followers over time, Facebook can be quite powerful, especially if you're able to employ Facebook advertising to build an initial base. And for individual activists, Facebook can be an extremely important platform, since they're limited only by their own ability to reach out and connect with potential supporters. The key to long-term results seems to be to think about Facebook as the initial rung on a [“ladder of engagement”](#) — get people to follow your campaign and then feed them information and offers to take action over time until enough of them make the jump into activism.

Really successful social networking-based campaigns generally seem to work with the strengths of the medium rather than treating it as just another broadcast tool — organizers engage their friends and followers one-on-one and at length, fostering commitment among (at times) relatively small but strong groups. Deeply engaged social networking outreach often aims to foster the creation of webs of super-activists who organize their OWN friends, with each forming the hub of a web of individual advocates.

Some campaigns also use Facebook essentially as email-replacement tools, particularly when working with younger audiences, but I suspect that email and social-network messaging will merge to a great extent down the road — ultimately, integrated campaign communications systems may not necessarily need to distinguish between the two.

Finally, some zealous true believers argue that electronic social networks will eventually be as ubiquitous as air, with each of us embedded in them from waking until sleep. We'll see; in that case, they'll replace most personal online communications. And I'll need to rewrite this book yet again.

Next: Twitter

9. Online Advocacy Tools: Twitter

[Twitter](#) is the newest significant weapon in the online politics arsenal: while it was a very limited arena as recently as the 2008 elections (Barack Obama had all of 50,000 followers by Election Day!), it's exploded in popularity since. Though the two sites are often lumped together in the popular mind, Twitter isn't quite a mass medium in the same way Facebook has become — it's more of a channel to reach the “[network influentials](#),” since it's particularly popular with [bloggers](#), [journalists](#) and activists. In fact, very high percentage of Twitter profiles people create are abandoned within months, making it a tool with more of a specialized following.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at [epolitics.com](#)

Functionally, Twitter is the very short equivalent of blogging, with dash of social networking thrown in: individual Twitter messages (“tweets”) are limited to 140 characters in length, and people generally have to choose to “follow” someone's Twitter feed in order to see their updates. As with Facebook, essentially anyone or any organization can create a Twitter feed, but in some sense Twitter lacks the reciprocal nature of a true social network — plenty of feeds have thousands of followers but follow far fewer people in return themselves (do you think that Ashton Kutcher really pays attention to what you say?).

What to Tweet?

A common perception of Twitter is that it's an inherently trivial medium — its often spoken of as a way to tell the world what you had for breakfast. But in practice, normal people who fill Twitter's “airwaves” with self-indulgent drivel generally don't pick up much of a following (for celebrities, that's unfortunately NOT so true). In fact, perhaps the most common single use of Twitter is to spread links to blog posts, videos, news articles and other pieces of in-depth content, making the 140-character limit less of an issue. Organizations and news publications in particular tend to use Twitter much like an [RSS feed](#), simply listing each new piece of content as it comes out.

In general, as in so many other parts of the online advocacy space, readers aren't likely to pay much attention to you unless you have some kind of value to offer them. People who tweet too much trivia too often can find their followers dropping off in droves, so be sure to pay attention to the KIND of information you distribute. Not every tweet needs to be a haiku-like gem of wisdom, but it rarely hurts to think for at least a minute or two about your ultimate communications goals before messaging the world. How often people Tweet varies immensely — I have friends who've sent out 10 or 20 times more messages over time than I have, for instance. It really depends on what you have to say and the kind of following you have.

Building a Following

Once you've begun to build a base of content on Twitter, the next consideration is to build that following. Unfortunately, short of being mentioned in the Twitter feed of someone famous, finding an audience typically takes time. Start by following the people you want to follow you — your peers, political activists, bloggers, journalists, etc., since at least some of them will follow you back right away. Once they do so, you have the opportunity to reach them — and potentially, their own audiences.

Engaging the Community and Connecting with Prominent Voices

The most effective way to build your following over time is to actively engage the Twitter community, a process that can take several forms. The most straightforward is to use an “@reply,” in which you reference another Twitterer in your own post (i.e., “@epolitics why don’t you just shut up about this crap”). You can use @replies to hold a back-and-forth conversation with someone, plus they’re a good way to get the attention of someone with whom you’d like to connect (Twitter.com and other Twitter-management tools typically make it very easy to see who’s @replied you).

@replies also play a role in “retweeting,” which is the forwarding of someone else’s posts to your own followers. Retweets are one of the signature characteristics of the ongoing Twitter conversation, since they let people provide value to their readers without having to write new content themselves. Plus, retweeting someone more prominent than you can be a good way to come to his or her attention, particularly if you use the old-school “RT @reply” method rather than Twitter’s newer built-in retweet function (RT’ing a tweet as an @reply also lets you add a comment, another valuable feature).

Besides RT’s, the other common bit of Twitter shorthand you’ll commonly encounter is a “hashtag,” a word or abbreviation preceded by the “#” sign. Twitterers use hashtags to refer to a topic that’s being discussed by several people at once, for instance an issue, event or public figure, and people often use Twitter’s search function to follow the extended discussion around a particular tag. This tendency makes hashtags a valuable way to gain exposure to new followers and to find yourself retweeted, assuming of course that you have something interesting to say. Some websites attempt to keep track of common hashtags, but the easiest way to find the terms in general use is to use a Twitter search to note the terms actively employed in the discussion around an issue.

Engaging the Twitter community is obviously time-consuming, since you have to pay attention to what many different people are saying — you can’t participate in the conversation unless you’re actually listening. Besides hashtags, dedicated Twitter-management tools like Hootsuite and TweetDeck let you break the feeds you’re following down into various groups by their characteristics, for instance based on topics they cover, and they also tend to speed up the process of posting content vs going through Twitter.com itself. A good tool will typically allow you to pre-schedule Tweets for publishing, something that’s particularly handy if you have content that needs to go out over the weekend.

Besides public conversations, you can also “Direct Message” someone behind the scenes if you are following each other reciprocally, and I’ve known people who’ve been able to connect with a blogger or reporter via DM whom they’d never been able to reach via email.

Advanced Tactics

Twitter has given rise to an impressive array of different tactics and practices in its short time on Earth. “Live-Tweeting” an event involves covering it comprehensively as it happens, and social media-friendly conferences and seminars typically promote the use of certain hashtags to facilitate the process. Activists or groups can also pre-arrange TweetChats, which are public discussions at a particular time and around a particular hashtag. Many people pay attention to the hashtags that are “trending” on Twitter, i.e., becoming widely discussed, and the goal of a TweetChat or live-tweeting is often to either encourage a topic to trend or to ride the wave of a subject that’s moving up the popularity ladder. Finally, a Twitter interview can be an interesting

way to run a one-on-one public conversation, though it practice it can [feel like competitive poetry](#) or a freestyle rap showdown — i.e., a public balancing act on a very narrow wire.

Twitter and Cell Phones

A common question about Twitter: why the 140-character limit? The answer is [cell phones](#) — Twitter is designed to be used like SMS text messages, making it one of the few online tools that's commonly and easily used on handheld devices. Some organizers have taken advantage of this fact to use Twitter to help communicate with and ultimately rally communities in which cell phones are more common than access to the traditional internet. Others have used the Twitter/phone connection for on-the-spot coverage of rallies, protests and other events, particularly as a means to distribute photos and videos shot with their phones. This last feature has been particularly important in street protests in countries around the world.

Twitter as an Amplifier

One of the fascinating developments in the online politics arena after the 2008 election was the extent to which conservatives and Republicans took to Twitter, leading some observers to claim that Democrats were [losing the Twitter war](#). In response, progressive activists such as [my friend Alan Rosenblatt](#) actively began to try to create an echo-chamber effect on the Left, in part through the use of hashtags like “#p2” to counter the Republican “#tcot” (“Top Conservatives On Twitter”). Alan's also had great success helping his issue-expert colleagues at the Center for American Progress amplify their individual voices — he's helped get them on Twitter in the first place and then retweets their content out over a much larger network. Other groups such as [Progressive Congress News](#) are similarly trying to use Twitter to raise the profile of content that's otherwise at risk of getting buried, something that I suspect we're going to see much more of in advocacy campaigns to come.

More Ways to Stumble

A note of caution: electoral campaigns in particular need to be careful to distinguish between a candidate or officeholder's Twitter feed and one updated by staff, since Twitter as a community tends to value authenticity. If Twitterers find out that a “candidate's voice” is not actually his own, the campaign's credibility can take a hit. Campaigns can use both approaches in a single feed if it's clear whose voice is speaking at any given time, and can even turn a relatively rare candidate appearance on his or her own feed into an event to promote. Another consideration for electoral campaigns: some politicians have taken to Twitter like a duck to water, but the results of unfiltered Twitter-posting can be dangerous to a political reputation (plenty of room for a stupid mistake in 140 characters).

One final thing to remember: once a campaign has a Twitter feed, people will expect to be able to follow it and interact with the author(s). Don't start a feed only to let it die of neglect.

Next: Social Media

10. Online Advocacy Tools: Social Media

Social media is a broader concept than social networking, though people often put them together — it refers generally to content that is created by random internet users rather than by a central person or group. YouTube and Wikipedia are great examples of sites built on social media concepts, as are blogs that allow comments. How can political campaigns use social media to tap into the internet hive-mind?

