A guide for grassroots groups:
How to create a powerful website without money or technical expertise

In the thick of a campaign, many grassroots groups decide that starting a campaign website is something beyond their abilities and budget. With all the new gadgets, programs, and apps coming out now, it is easy to become intimidated by all the details and choices.

Don't worry: The internet can be a surprisingly powerful tool in winning your campaign if you just focus on the basics of running a superb website.

With common sense and attention to detail, your website can become the authoritative source for information on the campaign, and its original content can make news that other media pick up.

A strong website can become the pulse of the campaign, so that everyone involved on all sides feels compelled to check the website every morning to find out what's going on.

You will know you're getting to the company or the government agency when they try to introduce as an item for negotiation when you are going to "take that website down." (Don't do it).

Ohio Citizen Action has spent fifteen years developing a model for use of the internet in grassroots campaigns, www.ohiocitizen.org. What follows are some lessons we learned.

New media

As fast as new media arrive, corporations try to figure out how to own them, governments try to figure out how to control them, and people get to work using them.

This is a worldwide trend with historic results:

1989: Indigenous people in Brazil used portable video cameras to record meetings with government officials. "That way," said Ailton Krenak, director of the Union of Indigenous Nations, "we can catch their lies and make them hold true to their promises." The tactics helped to "block a huge hydroelectric dam project that would have submerged tribal homelands."

1989: During the democracy protests in China, fax machines all over the country spewed out messages of support and uncensored news from overseas. A sticker proclaiming 'Fax Saves Lives' was plastered over Hong Kong lampposts… In the wake of the Beijing massacre, Chinese authorities moved immediately to place all fax machines in the country under armed guard.

1991: During a failed coup attempt in Moscow, the resistance organized itself — and prevailed — using the internet, even though only 3,000 computers in the former Soviet Union were then on-line.

1998: A nonviolent Indonesian student movement toppled the 32-year dictatorship of General Suharto. The president could not kill or imprison the movement's top leaders because there weren't any. It was a loose network held together by the internet.

2005: The Chinese Ministry of Public Security announced a crackdown on the use of cell phones for text messages that can have "massive influence." As one newspaper noted, "Chinese leaders fear text messaging could be used for pro-democracy and anti-communist political activities."

2010: WikiLeaks, a not-for-profit media organization, provided a secure and anonymous way for sources to leak information through its electronic drop box. This mechanism led to a torrent of newsmaking leaks, helping to trigger the remarkable Arab Spring revolts.

2011- 2012: Participants in the Arab Spring and Occupy revolts around the world routinely used Twitter and Facebook to maintain contact.

1. Website basics

Think about the grassroots websites you have seen. There are two kinds.

The first kind is a brochure site. It gives the basic information on the organization or campaign, some background, and that is it. It may be beautifully designed or not, but its defining characteristic is that it never changes.

The other kind is a news site. It has all the information of a brochure site and it has all the campaign news on it, posted as soon as it happens. It changes all the time.

Most grassroots websites are brochure sites. Unfortunately, a brochure site is worse than none at all. From the point of view of visitors to the site, it looks like nothing is going on in the campaign. That is a bad first impression. There will not be a second impression because nobody goes back to a brochure site a second time. Why bother? It is going to be the same as it was the first time.

Worst of all is a website that starts out with the best of intentions as a news site, but soon becomes a brochure site. We have all seen these. They have all the basic information, and a couple of news items. The date of the most recent item, however, is nine months ago. Here is proof positive to visitors that the campaign has died, even if it really hasn't.

So, in considering whether to have a website, the most important question is not money or gorgeous design. It is whether someone is ready to commit the time to keep it current for the duration of the campaign. It could be you. It could be your spouse, your teenage kid, or your sister. It could be an environmental club at the high school, or students at the local community college or university who want to do the web site as an independent project for credit.

Once you have solved this problem, the rest is not that hard.

Money. You can get free almost everything you need to run a website. Whoever volunteers to maintain the website either has a computer or knows how to get free access to one. Someone you know already has a copy of all the necessary software, or you can download it free from the internet. And free website hosting is now common.

