



CARE2 PETITION ACTIVIST TOOLKIT: How to create a successful online petition

Creating an online petition is fairly simple on Care2's ThePetitionSite.com, and by taking a few key steps to collect your signatures, you can maximize your chances of success. Our seasoned Care2 campaign team has compiled a list of best practices to help you meet or even exceed your activist goals.

1. Do Your Research and Set Achievable Goals

Show people that your petition will really make a difference; create a single, clear achievable goal. Too many goals make it hard to communicate your point and can confuse people from taking action at all.

Case study: Even a small number of well-presented, clearly targeted signatures can result in victory!

Issue: PetitionSite activists wanted to create a dog park in Augusta, Georgia. For 6 days preceding a town hall meeting, 1 activists collected 129 signatures from people all over the region (and internationally), some with wonderful personal comments. When it came time for a vote, the activists had their list in hand, and celebrated when the Commission passed the dog park measure.

Steps to a Successful Petition

1. Set achievable goals
2. Select an effective target
3. Connect issue with audience
4. Write a clear, concise action
5. Pick the right audience
6. Promote your petition

2. Select an Effective Target

Determine who will make the decisions that influence your goals. Possibilities include:

- a. State or federal legislators
- b. City or other local representatives
- c. A local media station that you want to cover your community's issue
- d. Local or national business
- e. International entities like the U.N. or U.S. ambassadors

3. Connect your Cause to Issues People Care About

- a. Connect your petition to events in the news, and gather signatures as quickly as you can.
- b. Connect your petition to a local community and show them how it will impact them directly.

Case Study: Pets In Puerto Rico

When, Nadia, a Care2 member from New York, heard about a mass seizure and killing of over 80 innocent pets in Puerto Rico, she started a petition on Care2. She quickly promoted her petition to her Care2 friends by posting it on different Care2 groups, and then moved on to other websites. Then, she contacted local animal advocacy groups in Puerto Rico and worked her way to the major organizations.

She'd hoped to gather 1,000 signatures, but reached 6,000 in less than a week. The Associated Press (AP) took notice and after the first article was published, more news media covered the petition, which lead to more signatures.

Less than two weeks later, hundreds joined a march in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to protest the pet massacre and, according to media reports, Puerto Rican authorities have started an investigation into the mass killing of dogs and cats. So far, more than 50,000 people have signed Nadia's petition.

Cast Study: Aerial Spraying in S.F. Bay Area

When an invasive moth was discovered in California, the agriculture lobby panicked and insisted that the government eradicate it as soon as possible, using extreme measures including aerial spraying over entire cities. PetitionSite activist John Russo created a petition to stop the spray and as the media began to pick up on the story, thousands of concerned citizens began to sign the petition. When concerned parent groups learned of the spraying, they began to further spread word of the petition, as well as updates regarding the issue. By regularly updating the petition audience with new information about the spraying plan, the entire community stayed engaged and informed and continued to fight the spray plan until it was defeated.

4. How to Write a Clear, Concise and Compelling Petition Summary

A compelling petition summary usually contains the following:

- a. **Call to action:** In the first or second sentence, tell people why they are signing.
- b. **Supporting information, ideally current events:** Provide one or two sentences of background information, ideally supported by current events in the news.
- c. **Bulleted list of three supporting facts:** If it makes sense, include a short list of 3 facts supporting your petition's appeal. You should assume most people don't have the time to read all your information so be very brief.
- d. **Final call to action:** One sentence restating your call to action.
- e. **Additional Information:** If you want to include more detailed background information do so at the bottom, or include a link to more information.
- f. **DON'T FORGET TO SPELLCHECK!**
- g. **Include an Image:** Select a compelling image that speaks to the heart of your issue. Pictures with people looking at the reader are often most effective.

5. Pick your Audience and Promote Your Petition

Initially, the best audience for your petition will be your network of friends. Tell them why you've created the petition. Then, as you collect more signatures, you will want to start thinking outside of your friend network. Some promotional tactics will work better than others, depending on the nature of your petition. If it's a very local issue, you can reach out to people in your community. For very political issues, some targeted promotion could be essential; certain legislative targets will focus on comments made by citizens in their community, so you'll want to find the majority of your signers in the relevant areas.

Case Study: Massive, Quick Outreach Works

These citizen activists pushed their petition to victory through with quick, concentrated online legwork, and the quick swelling of signatures attracted media attention.