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Carefully, as MoveOn.org discovered during the 2004 presidential campaign. If you'll recall, early in 2004 the group encouraged its members to create anti-Bush ads that it would then evaluate for actual use on television. Hundreds of ads were submitted and placed online, but one used historical footage to associate the Bush administration with Hitler and the Nazi party. Oops — that one ad gave MoveOn.org's enemies fodder for days of attacks on the organization. An ad that never ran got plenty of media coverage and took attention away from the issues on which the group wanted to focus voters (though all the attention also boosted the group's membership, so it wasn't exactly a total loss).

Any time you open the floodgates to user-generated content, you take the same risk, so good gatekeeping is essential. That being said, allowing your members or readers to generate content has some real strengths as a tactic. For one thing, it allows you to capture the brainpower of far more people than you could reasonably hire — you can leverage the collective intelligence of a chunk of the internet. For another, it's potentially a terrific tool for community building, which we'll discuss in more detail in the section on [building and keeping an audience](#).

As an example of both aspects, in the summer of 2006 the Ned Lamont campaign in Connecticut made great use of user-created video. For instance, Lamont supporters shot clips of opponent Joe Lieberman's campaign appearances and uploaded them to the Lamont site. Minor gaffes that would have passed unnoticed in the past could thus be preserved for all to enjoy, and those behind the cameras could feel that they were an essential part of the campaign. Lamont supporters also amused themselves and their comrades endlessly by cleverly editing Lieberman footage into their own online ads and "documentary" clips. In the 2008 and 2010 election cycles, this trend only accelerated, with some memes like [2010's "Demon Sheep"](#) taking on a life of their own.

Besides video, a campaign could solicit slogans from supporters, ask them to contribute their own personal stories or essays to an online presentation, provide them with photos to embellish with captions and speech bubbles, or ask them to vote or comment on ads, speeches and position papers, just to name a few uses. Any of these tactics can motivate your supporters and get them to help push your campaign over the top.

Social Media, Whether You Like It or Not

One more thing about social media that campaigns need to keep in mind: it's out there whether you want it to be or not. For instance, look at our experience in the 2008 primaries. Barack Obama benefited from the "Yes We Can" and "Obamagirl" videos, which were created by citizens without any coordination from the campaign, but he was hurt by videos of his former pastor which were posted to YouTube. All the major campaigns had Facebook Groups for and against them; all had blogs building them up and cutting them down.

In a social world, campaigns need to pay attention to a vast new array of content producers whom they never had to worry about before, since some college kid (or some grandma) can produce a viral email or a powerful video piece that can drown out the message the campaign is actually trying to get across. Whether campaigns actively use social media tools or not, they're being used on them. Fun times, if you ask me.

Next: Video and Animation

11. Online Advocacy Tools: Video and Animation

Though online video has really broken out big in the last five years, campaigns and random citizens have been using short video clips (live-action or animated) to promote their ideas and pummel their enemies for years. But broadband's easy availability and the explosion of video posting sites like YouTube makes it much more effective than before — users no longer hesitate to click on video links like they might have a few years ago, and you're not going to lack for easy places to post your content as an outreach tool. Plus, tools like Twitter and Facebook now provide additional ways to spread the word about each new piece of video content.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Of course, the huge expansion of online video makes it hard to break through the clutter: the next “Yes We Can” is competing with millions of YouTube clips created by both amateurs and professionals. Besides the new generation of home video enthusiasts, music labels are promoting bands, broadcast networks are hyping their shows, and P.R. firms from all over the world are pushing “clever” promotional video clips in hopes of viral takeoff..

Why Use Video?

Campaigns have found that video can be a powerful tool in part because it helps create more of an emotional connection with a subject — having someone TELL you about a political issue is usually more compelling than reading about it. Also, good video can take complex issues and make them immediately understandable, in that picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words way. One consideration, though, is that video is often quite time-consuming. Posting an unedited clip is relatively easy, but anything that needs editing can quickly turn into a huge project. I've heard video producers estimate 30-40 hours of work to produce a 3-minute clip, if it needs to be scripted, shot and edited.

The Basics

So, now that we've decided to use video (or animation), how do we do it? First, campaigns can host clips on their own websites, blogs and MySpace sites/Facebook pages to vividly illustrate their ideas, to show their candidates in a godlike light, to highlight opponents' misdeeds and overall perfidy, etc. This tactic is really a no-brainer, and you're only limited by your ability to create content — plenty of people are doing amazing things with \$200 video cameras, and hosting is cheap unless you're getting gigabytes of data accessed weekly. Good video (and Flash animation) can make your case in a dramatic and immediate way and is often the centerpiece of [viral campaigns](#). One particular advantage of using video hosting sites is that you can usually “embed” the video in your own page: paste in a snippet of code, and your readers can watch the video directly on your site without having to open the video clip as a separate document.

One note — if possible, “watermark” your pieces so that your URL displays within the picture as they play. This way, if someone copies the file and distributes it independently of your site, viewers will still have a way to find you. And if your video is specifically intended to spur action, be sure to end it with a definite call for people to take that action, usually accompanied by a link that provides an opportunity to do it. Also, besides linking to issue-specific clips in the appropriate

places on your site, you'll probably want to create a central page that collects all of your video (and/or audio) in one place. Finally, when you post a video to YouTube or a similar hosting site, pay close attention to the description and keywords you include along with the video clip itself — they're extremely important in helping users of the site find your content as they search for information (or momentary distraction).

Reaching Out

Next, campaigns can use video as an outreach tool by posting clips on Google video, YouTube or their competitors, hoping to capture new supporters as they come across them. Most sites will allow you to create a "channel" that gathers all of your videos in one place and may allow you to link back to your main site or your action center. Again, watermarking is a good idea, as is carefully crafting the short text descriptions video-hosting sites typically allow you to add to your content — they'll help your pieces show up when people use Google or the search engines built into the video sites themselves.

Posting videos is the beginning of the battle, but if you really want them to be seen, you'll need to spread the word using all of your normal [promotional mechanisms](#). Link to them from your main website and social network profiles, promote them to your email list, and make sure that it's as easy as possible for viewers to forward your link to others (a feature generally built into video-sharing sites). Also, keep in mind that YouTube and other video-sharing sites usually display a handful of popular or noteworthy clips on their front page and on category pages, and your viewership can spike if you can build enough traffic on your own to start being featured. Pay close attention to copyright! Some sites will reserve the right to use your content for their own purposes.

What Kind of Content?

As you're developing your online video strategy, don't forget to think about the KIND of content you'll be producing. Political campaigns have typically focused on slick-looking video equivalents of their television commercials — [John McCain's videos in '08](#), for example, or this [hi-larious example from a 2010 Alabama statewide race](#) — but professional isn't always perfect. Obama's 2008 campaign not only produced close to 2000 individual YouTube clips, they [produced video in many flavors and for many purposes](#). Some pieces were intended for a broad audience, effectively serving as online campaign commercials, but others were aimed at volunteers and campaign staff — their goal was educational and motivational, and at times their relatively primitive production standards added to their perceived authenticity.

Social Media and Online Video

Finally, as discussed in much more detail in the chapter on [Social Media](#), campaigns use video as an organizing and motivating tool by letting their supporters create and edit video content and upload it directly to the campaign site.

Next: Advertising

12. Online Advocacy Tools: Advertising

If I had to pick a most-neglected aspect of internet politics, it would be online advertising — until recently. In particular, electoral campaigns used to spend relatively little money advertising to web audiences, particularly compared to the huge amounts they raised online. While it's typical for commercial marketing campaigns to spend 15% or 20% of their budgets online, for political campaigns the comparable range before 2010 would have been 3% to 5%. This seems particularly strange considering the targetability of online advertising (the 'net naturally breaks down into demographic and interest-based niches) as well as its trackability. During the 2010 election cycle, this situation finally started to change, with campaigns turning to Google and Facebook ads in particular.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

One factor behind this evolution is that fact that the internet's main rivals as communications channels (general-audience broadcast advertising, phonebanking/robocalls and direct mail) are all gradually losing effectiveness as a result of a variety of factors including increased competition for viewer attention, cable channel proliferation, cell phone ubiquity, and overall junk-mail resistance. But until now, a combination of factors seem to have slowed down the acceptance of online advertising in the campaign world.

First, online advertising is often hard to do, particularly if you're going beyond basic Google, Facebook and blog ads. Running display ads (static banners or more complex Flash/video/interactive pieces) is much more difficult than it should be, in part because different publications can have vastly different standards (I can remember one time doing three different versions each of four online ads, one set for the NY Times site, one set for Washington Post properties and one at standard 468x60 banner size for National Journal) and in part because ads can't be ordered from a single central broker (a situation that AOL's Advertising.com for one [is trying to change](#)). Television and print ads, by contrast, are done in standard formats and sizes and ad agencies can usually purchase space in many outlets at once.

And therein lies the second part of the problem — professional campaign consultants in the U.S. have generally taken a cut of their clients' TV spending as a commission for placing their ads, and the industry hasn't worked out a similarly profitable business model for online political advertising. Pressure is coming, though — the 2008 and 2010 campaigns broke down a lot of barriers, and consultants are also being pushed more often into lump-sum channel-neutral contracts that don't discriminate as much against the 'net.

Basic Types of Online Advertising

Regardless of whether they're used to elect a candidate or promote an issue, online ads today break down into a few basic categories.

Display Ads

Display ads are the descendents of the banner ads that sprang up everywhere during the first dot-com boom, but the family has now expanded to include sophisticated video pieces, Flash animations, database interactions and "floating" pop-overs. Display ads are also in no way new to

political advocacy, since I can remember the original incarnation of Epolitics.com making money (through a political ad network) from [Lockheed-Martin ads for the F-22](#) during a defense funding fight in the late '90s. As mentioned above, display ads often have to be tailored to the particular requirements of a given website or publisher, particularly if they include higher-end features.

Also depending on the publisher, display ads can be targeted at particular site users, particularly on sites like web portals and social networks as well as newspapers and others that collect financial, demographic and usage data on their readers. An advertiser on Washington Post web properties, for instance, can aim ads at employees of particular federal agencies, showing them only to readers coming from the selected .gov domain(s). Of course, advertisers can target by interest as well as by demographics, running ads only on special-interest sites or on special-interest sections of mass-audience and news sites.

We should note right away the obvious application of databases to the question of online targeting, something covered in more detail in the chapter on [political databases](#). Also note that some forms of offline political communications also benefit from similar kinds of targeting, since the explosion of cable channels naturally encourages targeting by interest — “cable” channels delivered by actual cable rather than by satellite are also often geotargetable by zip code or neighborhood. Radio also breaks down by region and by demographic, and direct mail is a well-known haven for database nerds who dream of slicing and dicing consumer data (more in the chapter on Political Databases).

Contextual (Google) Ads

Another common online advertising channel deploys text ads on web pages based on the content of those pages. Google Ads are the classic example, with ads being served based on each unique search query, but Google now also sells text ads on thousands of sites across the web, and similar ad networks have sprung up as well. Contextual ads have proven to be very effective for both commercial and political advertisers, with easy and obvious targeting based on a variety of factors including keyword and reader location. Most also feature easy testing of alternative ad message/keyword combinations and the ability to change ads and ad runs mid-stream. Nonprofits can apply for Google Grants to receive free Google Ads, which a number of groups have used to build their supporter and donor lists. In practice, [Google Ads have turned out to have an excellent Return On Investment](#) when used to build fundraising lists.

To get the most out of contextual ads, testing and tracking are usually vital. Since ads on a particular page are arranged and emphasized based on the amount each advertiser has “bid” to purchase those keywords, a campaign may be able to reach more people for the same amount of money by advertising on more-specific queries. For instance, advertising on the word “outdoors” is likely to be expensive, since lots of different retailers, outfitters and advocacy groups will be competing for it. Advertising on “alternative fuel biodiesel,” on the other hand, may be much cheaper, and its superior targeting may also yield better results per-ad-viewed. Smart advertisers will test many different keyword/ad combinations to find the best and most cost-effective results.

Two other considerations about Google and other contextually targeted ad systems: first, if you target well, they'll reach people at the moment when they're potentially interested in your subject, since they're either searching for it or they're on a page that's somehow related. Second, Google ads have a secondary branding effect, since they put your message in front of web searchers and readers regardless of whether they actually click on them. Some research has even shown that it's beneficial to have a Google Ad show up on a page that also has your site in the organic Google search results — if a page contains both your ad and your link in the Google search results, more people click on your link, as if the ad somehow delivered extra visibility or credibility.

Facebook Ads

Facebook has significantly expanded the online advertising playing field over the past couple of years, primarily because ads on the social network can be targeted at people based on the interests they've listed in their Facebook profiles and on their demographic characteristics (“men aged 25-34 who like football” would be an easily targetable group, for instance). Unfortunately for our purposes, Facebook constantly changes its features and offerings, making it difficult to write about definitively! Websites like [Mashable](#), [AllFacebook](#) and [InsideFacebook](#) track these changes closely, making them essential resources for people running social ad campaigns.

Though the specifics may change in the future, we CAN talk about some basics. First, Facebook ads are easy to buy — anyone with a Facebook profile and a credit card can set up a campaign. Second, the creative elements are equally simple, with a small image and a few words of text, along with a “Like” button and a link to the appropriate landing page (ads can point to a Facebook page or to an outside website). Finally, up to this point at least, Facebook ads have been relatively cost-effective, with the price-per-click sometimes as low as a few tens of cents. Note that the cost is highly variable, and that at least for now, [Facebook's price structure rewards success](#): the higher the rate at which a particular ad run is clicked, the lower the cost moves over time. As a result, Facebook effectively rewards experimentation, and as with Google ads, Facebook advertisers frequently test many different combinations of creative elements and targeting to find the final versions on which to concentrate resources.

Video Ads

One interesting trend for 2010 and beyond is the steady growth of opportunities to place advertising on web video clips. Many YouTube clips now have a text ad overlay, for example, but perhaps the real opportunity lies in “pre-roll” ads on the internet versions of tv shows. Sites like Hulu.com, for instance, stream thousands of programs to people across the country, and electoral/candidate campaigns in particular have begun placing web versions of their tv commercials at the beginning of web clips. Other opportunities exist on sites for networks or individual shows (on episodes hosted on the Daily Show's website, for instance), and it's likely that pre-roll video will only increase in popularity. For one thing, it's close enough to traditional television advertising that political consultants can wrap their heads around it!

Blog Ads

Another ad channel used in the political world involves specialized advertising on blogs, either through the Blogads.com site or through other blog advertising networks. These ads are naturally targeted based on each blog's particular niche, and ads on specialized sites such as local or regional political blogs frequently reach very influential audiences at a low relative cost. For more, see the chapter on Blogs and Blogger Relations, and also note that very large sites like HuffingtonPost sell advertising directly, just like WashingtonPost.com and NYTimes.com.

Mobile Advertising

One new development in the 2010 election cycle was the first significant use of mobile advertising, particularly ads on the cell phone-optimized versions on websites and search engines. Because of the GPS features built into modern “smart” phones, mobile ads can be geo-targeted as well as aimed at people based on their search queries. Congressmember Michelle Bachmann reportedly bought ads aimed at people at the 2010 Minnesota State Fair, for instance, and other candidates attempted to reach people [finding their polling places or even researching](#).

[candidates](#) while standing in line to vote. Mobile advertising is still very much a niche application, though that situation may change if cell phones start to dominate Americans' internet usage as they do in some other countries.

Targeted vs. Blanket Advertising

We've talked a lot about targeting online advertising, but why not simply push out lots of ads to popular but non-targeted and non-political sites? Absolutely, why not? Some campaigns and consultants have gotten quite good results from bulk appeals on mainstream consumer and media sites. Shotgunning cheap ads out into the aether often fails, though — ads inexpensive enough to buy and deliver in massive amounts are also more likely to be bland enough to get lost in the online clutter.

Landing Pages

One final consideration — the ad itself is only the first part of the battle, since once someone clicks on your link, what happens next? Ideally, they'd jump to a highly targeted landing page that is conceptually and/or visually linked to the particular ad that they clicked on, and that also clearly steers them in the direction you want. For instance, political campaigns frequently push people to volunteer sign-up or donations pages, while advocacy groups will often promote email-your-Congressmember campaigns and similar political actions. In the 2008 and 2010 cycles, we've seen landing pages deliver video messages, help people find their polling places, promote house parties and even encourage donations to outside causes like disaster relief.

Next: SMS Text Messaging/Cellphones

13. Online Advocacy Tools: Cellphones and Text Messaging

Cell phones, and particularly text messages, are the next political tool we'll consider. If you've spent the past few years building up your thumb strength and agility while keeping up with which bars have good drink specials (as I wrote the original version of this article, I was looking at a friend's message from the previous night that said, and I kid you not, "CcCome to bedinbl" — Jen had maybe been at a barstool a little too long...), you already know that text messages are an efficient way to get a brief burst of information in front of a lot of people at once.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Their limitation lies in the brief part — text messages are too short to include much persuasion, so they're best used in triggering an action that you've preplanned. Particularly outside the U.S.

(creative cell phone uses have lagged in the States), organizers have used mass text messages to alert people to the location for a rally or demonstration and give authorities little time to counter them. You might use them for similar purposes or to spark an immediate cell call to a campaign target, for instance a Congressman or corporate CEO. You'll need to have educated your activists beforehand through other means, probably via email, but the text message can generate an immediate action when you need it. The trick will be getting the right target phone number to the right activist, but that's why you hired a top-notch vendor (hint). And of course, individual activists can always use texts to reach their friends and other organizing targets.

Probably the most immediate use of text messaging in the U.S. will be for election-day Get-Out-The-Vote efforts, though you can also use them as a two-way tool by soliciting information from supporters through polls and such. If you're really ambitious, you'll use them to [announce your vice presidential pick](#)! But the really interesting uses of mobile technologies are probably still a couple of years away (hmmm, they ALWAYS seem to be a couple of years away), and savvy campaigns are gathering supporters' cell numbers now for applications that haven't yet been dreamed up. Note that one good way to build a cell list is at live events, if you've set up the capability for people send you a short text message to sign up at that moment.

One particularly interesting use of cell phones for fundraising in the 2008 election cycle: the John Edwards campaign contacted list members via text, urged them to call a number and listen to a recorded message, then connected them to operators to take donations right away. The results were said to be good, though the campaign did not repeat the attempt that I know of. Otherwise, cell phone-based fundraising has primarily been used for [disaster relief and similarly high-profile and immediate purposes](#).

Location-Based Services

Foursquare, Gowalla and similar cell phone-based location-dependent services were all the rage in the commercial marketing world in 2010, though they haven't seeped over much into the political space just yet. Plenty of folks see [advocacy potential in location-based tools](#), so we'll keep an eye on them and see what pops up in the years to come. Also see the chapter on [Political Advertising](#) for a brief discussion of mobile ads, which tend to be location-based.