*The issue: Saving Ratchet – A Soldier's Dog in Iraq
Sgt. Gwen Beberg saved a puppy "Ratchet" from a burning trash heap in Iraq and raised him. When she planned to leave for home to the U.S. after 13 months of additional required service, the military seized the dog and threatened to murder him. The petition author, Terri (a former veteran), heard about this issue and immediately started a petition on Care2. But that was only the beginning:*

Petition author Terri spent several nonstop days finding likeminded people on blogs, animal rescue networks and forums, and social networking sites. She presented the issue and asked that they sign the petition and spread the word by telling their friends, local TV and radio

Key Promotion Tactics

- Email your addressbook and social networks.
- Post on blogs and social networks related to your petition.
- Reach out to organizations with similar goals.
- Target specific "swing" districts or communities.
- Contact the media with letters to the editor
- Create a compelling video ad on YouTube



"The internet is a valuable tool to reach people - my daughter and I have a network of about 5,000 on Myspace, all with their own friends and groups to spread the word. And, there must have been 100-200 groups on Myspace related to dogs or animal welfare that we also contacted. And, we posted on Care2.com, Facebook, Bebo, Diggs, Yahoo Groups and various independent online communities for dog lovers, animal welfare groups, local radio and TV stations in the pet sections... anywhere we thought pet lovers would see it and become as passionate about the cause of helping soldiers and their pets as we had become."

It is critical that the message in these posts and emails include very detailed information about what readers must do. "You really have to motivate people to take action beyond just reposting within their own network - getting them to spread the word beyond that first post is key," advises Terri.

Key Promotional Tactics

- a. Promote the petition on your website. Many Care2 activists use our PetitionSite widget to allow people to sign directly from their site.
- b. Find local and/or national groups and organizations with a similar interest.

Case Study: Promotion through key local groups can help get national reach

PetitionSite Activist Bob started a petition to stop a certain type of childhood cancer. He promoted the petition through hospital blogs parents use to keep others updated on their kids. Then, he started a website which parents, friends, family, and importantly major childhood cancer organizations (CureSearch, Make A Wish, Gildas Club, Alexs Lemonade Stand) began to join to help spread the word. In hospitals and clinics, he posted paper copies of the petition with tear-off tabs showing the website address.

- c. Use social networks like Facebook, MySpace and Care2 – all of these sites have discussion groups where you can successfully reach people who care about your cause.
 - d. Use social media like Care2 News Network, Digg, Reddit and Yahoo Buzz – these sites can help you reach a large audience of people who spend time
 - e. Buy google adwords. Especially if your petition is local, you can purchase reasonably priced petition ads targeting keyword searches that relate to your petition in your region.
 - f. Make connections with your local papers and inform them of your issue and your petition.
 - g. Pay attention to your issue in the news and write letters to newspapers/contact local media
 - i. If local talk shows are discussing your issue, call in, make comments, and mention your petition.
 - ii. Letters to the editor: Many newspapers prefer letters that respond to particular articles they've printed, but if you cannot find one, try to tie a current article in with your topic. Use your own words - if editors receive the SAME letter from multiple people, that hurts the cause rather than helping it.
 - iii. Opinion pieces: If your issue is timely, you can check the newspapers' websites for length and other opinion piece requirements. Then, passionately express your viewpoint without exaggerating, and include footnoted facts. Quote from other sources but don't plagiarize.
 - h. Create an online ad or compelling video on a video network like YouTube
- Example:** Petitionsite Activists to Cure SMA created a video commercial to help promote their petition which you can see here: http://youtube.com/watch?v=U_pL0kMv1cg
- i. Post information about your petition around your community, especially in places where you think there will be citizens who would sign it (supermarkets, libraries, bookstores, coffee shops...).



Case Study: Staffing a Booth

One PetitionSite activist had a mother's group booth event that collected over 200 signatures in a day. She then entered the signatures into the petition system. You could bring a computer to events where wireless is available, or enter the signatures into a .csv file and print them out with the rest of your signatures generated by the petition.

6. Delivering your petition signatures for maximum impact

When delivering your signatures, consider your target and your objective. Have you called or met with your target to determine their position? Where do they stand on your issue? If your goal is to win over your target, you will likely want to impress them with the volume of people who agree with your position, as well as persuade them that these people matter.

For example, if you're asking for your City Council to put a new dog park in your community, you could talk to the Council about your idea and your petition, and then follow up with your signatures. Attend a city council meeting and deliver the petition in person along with your testimony about why the park would benefit your city.