Grassroots Organizing

Perhaps the next frontier for cell phones in politics depends on the spread of “smart” phones — in 2010 we saw the first significant use of iPhone and other “apps” as well as specialized mobile-optimized websites for [field organizing and block-canvassing](#). The best of these applications would provide canvassers with directions to the next houses to visit, offer talking points and videos for persuasion, and give the ability to sign people up for a supporter list on the spot. I suspect that the potential of tools like these is just beginning to be tapped, and that phones will play a major role in field organizing moving forward.

Next: Political Databases

14. Online Advocacy Tools: Political Databases

Political databases generally don't get a whole lot of attention in the press or in public, but they underlie much of the technology of modern politics. Email advocacy and fundraising systems are really just specialized examples of CRM (customer/constituent/contact management) software, while blogs and website content management systems are database-driven, as are online ad serving systems. Robocalls, phone banks and direct mail depend on databases of voter registration and consumer behavior, and database experts frequently spend large amounts of time sorting their lists and testing different messages and asks.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

CRM Systems

CRM systems help organizations and campaigns communicate with large numbers of supporters to encourage online advocacy, fundraising and real-world behavior. Some CRMs focus on email advocacy, others on fundraising, others on newsletter delivery or project management. Sophisticated political systems may incorporate social networking outreach features, regulatory reporting features (for campaign contributions or lobbying expenses) and media- and lobby-contact management. You usually pay for what you get, though several lower-cost, higher-feature systems are becoming available. One development for 2008 and 2010 — the major political parties and the presidential campaigns are investing heavily in database-driven systems to increase the efficiency of block-canvassing and other local volunteer activities. In fact, the volunteer-generated data that the Obama campaign was able to gather in 2008 at times provided [a better sense of an upcoming vote's outcome than polling data did](#). Watch for database-driven systems to become increasingly important in organizing real-world political action, helping to turn online energy into offline activity.

For more on choosing a particular CRM for your needs, see the [“Tools, Time and Resources”](#) chapter of the *Winning in 2010* guide.

Identifying Super-Activists

Most activism-related CRM systems will allow list members to be sorted by their behavior — the number of actions they take, the amount and frequency with which they donate, etc. Identifying your super-activists can let you create special programs intended for them alone and which frequently reward them with access or recognition. Cultivating super-activists (or super-volunteers or super-donors) is time-consuming, but particularly for campaigns or groups with large lists, it can really pay off over the long haul. Organizing effectively on online social networks such as MySpace and Facebook frequently also relies on the work of super-activists; for more, see the chapter on [Social Networking](#).

Microtargeting

One database-related topic occasionally mentioned in the press is microtargeting, which almost always seems to have both a gee-whiz air and a slight whiff of evil about it. At a basic level, microtargeting involves the tailoring of communications based on the particular characteristics of

the potential recipient — sending different messages to different people based on who they are or what their interests are.

Microtargeting enthusiasts sometimes talk about the sophisticated merging of voter files and consumer databases, for instance to target voters by cross-referencing their magazine subscriptions and the kind of car they own to identify a particular group that's open to a selected message (for instance, direct mail people sometimes boast of sending different mailings to each address on a given block). But the actual benefits of such fine-grained targeting seem to fall off pretty quickly — most electoral campaigns are happy enough with voter addresses and past political affiliation, with a bonus for lists of union members, past political donors, volunteers for past political campaigns, etc. Note that if you're running for elected office in the U.S., the national parties are developing and fielding systems to put voter information in the hands of their candidates at all levels.

A number of vendors and polling firms also offer what seem to be quite sophisticated microtargeting-based voter/donor outreach, but I've also heard experienced direct mail database people say that the by far the best predictor of a person's propensity to give money to a campaign is his or her past history of donating — people who've donated before are more likely to donate again. In that case it doesn't take a whole lot of sorting to determine if you have your hands on the right data. So, consider microtargeting if it seems like a good fit, but make sure you're paying for information that's actually useful.

Making Your Case with Data

Speaking of useful data, another way you can employ it politically is to enlist it directly in your cause. Advocacy groups in particular have latched on to the idea using of data as an online persuasive tool through custom web applications, Google Maps and other mashups, interactive Flash presentations and online video. Essentially, it involves using software to turn information into pictures in a way that's interesting to viewers, and presenting data well can turn a very dry policy topic into something live and compelling. Most data presentations should be planned very carefully, since they are often significant software projects. See the chapter on [Media Relations](#) for a discussion of the use of data to influence journalists and policymakers.

Next: RSS

15. Online Advocacy Tools: RSS

RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Syndication) is an easy way to keep your readers abreast of updates to your site content. At their simplest and most common, RSS feeds send subscribers the title and a brief blurb about each new article or post on a given site or blog, along with a link to the post. Users can subscribe directly to feeds from sites they read regularly, though feed aggregators such as [Google Reader](#) and MyYahoo also collect feeds in searchable form.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at [epolitics.com](#)

Over the last few years, most major media outlets have implemented RSS to allow their readers to keep up with site changes as they happen. RSS feeds are built into most blogging software and are so common in the blogosphere that they are becoming critical to a site's credibility among bloggers as an information source.

Though the name “feed” implies that RSS is something that you send out to subscribers, your RSS feed is really just a simple XML file that lives on your site and that you either update by hand (not common any more) or is generated automatically by your site's content management system. When people subscribe to a feed, they've really just set up their RSS-reading program or site to automatically request the feed's XML file at a regular interval and display the contents.

For political campaigns, RSS should be a no-brainer. It's extremely easy to set up and to maintain, and it's a great way for you to keep in regular contact with your more tech-savvy readers. Also, as RSS aggregators become more common, many people are reading the contents of RSS feeds without even knowing it, since the news pages they're browsing are collecting and displaying the contents of feeds from many sites.

If you do podcasts, RSS feeds alert subscribers and aggregators every time you post a new installation (the “cast” part of the word “podcast” derives in part from the way RSS lets you mimic the “content push” model of traditional broadcast media).

A couple of quick things to keep in mind:

- Particularly if you update your RSS feed by hand, always run it through a [feed validating site](#) after you change it. Tiny flaws can crash your whole feed.
- Also when you make an update, use a [pinging service](#) to alert feed aggregators of the change, a feature built into most blog platforms by default
- In the same way you submit your site to search engines and directories, submit your feed to feed aggregator sites — you can find them via a Google search.

Next: Spreading the Word/Building an Audience

16. Online Tactics: Spreading the Word and Building an Audience

What good is a campaign if no one knows about it? Inadequate promotion is a painfully common problem in the online world — rarely can you hide your light under a bushel and expect your site to shine. Let's look first at the basics of getting attention, then we'll look at how to keep those readers once you get them.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Be A Resource

The first step in self-promotion is to be worth promoting: content that is both broad and deep is vital to attracting readers from every source — rich content tends to yield more search engine traffic, more links from other sites and more repeat visits from people who have found you. I've beaten this into the ground [before](#), but you're more likely to get readers if your site is relevant, easy to navigate and regularly updated.

Have you heard of the concept of the [Long Tail](#)? Introduced by Chris Anderson of [Wired](#), the Long Tail is the idea that in a sea of sites, a handful get massively more traffic than all the others, but those also-rans get much more traffic as a whole than the big few (the Long Tail is the loooooong list of sites trailing off from the leaders on a chart of overall traffic).

True internally for Amazon and other retailers, who make more money in total from books that sell two or three copies a day than from bestsellers, it's also true for broader resources on the internet. The online audience naturally fragments in a small number of very popular topics and a much, much larger number of niche topics.

Why does this matter to you? One of the most important things a site can do is to be significant within a given segment in the tail. Be a valuable resource, make yourself easy to find, and people interested in your topic will find you.

The Basics of Self-Promotion

Okay, poof, we're a valuable resource, so let's start telling the world. First, submit your site to Google, Yahoo, Bing and the other MSN sites and the also-ran search engines. They'll probably find you anyway in the long run, but why not make it easy on them? [Note: we'll talk about getting good search engine placement [below](#).]

Don't stop with one round of submissions. When you add a new content section ("Why Blue Fizzies Hate America"), make sure that you submit the section's front page to Google — it'll show up much sooner that way. The other search engines seem to update more slowly, so I'm not sure how much it helps to let Yahoo or Bing know about a particular content section, but if you have the time, it can't hurt.

Next, how visible are you beyond the search engines? Are you mentioned on the relevant pages on the web that cover your topic? Not link farms or link-spammers (sites that link to massive

numbers of other sites in an attempt to spoof search engines), but actual substantive sites about your subject. If not, it's time to go through the tedious and time-consuming task of tracking them down and letting them know about you. It's as simple and as annoying, once you've done it about a hundred times, as finding the email of the site editor and sending a short and polite note to let him or her know about your great new set of resources about the Blue Fizzie Menance.

Not everyone will answer you (many, many sites are no longer kept up, and some actively-maintained sites are run by big fat jerks), but if your content is worthwhile, you should gradually build up links. Links obviously help your traffic directly, and as we'll discuss in the section on [search engine optimization](#), they'll help you with visibility in search results as well. Don't forget reference sites — are you listed in the [Open Directory](#) and in any relevant [Wikipedia](#) articles?

And of course, social media channels like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are potentially rich sources of website traffic and public attention — in fact, so many people have come to use YouTube as an information source that the site has effectively become the most popular search engine in the U.S., after Google. Fill those profiles with content and keep them current!

Are you leveraging your other resources? Never, ever, ever let a piece of paper leave your office without a URL on it SOMEWHERE. Not a business card, not a newspaper ad, not a “fact” sheet, not a direct mail piece, nothing (unless you're trying to maintain plausible deniability, and that's naughty). This is sometimes a tough one to beat into your colleagues' heads, but every communication is a chance to promote your online presence. If you're spending money and/or time to promote your ideas in the offline world, don't miss the opportunity to give people a chance to go online to learn more about them.

Getting More Aggressive

Okay, we're done with the passive stuff — let's start bugging people. Press releases are a classic way to get the word out, but make sure you always have your URL in them. Besides going directly to journalists, press releases that go out through a distribution source like [P.R. Newswire](#) or [PRWeb](#) also show up in Google News, Yahoo News and other content aggregating sites. The proliferation of online journalism (blogs and newsletters) creates a huge demand for content, and you never know where your story will show up. When I was running [Political Information.com](#) (no longer active, and now preserved by a museum!), our press releases generated some attention in traditional news outlets but got great coverage in niche newsletters.

You can also reach out directly to journalists and pitch stories, but you'll generally want to work with a press or P.R. expert so that you don't make the kind of mistakes that alienate reporters. Again, you'll probably have better luck with niche publications than with newspaper or broadcast journalists. Don't forget podcasts and regular online video shows! They're likely to reach an audience that's passionately interested.

A classic way to reach a new audience is to position yourself as an expert (hello, e.politics!) and pitch stories to sites that cover your subject (hello, next step in my self-promotion process!). Newspaper op-eds and how-to or opinion pieces in online magazines put your campaign's name in front of an audience that other people have spent THEIR time building. Make sure you get a link!

Special Tactics for Bloggers

Building an audience for your blog deserves a special section. Blogs can benefit from most of the tactics described above, but they also have access to tools that other sites can't use as well.

Blogs are part of an online political discussion, and a good way to build your audience is to participate in that conversation. Linking to other sites and other discussions can build your traffic — [trackbacks](#) let you comment on posts on other blogs so that your content can reach that blog's author. Also, bloggers are usually passionate about being read, and they'll generally pay attention to the sites that are linking to them (which they can also find by searching for links to their URL on [Technorati](#) or Google's blog search. It sounds simple, but it also seems to be what works. With Epolitics.com, I'll be trying it out — I'll let you know about the results. [Note: pretty damn good so far!])

Building an Audience/Keeping Traffic

One of the biggest problems with site marketing is that even when you can convince people to come to your site, most readers rarely come back. Increasing your retention rate is an obvious way to get your page hit count up.

Sites encourage return visits in two basic ways: by enticing people to return and by periodically smacking them in the face with words and pictures.

Show that you have updated content

If your content is old and doesn't look as though it's regularly updated, why would a casual reader come back? Make it obvious that your site IS regularly updated — put a What's New section on your front page (and perhaps in the navigation on every page), use dates on pages, and highlight recent content as much as possible. For more on keeping sites up to date, see the section on [using websites as a political tool](#).

Use columns and regularly-appearing features

Regular columns or features can hook readers — that's why newspapers generally run op-ed columnists on predictable days. Your site might have a weekly feature on the ridiculous things your enemies are up to (Wednesday Wackos) or on a particular topic area (Tech Tuesdays, a la the [Kojo Nnamde show](#)).

Use Email

As I discussed in the section on [building and maintaining email lists](#), make it easy for people to sign up for updates. If you're building an activist list, you'll be doing this as a matter of course, but even issue sites and blogs can have an email list for telling readers about new articles. See the [email list](#) section for details, tactics and caveats.

Use RSS

[RSS](#) is another no-brainer, since subscribers to your feed will see links to new articles as they're posted. It's also essential for promoting podcasts.

Mobilize the Masses

Why tell your own story when someone else will do it for you? As we've discussed a couple of times before, your supporters themselves may be your best promotional agents, so encourage them to spread the word within the online (and offline) channels they use regularly.

Build community

Building an online community can be a good way to turn casual visitors into those passionate fans and supporters. Your [email list](#) is community at a basic level, since people do tend to identify with sites that send them information frequently (bitter as I am, I have a soft spot for several sites that have been sending me newsletters for years, even though I rarely read them) or for campaigns under whose auspices they've [sent email or faxes to Congress or other decision-makers](#).

The next step, and a natural one for blogs, is to get readers involved in the process of creating content for the site by leaving comments on pages. On some blogs, the comments have become more valuable than the original articles. Big media outlets are definitely realizing the value of comments, and community-building is a major reason that the Washington Post and other major media sites have rolled out comment features for most or all of news stories, and some have even implemented social network-style features for readers.

For many organizations, a Facebook page can be a great way to assemble an online community, since people will naturally enter into conversations as they leave comments on links and status updates that you post. This kind of interaction also helps ensure that they see your content in the future, since comments and "Likes" on your page elevate your posts in your fans' news feeds, and of course engaged supporters are also more likely to forward your action alerts or other posts to their friends and help spread the word that way.

Taking the idea of citizen involvement farther, campaigns can encourage readers and supporters to create content such as images or videos. See the section on [social media](#) for more.

See also:

- [Effective Press Releases in a Search-Driven World](#)

Next: Search Engine Optimization

17. Online Tactics: Search Engine Optimization

Getting found on search engines is usually vital if you want to have any kind of online prominence, and search engine optimization (SEO) is one of the Holy Grails of online marketing (and marketing is what we're doing here: we're selling ideas, right?). So, how do we get Google, Yahoo and Bing to notice us?

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

First, some introductory points:

- A lot of the information you'll hear about search engine optimization is out of date. Particularly, you'll still be told that you need to have keywords in your site's meta tags (which are in the html heading and provide information about your site), when they really don't make much difference now. People abused meta keyword tags so much in the past (i.e., by putting the word "sex" in them about 500 times per page) that search engines generally now ignore them.
- When we're talking about search engine optimization, we're not talking about spoofing search engines with bad information or otherwise trying to distort the search engine results — people often try to do that, but the search companies constantly change their algorithms to counter new tactics. Their business depends on good search results and they work hard to thwart attempts to fool them. Don't bother — if you really abuse the system, they can make sure that your site is somewhere around search result page number 100,000. You can generally get good enough results just by knowing HOW search engines rank pages and setting your site up accordingly and planning your marketing strategy accordingly.
- Search engine optimization is a long-term process, and the sooner you get started, the better.
- I'm going to focus on Google, because it's the most popular and most responsive search engine, but the same strategies will generally yield good results for Yahoo and Bing/MSN (the other two most popular search sites) and the also-rans. You'll probably see changes in your Google rank first; I've found that the others sometimes lag by a month or two.

How Do Search Engines Work?

To understand how to optimize your pages, it helps if you understand how search engines actually work. When you search on Google, the company's system calculates which sites are most relevant for your search within a fraction of a second, based on the contents of the page and on how authoritative a source your site seems to be. How do they determine these things?

Let's begin by looking at how does a search engine finds your site and analyzes it for inclusion in the engine's search index. Each search engine uses programs called "spiders" to acquire pages for inclusion. People speak of spiders crawling the web for pages, but they really never leave their host computer — to do their job, they work by requesting a web page, reading it, finding the links embedded in the page, and then requesting those linked-to pages, reading them, following links,

and on and on. In theory, Google and other search engines should be able to find any page on the web that's linked-to, though in practice it's best if you let them know that your page exists by submitting it directly.

Once Google has your site pages in its index, how does it know which ones to serve up in response to a given query?

First, Google looks at **page content**. Does the a page contain the words you searched for? Are they a significant part of the page (i.e., are they mentioned repeatedly)? If you're using a multi-word query (i.e., "die disco slowly"), how close together are the search terms on the page? Are they part of the same sentence or phrase or are they scattered? Do they show up in the page title, the filename and in page headings?

Second, Google looks at the **authoritativeness of the site** on which the page resides. How many other sites link to it? How authoritative are THOSE sites? Google sees links on the internet as "votes" for a site and its content and figures that the more links exist to a given site, the more authoritative that site is. And links from sites that are themselves considered authoritative count more. Google also looks at the specifics of the text of link — what keywords are clickable in links to a particular page? What words surround the link text?

Of course, this description is over-simple — the details of Google's search algorithm are a closely-held secret and the algorithm itself changes constantly. But it's close enough that we can benefit from it: if you want to boost your site's search engine presence, you'll need to look at the quality of your content (AGAIN with the content!), the way it's presented and how many quality sites link to you.

Optimizing Pages

To optimize pages, start with the words. Think about your topic and what search terms people might use when they're looking for information about it, and try to work them into the text as much as possible. Don't sacrifice readability — keyword-laden text doesn't need to sound weird — but do keep search terms in mind as you're writing or editing. If possible, keep your pages fairly short, since the percentage of the page text devoted to a particular keyword seems to matter — if a word shows up five times on a short page, it'll tend to do better than if it shows up five times on a long page. Again, don't sacrifice readability, since a bunch of one-paragraph pages are going to drive readers crazy.

Second, pay attention to the page elements. As much as possible, use "semantic coding" — Google pays attention to the classic html header tags (h1, h2, h3), using them as a guide to your page content. So, you'll benefit from using header tags for your page divisions (headings and subheads) rather than an arbitrarily defined tag — use H2 or H3 rather than , and make sure that your likely keywords show up in the headings (which they should do anyway, if the headings are any guide to the content). Don't neglect ALT tags for images — they're another chance to work in your key concepts.