Methods of Signature Delivery

- a. **Hand delivery (print and provide to target in person)** This is an effective method for local issues, but can be persuasive even on larger scale issues where the media will be present.

Case Study: Printed delivery allows representatives to see how many constituents from their districts care about the issue:

Two parents with a daughter is fighting SMA initially started a campaign asking Congress to find a cure for the disease. When they got no notice, they started a petition and their cause began to receive support. They got the support of the national non-profits, FightSMA and Families of SMA, and have started working with them as they lobby Congress. And the petition has already helped their efforts -- Senators Obama and Clinton recently signed on as cosponsors!

By collecting city and state signature data, the PetitionSite activists provided their nonprofit partner, FightSMA, with basic data to present representatives in D.C. "Politicians immediately took notice that their own constituents are asking for this bill. The petition literally opened doors for them that were previously closed!"

Case Study: Delivering comments to save a local park from destruction

PetitionSite activists who created the organization, "Friends of La Laguna" successfully saved the "La Laguna" or Monster Park playground at Vincent Lugo Park. They were able to present more than 3000 signatures to the city and have entered a MOU for the preservation and rehabilitation of the park. "We loved the stories and memories that people shared as they signed our on-line petition!"

- b. **Mailed delivery (print and mail to target)**
- c. **Individual email delivery (need pre-approval and assistance from Care2)** This can be effective for larger scale campaigns with large signature volume.
- d. **Individual fax delivery (need pre-approval and assistance from Care2)** More often than we'd like, a target needs to be persuaded or cajoled into action. If this is the case, sending individual emailed comments, or even more drastic, faxes, can effectively force a target to pay attention to your cause; many local offices cannot handle the volume that a petition with several hundred signatures can generate and they will be forced to learn more about the issue because the signature delivery directly impacts their daily work. If you choose to employ a method like this, it's critical to stay in contact with the target. There could be a key breaking point where you've got their attention and want to agree to stop delivery, or change methods while you negotiate.
- e. **List of signatures fax delivery (need pre-approval and assistance from Care2)** If your target is already on your side, you will likely NOT want to deluge them with



unmanageable volume of communication (ie fax individual signatures) but with a personal phone call determine the best manner in which you might communicate support for the issue. Most likely, a list of all the people who have signed and their individual comments will do.

Case Study: Fax/Email Delivery to Unresponsive Target:

Petitionsite activist John Russo wanted legislation passed that would prevent aerial spraying of a chemical pheromone over residential areas in the Bay Area without consent by residents.

His initial legwork began to pay off as the deadline approached: thousands of comments began to roll in and the media began to focus on the issue. John printed signatures and comments and began delivering copies to key legislators. However, some out-of-district representatives (people not from the Bay Area who would be voting on spraying in the Bay Area) began to cancel meetings with him. He was therefore unable to deliver or discuss the comments in his growing petition. It also became difficult to print out more and more copies of all the signatures for every representative. At this point, with a vote imminent, it became clear that Russo needed a better delivery mechanism to allow members' comments to more quickly reach legislators. So, as a Bay Area company, Care2 began to deliver citizen comments electronically and via fax to make sure signers' voices were heard.

During the process of delivering, Care2 checked in with targeted reps in an attempt to assess their ability to handle the volume of communication from petition signers. The emails and faxes really got their attention. While representatives were able to easily sidestep meetings with the petition owner, they had a harder time ignoring the emails and faxes streaming into their offices, and they ended up contacting Care2 and engaging in a dialogue about the issue.

- f. **Court of Public Opinion – No Delivery Needed** Sometimes, all you need is a clear mandate for action. The petition and its signatures can be used in ongoing discussions with the target to persuade them to take your cause to heart.

Case Study: Media Attention Precludes Delivery

Through intense, massive promotion, citizen activists quickly gained signatures and then media attention for their petition Clemency for Ratchet (A Soldier's Dog in Iraq). When the petition had collected 11,000 signatures, the Associated Press picked up the story and sent it out to every news agency worldwide. Signatures continued to skyrocket, and the world watched the story. With the media attention, the military became increasingly careful. The authors were able to use these signatures, and the "court of public opinion" as leverage in their discussions with the military to free Ratchet to save his life. "After the failed 2nd rescue attempt, the military took very good care of Ratchet until Operation Baghdad Pups could return the following week to Iraq to rescue the dog." They did not want any mistakes making headlines across the world.