Finally, Google gives a disproportionate amount of weight to the page title — not the title in the body of the page, but the html title in the page heading (which shows up in the little bar at the very top of the browser window). I've tested this one myself — on the NET site, because of a quirk in the site construction process, our global warming pages were originally titled "NET.org >> Warming," but after reading about the importance of titles, I changed them to "NET.org >> Global Warming" and resubmitted them to Google. A couple of weeks later, our main climate change

page jumped from around position 220 in the results for the search phrase “global warming” to around position 75. Impressive change! (And we improved on it later.)

In addition to the page title, pay attention to your filenames — for a climate change page, “global-warming.html” is better than “warming” and certainly better than “gl_w.html.”

Becoming Authoritative

Now that your pages are optimized, it’s time to make others respect our authority — we need links. Assuming that your content is worth reading, other sites will often be happy to link to it if they know about it. So, as we discussed in the section on [spreading the word](#), it’s time to track down resource sites about your topic(s) and ask them to link to you. Avoid link-spammers! Don’t get on sites that exist solely to exchange links with random sites in the hope of building Google traffic — the search engines tend to punish those sites, and showing up on them can actually hurt you. Focus on substantive sites that contain good resources about your subject.

Google provides a good guide, since sites that rank highly for your keywords will generally be authoritative by definition. Besides looking at where a page shows up in the search results, you can find a site’s approximate page rank directly using the Google toolbar or any of several websites. So, hunt down the site editors’ email addresses and start contacting them. You’ll be competing with the link-spammers (they send out zillions of spam messages asking sites to exchange links with them), so make sure that your message looks like it comes from a human being.

Be polite! Occasionally, site owners will act like jerks when you contact them, but even then, you’ll almost always attract more flies with sugar than with vinegar. Make it easy for them — clearly identify the page on their site on which your link belongs (usually on a Links or Resources page) and suggest text for the link. If sites don’t have a Links section and clearly don’t link out often, you may well want to leave them alone, unless they have a specific article page on which your content might be referenced.

Your general outreach will also usually contribute to link-building. [Blog outreach](#) in particular can help, and search engine optimization is another good reason to focus your outreach on the most popular blogs in your subject area. Press releases and articles that you write for other sites are another search engine optimization tool. Since releases that go out through P..R. Newswire and PRWeb show up on Google News, Yahoo News and other content aggregating sites, try to keep your keywords in mind as you write headlines, and make sure that your press releases always have a URL in them. If you contribute articles or columns to HuffingtonPost and other third-party publishers or to an newsletter, try to get a link to your site in the content or the attribution.

Finally, as you begin to build up links to your content, make sure that search engines see them. Particularly if you show up on authoritative sites, [submit the pages that link to you to Google](#) so that the benefits show up in the search index as fast as possible.

Limitations

These tactics can make a big difference in how high your site shows up in search results, but there will always be limits. Sites that have been around for years and have many, many links to them will be tough opponents, as will traditional news sites and (often) government sites. Particularly on controversial topics, pages from the BBC, CNN, the *New York Times* and other

sites with millions of readers and tens of thousands of links will almost always dominate the top results.

SEO Vendors

Some vendors will sell you specialized search engine optimization services. I haven't used them, though I've been to plenty of presentations by "experts," and I can't really comment on how effective they are. I suspect that you'll get 90% of the benefits they deliver simply by following the rules above.

Hosing Your Enemies

Well, okay, there's not much you can do to hurt your opponents' search engine placement, but you can certainly avoid helping them. If you link to an opposing site, for instance to discredit it ("Look How Bad My Opponent Sucks"), add a "nofollow" attribute to your link tag. It'll keep Google from counting your link as a "vote" for the site.

Another approach to hurting your enemies and help yourself is to "flood the zone" with content, particularly by posting on popular sites that tend to rank highly. YouTube clips and HuffingtonPost articles will tend to show up high in search results, for instance, so publishing on these sites can help to push content that's unflattering (to you) or flattering (to your opponent) down the page.

Next: Influencing Decision-Makers

18. Online Tactics: Influencing Congress and Other Decision-Makers

A major part of online advocacy involves direct attempts to influence decision-makers such as congressmembers, governors, the President, state legislators and corporate boards and CEOs. I'm going to focus on Congress, but many of these tactics apply to other decision-maker campaigns as well.

As when you're dealing with [reporters](#), often your most important role is to have a website that's a good information resource. Hill staff are often going to start out on Google when they're researching an issue, like the rest of us, so having relevant content that's widely linked-to is vital. [Content, once again, is key.](#)

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Next, when Hill staffers do arrive at your site, make sure that they can find what they're looking for. General [navigability](#) is a good start, but may also usually want to have a special section of the site carved out for them.

One of your common tasks is usually going to be supporting your government relations team (or your citizen advocates and volunteers) by collecting documents that they want Hill staff to see and presenting them on a central page about an issue. You'll usually have a short intro and a clearly-identified list of links of the documents, which might include press releases, video clips, congressional testimony, letters to Congress from supportive corporate CEOs or grassroots citizens groups, reports, factsheets, etc.

When you're preparing information for the Hill, bear in mind that staffers often have very little time to go over the details. Presenting information in layers, with a one-sentence summary followed by an overview page and links to more information, is vital. I discuss this in more detail in the section on [effective websites](#). For factsheets, bullets help, as does bolding key concepts. Keep those factsheets short and printable! You want them to be easy to include in a briefing book.

Also, unless you're specifically keeping your issue pages low-profile, make sure that they're referenced on your site front page. A staffer may remember that he or she got information from you recently but not have access to the specific URL of your news release or your issue page. Don't make them hunt for it — they'll go elsewhere.

Mass emails

For years, advocacy campaigns have been bombarding Congress with mass emails from supporters. Unfortunately, all the evidence points to the fact that they don't work very well — Hill offices largely ignore them and will often treat thousands of identical messages as essentially a single message (when I worked in the Texas Capitol 15 years ago, we were already treating xeroxed mass mailings the same way).

According to research by the [Congressional Management Foundation](#) part of the problem is the simple volume of email: in 2004 alone, congressional offices received almost 200 million messages.. Besides the sheer volume of email, however, many staffers doubt the legitimacy of mass messages and even think that organizations send them out without consulting the

supposed signers (though no one in the business I've talked with has ever HEARD of a group doing that). Some offices have grown so tired of mass emails that they've enabled "[logic puzzles](#)" and validation forms to restrict email to individual messages from individual constituents sent through the members' own web pages, though the common mass-email vendors have learned how to work around these restrictions to ensure that their blast emails get through.

Outside of Congress, email campaigns can be more effective. State legislatures, governors' offices and state and federal agencies are less used to being hit with communications from thousands of people at once and seem more responsive. At NET, I saw agencies back away from rule changes when they received a few thousand public comments and realized that people are actually watching their actions. Of course, we've all seen other agencies receive MILLIONS of comments and ignore them utterly.

Corporations are also likely to be more sensitive to mass emails, since they generally guard their brand integrity carefully.

With these constraints in mind, how can we get the most out of email campaigns?

- **Only allow activists to send to their own elected officials.** Don't spam Congress! Messages from outside a senator's state or a representative's district will be ignored, and you'll simply be helping to poison the well for everyone.
- **Keep your messages short and focused.** This applies both to your messages to your own list members asking them to take action and to the messages they'll send to the campaign target. In your message to your list members, pay close attention to the subject line — you're trying to sell your activists on the action.
- **Tie your message to a specific piece of legislation or agency rule.** Staff will usually sort them by bill number or rule docket number and you'll want to make it easy on them — otherwise, your message may fall through the cracks. Try to put the bill/rule number and name in the subject line. For agency rules, the [Federal Register](#) posting will often give the exact subject line required. General emails ("Support The Environment") may well disappear into a black hole.
- **Encourage your activists to edit messages.** Congressional staff claim in surveys to take individual messages from constituents more seriously than obvious mass messages, so make sure that the text in your message is editable. Some groups have even built online applications that let people assemble their own messages from pre-written snippets. Don't expect too much, though: according to folks at my old vendor, the now-defunct GetActive (now rolled into Convio), fewer than 10% of the messages sent through their system got edited, since it's so much easier for activists to send the pre-written ones.
- **Try supplementing or replacing email actions with phone calls.** Again, according to [Congressional Management Foundation](#) research and plenty of anecdotal evidence, phone calls from constituents get more attention. Either ask activists only to call or call in addition to sending an email, but be sure to include their congressman's name in the message — don't create more work for the congressional switchboard operators.
- **Replace emails with faxes.** With a big campaign, this will get expensive fast, however, and seems to have fallen out of favor.

- **Print the messages out and bring them in by hand.** Instead of sending immediately, or in addition to sending immediately, store the messages in a database, do a mail-merge and print them out. Then, sort by member and bring them to the Hill. Obviously, this is a huge amount of work and is only practical if you're trying to reach a handful of legislators, such as the members of a particular committee. Whipping out a stack of constituent letters in a meeting with staff can help raise awareness of an issue, though. Be sure to include the constituent's name and address in each printed message.

Let's Get Social

Like seemingly everybody else these days, plenty of Hill offices have taken to Facebook and Twitter, creating new channels to reach those ever-in-demand decisionmakers. Retweets, @replies and Direct Messages are all ways to reach Congressmembers and their staffs who are on Twitter; see the relevant chapter for more information. Politicians' Facebook walls have also turned out to be juicy advocacy targets, since people have learned to [flood them with comments around a particular issue](#). As soon as a member suffers this kind of attention, though, his or her office is likely to turn off people's ability to comment without filtering, making it a tactic with a short shelf-life.

Tell me more!

See the section on [building and maintaining email lists](#) for tips on getting more activists on your list in the first place.

Next: Working with the Media

19. Online Tactics: Working with the Media

The first thing to remember about working with the news media is that reporters are bombarded with information and that the good ones consequently quickly develop a sensitive bullshit meter. When you're working with journalists, dial back the rhetoric and focus on the facts of your issue.

The main exception is when you're providing a statement to a reporter from which he or she will mine quotes. In that case, being over-the-top may help land you in the story. But even then, always try to back your language up with facts, usually in a "For More Information" section at the end of the statement. Everything you send to reporters should have your site's URL!

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

As when you're dealing with [Congressional staff and other decision-makers](#), often your most-important role is to have a website that's a good information resource. Reporters are going to start out on Google, like the rest of us, so having relevant content that's widely linked-to is vital. [Content, once again, is key.](#)

Next, when reporters do arrive at your site, make sure that they can find what they're looking for. General [navigability](#) is a good start, but you'll also usually want to have a special section of the site carved out for journalists. In that section, you'll generally have:

- press releases and statements, often divided by topic
- information about your issues, or at least clear links to your issues, factsheets and reports
- contact information for your organization's press team
- a sign-up form for your press email list

Now that we've taken care of random stumblers-by, let's get more aggressive. When you're contacting reporters, you generally don't want to send email attachments — they may be away from the office and reading mail over an iPhone or Blackberry or even a dial-up connection in some remote and godforsaken hotel room, and big attachments will bug the hell out of them.

Consequently, one of an online communicator's common tasks is usually going to be supporting your press team by collecting documents that they want reporters to see and presenting them on a central page about an issue. You'll usually have a short intro and a clearly-identified list of links of the documents (which might include press releases, video clips, congressional testimony, letters to Congress from supportive corporate CEOs or grassroots citizens groups, reports, factsheets, etc).

When you're preparing issue pages like these, unless you're specifically keeping them low-profile, make sure that they're referenced on your site front page. A reporter may remember that he or she got information from you recently but not have access to the specific URL of your news release or your issue page.

One tactic we had great success with at a previous job was podcasting issue briefings. When we held a conference call or even a stand-up press event, if possible we'd record the audio and post it online as an mp3. This way, reporters who couldn't make the initial event could still listen in, and we got several press hits from podcasts that we'd have missed if the audio hadn't been available. And, of course, regular citizens can listen in, too, which has led to blog hits in the past.

Reporters are Bloggers (and Twitterers), Too!

A newer channel for reporter-outreach is via their ever-increasing role as bloggers and Twitterers. Many traditional news outlets now require their reporters to blog regularly throughout the day, just as many reporters have also taken to Twitter as a tool for communication and interaction. Consequently, they're open to connection through blog comments and Twitter @replies/retweets/Direct Messages, and they may also be more hungry for short bursts of content to help fill those blog pages. I actually know of nonprofit communications staff who've gotten stories placed in prominent news outlets because they first contacted the relevant reporter via Twitter. Of course, as more people use Twitter and its novelty fades, this route may be pinched off, just as it's now harder to reach many reporters via email now than it was when it was a shiny new tool.

Long-term reporter education

Beyond supporting normal press outreach, you can also create special sites or special online presentations for long-term press education. They may be straightforward presentations of information or they may be snazzy video extravaganzas, but their goal is usually to influence the way reporters approach an issue rather than to score immediate press hits.

Before I started at National Environmental Trust (now Pew Environment Group), they launched Luntzspeak.com, an excellent little site centered around a strategy memo by Republican pollster/messaging guy Frank Luntz. In the memo, Luntz suggested language that Republicans could use to improve their image on environmental issues without changing their actual policies, and the Luntzspeak site highlighted politicians' use of his tactics for reporters. The goal: to make them skeptical of such language in the future.

Another good educational tool is to present abstract data in a way that's easy to grasp. As an example, again, before I started as an employee, NET's partner Clear The Air developed an [online power plant pollution locator](#) as a Flash application. The locator site shows major power plants across the country and lets you zoom in on each one to see how many tons of pollutants it produces. It also compares the effects of different plant clean-up plans. Besides putting it on the web, Clear The Air also provided its field organizers with CD copies that they could bring directly to reporters and demonstrate.

Many organizations have used Flash, Google Maps and/or Google Earth to present information in clear and compelling ways on issues ranging from the [2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill](#) to [congressional redistricting](#) the scourge of [political robocalls](#) to [Third World political corruption](#) to the [humanitarian crisis in Darfur](#). One good source of inspiration is the [Sunlight Foundation](#), an organization devoted to tracking the role of money in politics and a continuing font of interesting uses of political data.

See also:

- [Digital-Age Media Relations: Pitching Stories in a Challenging News Environment](#)
- [Tossing Emails into the Spin Blender](#)
- [Media Relations Tips](#)
- [Effective Press Releases in a Search-Driven World](#)

Next: Viral Campaigns_

20. Online Tactics: Viral Campaigns

Mmmmmm, mental viruses. Let's create a video clip, an animation or even an email appeal that's so compelling that people forward it around the world and do our promotional work for us. It's basically traditional word-of-mouth leveraged across the internet, and who wouldn't want to create The Thing That Everyone Is Talking About?

Of course, launching a successful viral campaign involves much more than just dreaming up a clever video, and for every viral campaign that claws its way to the surface of the public mind, dozens or hundreds of others sink leaving scarcely a ripple. What can you do to give your campaign the best chance of succeeding?

Let's think first about the mechanics of the content. You'll probably have two basic parts — the aspiring viral content itself and the promotional campaign (email, ads, blogger/Twitter/Facebook outreach) that launches it. If your content is an email alert (note: VERY rare is the email appeal that achieves viral takeoff), the message itself could be the viral content, but usually you'll be sending people to a page or presentation on the web.

One note about promoting a video via email: you could send the video file itself as an attachment, but that would be self-defeating — you want people to come to your site so you can catch 'em in a big net. Also, attachments annoy a lot of people and may be deleted as a virus risk. So, plan to have your promotional piece link to a site or page that contains your featured content, and instead of the video itself, include a still image as a teaser in your email.

What characteristics can help viral campaigns succeed?

Be relevant to your audience

Who are you trying to reach? What would fire them up? Remember that you're going to be asking people to "vote" for your viral content by sending it to people in front of whom they want to look good — they're trying to boost THEIR status/coolness quotient by attaching their name/reputation to YOUR content. Be sure that what you're promoting is something that people are going to want to associate themselves with. YOU are not your audience — play to their tastes, not yours.

If at all possible, be funny!

Much of your potential audience consists of people stuck in offices during the workday and desperate for distraction. Give 'em something to make 'em laugh and you might make 'em yours. Humor's tough, though — you have to have an idea that's inherently funny and also well-presented (how many good jokes have died through bad telling?). Keep your pieces short — a couple of minutes is usually getting too long — and well-timed. Test, test, test! And not just on people around the office who've already been converted to your issue — try it on friends and ask for honest criticism.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Try to tie your piece to something topical

For instance, you could reference a holiday or some event that's in the news.. Of course, if you're not careful, you'll be one of 500 Halloween-themed campaigns out there (see below).

Offer an immediate payoff

You only have a few seconds to catch someone's attention, so don't waste it. Try to grab viewers' attention immediately with a strong visual (or audio) lead-in, even if your piece really builds to a crescendo later.

Offer an immediate way for your audience to act, and use it to capture names and emails

You may just want people to see the piece as an educational tool, but more likely you're also using it to build your email list/Facebook following or to generate an action ("Write the Bilbo Gear and Sprockets company and demand that they no longer use parts made from itinerant llamas"). Make the action obvious and easy — if people can't see it or have to jump through a bunch of hoops to take it, you just lost them.

Make your content easy to forward

Include a "send this email to a friend" link on the page and even in the viral email itself (it can't hurt). Ask readers to send to a specific number of people (i.e., "tell five friends about this spectacular video") — for some reason, having a specific number seems to work better.

Make your content social media-friendly

Facebook and Twitter have become one of the main routes for online viral spread over the last couple of years, so keep these platforms in mind as you're planning your campaign. When you launch, aggressively promote your piece via social channels: feature it on your Facebook page, link to it from your Twitter account, email it to prominent bloggers, and consider bringing it to the attention of prominent voices via Twitter @replies and Direct Messages and through Facebook Wall postings. Finally, make it easy for people to share your piece once they've consumed it — those now-ubiquitous "Share" buttons allow easy posting on social channels, plus they often include an email-a-friend feature.

Promote it ruthlessly

Yes, some viral party invitations and such have spread around the world after being sent to only three friends, but a conflagration is much more likely to start from a bunch of little fires than from a single spark. Obviously, sending to your email list is a good start (and everyone in your office should be helping by sending to their friends and colleagues), but also consider media outreach — several PR firms specialize in "helping" your viral campaign get on local news shows and into print outlets. Also, think about blogads, blogger outreach and advertising (or free placement, if you can swing it) in newsletters that go to your potential audience.

Special Considerations for YouTube/Online Video Campaigns

YouTube and other video-sharing sites have come to be one of the main routes for spreading content virally. Sometimes campaigns are consciously trying to tap into the YouTube audience, while at other times they may also just be using the site for free hosting and relying on their own promotion to drive traffic. Most viral campaigns aim for some combination.

If you're trying to induce content on YouTube or another video site to spread virally, try to take advantage of the extra traffic that "featured" videos generally receive — if you can steer a burst of traffic to your video piece, you might be able to get it promoted up a level and exposed to a new audience, who then can spread it if they like it and bump it even higher. Consider using your email list, online social networking outreach and blog outreach as well as social news sites like Digg or Stumbleupon to get the word out. Classic viral spread is like an avalanche — one piece dislodges another, which dislodges another, which....

Finally, a cautionary note

I hate to say it, but don't expect too much. You may have a terrific piece, but it may fail completely for reasons that won't even be clear. And even if it does take off and ends up in front of millions of eyeballs, that doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to get a lot of email addresses or raise a ton of dough. A classic laugh line at conferences? "My client says they're about to launch a 'viral video.'" The "joke" is that what they've actually done is create a video that they HOPE will go viral...something that very, very few ever do.

An Example: The Climate Mash

Let's take a look at an example. In October of 2005, [NET](#) (my old day job) and its partner [Clear The Air](#) worked on a viral campaign that succeeded quite well by some measures: the Halloween-themed [Climate Mash](#) animation. If you go to the site, you'll see that the video follows the rules pretty well — it's short, it's funny, it rewards repeat viewings (lots of clever little details) and it's designed to make it as easy as possible for people to take action (note that the action links are present on the page AND embedded at the end of the video).

We also promoted the hell out of it: we sent it to the NET and CTA lists directly, posted blogads that were seen a couple of million times, got partner organizations to send it to THEIR lists and also had a PR firm doing a monstrous (hah!) amount of outreach for a quite reasonable price. It helped that we launched far enough out from Halloween that we beat most other holiday-themed campaigns to the punch. In the end, we had scores of media hits, both broadcast and print, many blog hits and very strong word-of-mouth response. All told, several hundred thousand people came to the site — we crashed the server! Our hosting company, whom we'd warned but who hadn't taken it seriously enough, had to set the site up on a dedicated server for a couple of weeks to handle the traffic, before the inevitable drop-off occurred.

Was Climate Mash a success? As an educational tool, yes — lots of people saw the animation. As an action-generator? The campaign got about 4000 people to send emails to Congress, with half of them opting to join the Clear The Air list. So, our conversion rate for action was around 1% and for signups was around 0.5%. We didn't spend an immense amount of money on Climate Mash, but if we'd viewed it solely as a list-builder, it would have been significantly cheaper to buy the names.

Next: Raising Money

21. Online Tactics: Fundraising

The internet really came of age as a fundraising tool in 2004 — the success of the Dean campaign and of groups like [MoveOn.org](#) startled most political professionals and observers, and other campaigns were quick to put new emphasis on the web and email lists as way to raise money from supporters. In 2007-2008 the [Obama campaign raised online fundraising to a high art](#), and it became one of the most important contributors to his ultimate victory. The paragraphs below provide a good introduction to online fundraising, but for more details, definitely check out the fundraising chapters in [Learning from Obama](#) and [Winning in 2010](#).

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at [epolitics.com](#)

Of course, many groups and politicians do little but ask and ask and ask, and as I discussed in the section on [list-building and list maintenance](#), that's a quick way to burn out casual supporters and hard-core activists alike. What are some techniques to shake the most money out of those credit cards and Paypal accounts without poisoning the well for future requests?

Building relationships

As I talked about in the section on [site promotion and audience-building](#), creating a sense of community and an emotional connection can be vital in the process of turning casual readers into dedicated supporters. If people feel a real attachment to your cause or candidate, they're much more likely to want to help you out financially. Your goal is to build that connection and then use it in amounts carefully regulated to turn as few people off as possible.

You'll reach your activists mainly through email (it remains absolutely the "killer app" of online fundraising), so think through your messaging strategy carefully. Some points to keep in mind:

- **Carefully regulate your message frequency**, which I discuss in some detail in the section on [list management](#).
- **Don't just ask for money.** If the only messages your supporters receive from you are fundraising attempts, you're likely to lose them pretty quickly. Make sure that you're sending them things THEY want, whether it's issue updates, pretty pictures of animals, or chances to pester their elected officials, and not just an endless string of requests for money
- **Whenever possible, tie a fundraising request to a specific action.** Are you raising money to build schools in Africa? Talk about a particular community that would benefit and set a target. The DNC emails over the past couple of years or so have been very good about tying donations to specific state-party-building activities, and I can attest to their effectiveness (i.e., I've thrown them a few bucks).
- **Plan for list exhaustion, and keep building your list.** You're constantly going to lose list members — no matter how good your issue, it's going to happen. [Build your list](#) through every method you can.

Maximizing returns from your website

Besides raising funds through your existing supporters, you'll want to maximize the money that you generate from casual visitors to your website (i.e., people who aren't already receiving your emails). Putting a Donate button on every page is a no-brainer, but here are a few simple things you can do to get more out of it. They should also cross over to help you get more from your email outreach.

- **Just as with emails, tie your ask to specifics about an issue.** Try using different fundraising language on pages about different subjects. Get as detailed as you can about what the money will go for, assuming of course that it's going for something that sounds good in print...and not just to administrative costs.
- **Keep the number of steps in the donation process to a minimum.** Web users are very sensitive to the details of sign-up processes — with every step, you'll lose a few. Make it easy, for their benefit and yours.
- **Suggest specific amounts for donations.** According to a friend who's been in the fundraising racket for years, suggesting amounts tends to make people more likely to give and to give more. A series of suggested donations with little checkboxes will do fine, as long as you leave one field blank for donations of other sizes. Don't be afraid of large amounts! (As long as you also list smaller ones.)
- **Pay close attention when you're comparing vendors.** Look at how much you'll pay in a base amount per month for their system as well as the percentage they'll take of every transaction. Run sample numbers for different vendors to get the best idea of which will work for you. And always test their systems for ease of use.

The Explosion of Online Fundraising

One fascinating development in the world of online fundraising has been its explosion during the 2008 election season, with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton both raising tens of millions of dollars per month. In the 2010 cycle, politicians and interest groups alike [continued the trend](#). Online fundraising has yielded several advantages, first by helping to build networks of small donors to whom a campaign can return again and again. Also, money raised online is available to the campaign immediately, while mailed checks can take days to arrive and be processed. Finally, online fundraising cuts the administrative costs of fundraising tremendously, both because checks no longer have to be entered and deposited and because donor information is immediately available for sorting into Federal Elections Commission and other regulatory reports.

And online fundraising isn't just a game for presidential campaigns: sites like ActBlue on the Left are extending internet fundraising to candidates at all levels, while nonprofit advocacy groups have access to a broad array of tools to build supporter lists and plumb them for cash.

Next: Now YOU Have the Power

22. Conclusion: Now YOU Have the Power

Whew, that was a long slog, wasn't it? But after 20+ chapters, now YOU have the potential to be a master of online political communications, and if you're lucky (and good), you might just get to spark changes that'll affect millions of lives. Pretty cool, eh?

Of course, this version of *Online Politics 101* (the fourth edition) was obsolete about five minutes after I finished the last draft, since someone in a basement or garage is already creating tools that'll change the ways we do online politics forever. Great! We'll have plenty to learn from (and plenty to write about) in the years to come, so keep coming back to Epolitics.com to learn the latest. And if you do something interesting online or if you see something that others might learn from, considering writing your own chapter in the digital politics saga — an Epolitics.com guest article is a great place to start.

But whether or not you want to contribute in public, always feel free to write in with questions, observations and corrections, since this document is far from perfect or even complete. But I hope you think it's a good start, and I hope you've enjoyed and learned from the time you spent with it. Onward, through the fog.

But Wait, There's More

Other publications by *Online Politics 101* author Colin Delany:

- [Learning from Obama: Lessons for Online Communicators in 2009 and Beyond](#)
- [How Candidates Can Use the Internet to Win in 2010](#)

Next: About Epolitics.com and the author

More About Epolitics.com and Online Politics 101

Auhtor Colin Delany

"Epolitics.com, a one-stop shop for tools and tactics of online campaigning"
[The Washington Post](#), June 9, 2007

"In politics, an absurdity is not a handicap"
Napoleon Bonaparte

Colin Delany is founder and editor of [Epolitics.com](#), a website that focuses on the tools and tactics of Internet politics and online advocacy. Launched in July of 2006, Epolitics.com received the Golden Dot Award as "Best Blog - National Politics" at the 2007 Politics Online Conference, and in October of 2010 Delany was honored as one of the "Ten Who Are Changing the World of Politics and the Internet" at the World E-Gov Forum in Paris, France. Epolitics.com features three downloadable e-books, "Learning from Obama," "Online Politics 101" and "How Candidates Can Use the Internet to Win in 2010."

Delany started in politics in the early '90s in the Texas Capitol (where public service is considered a contact sport) and moved into the online political world in 1995. In 1999, during the first Internet boom, he helped to start a targeted search engine for politics and policy, which lasted about as long as such ideas usually do. Since then, Delany has worked as a consultant to help dozens of political advocacy campaigns promote themselves in the digital world, and between 2003 and 2007 was the Online Communications Manager at the National Environmental Trust. In January of 2010, Delany joined the public affairs section of the veteran online communications firm New Media Strategies, but in November of that year he returned to the nonprofit world to become the Director of Online Communications and Outreach at the National Women's Law Center. He also plays bass in a rock and roll band.



Your Host,
Colin Delany

Contact Delany through [Epolitics.com](#) or cpd@epolitics.com, or follow him on [Twitter](#).