(Technically, much of what you'll need for a strong website is not free, but it has already been paid for. Somebody has already bought the computer you'll use. Somebody is already paying for the internet access you'll use. Somebody has already bought the digital camera or smartphone you'll use. All these things are common enough that if you don't have them and can't afford them, you'll be able to borrow them from someone in your group.)

Technical expertise. You do not need to find an expert to start a website. That is because companies have developed software that makes things simple. You can concentrate on the politics of your issue, and let the software worry about the technical side.

(And, of course, if you want to get fancy, the country is overrun with computer buffs who already know plenty and love to think through new problems. They are all around you. All you have to do is to ask.)

Design. You do not need to hire a web designer to come up with a sophisticated look for your site. No one expects your site to look like ESPN (Besides, you are doing something far more important than ESPN is doing).

You can skip all the trouble of learning the HTML or other markup languages for your website by using blog software.

The word "blog" is a shortened version of "web log," a special kind of web site that includes separate items, called "posts," added to the blog and appearing reverse chronological order. Special free software makes "blogging" easy. All you have to do is plug in the words and the software provides the formatting for you. There are a number of choices of software, and both leading formats, WordPress (http://wordpress.org/) and Blogger (www.blogger.com) are free.

Who is the audience?

The website should be the authoritative source of information for everyone interested in the campaign. The number of visitors to the site is not as important as who they are. Typically, they will be a mix of neighbors, reporters, company executives and employees, and government officials. Over time, many of them will check the website every day to see what's new in the campaign.

What makes a good news site?

Speed: Update your site within hours of an event or announcement or arrival of new information. The faster, the better. You will find that this picks up the tempo of your campaign.

Clarity and accuracy: In order to be the reliable authority on the issue and the campaign, the site must be simple, clear and accurate. Only post information that is solid. Imagine yourself a cub reporter showing your first story to a grizzled veteran editor. Think of the tough questions the editor is firing at you. (And don't let your site become like the

Comments Section of so many internet sites, where people compete in name-calling contests. There's nothing in the First Amendment about you not being able to keep your site free of this kind of verbal mud wrestling.)

Thoroughness: The other key to an effective site is the volume and quality of the content. It should be the resource for all statements by all sides, all news articles, all blog references, all letters, all photographs, and so on.

And, of course, the most recent posting must be prominent on the screen when the home page comes up, so visitors know immediately that it is a news site, not a brochure site.

Particularly useful are the following four types of content: news, photographs, video, and scanned documents.

2. News

The phrase "newspaper of record" originally meant a newspaper with the authority to publish legal notices. Over time, it has picked up a second meaning, "an authoritative newspaper, a newspaper of the highest professional standards." The *New York Times* considers itself "the newspaper of record" in the United States.

For your campaign, your website should become "the website of record," the authoritative source for all information about it. Every newspaper or newsletter story about it, every significant document, every photograph, every videotape, should be found on, or linked to, your website.

Here's the goal: when any neighbor, any reporter, any public official, any company official, wants to know about the campaign, the problem, or the latest news on it, they come to your website because they are confident they will find it there, and they will be able to trust the source.

Some groups refuse to post statements by "the other side," on the grounds that "it's all lies anyway, and why give them free publicity?"

We have found that this is short-sighted. After all, it is our web site, and if there is a statement by the company or the government official on it that is untruthful, we can easily post a statement ourselves explaining how it is false. Also, when new visitors come to the site, it's good if their first impression is (1) that you are fair because you present both sides' views, and (2) that you are self-confident, because you are not afraid to let your readers make up their own minds.

Posting news from newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio news

You have every right to post on your website a story that has been published in newspapers, magazines, television, or radio. The way to do it without violating copyright

laws (http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/17/107) is to post an excerpt of no more than two or three paragraphs from it, and include a link to the full story on the original news site it came from.

Here is an example:

No time frame set for completing final coal ash regulations, EPA says

ARLINGTON, VA — "The Environmental Protection Agency still cannot provide a 'definitive time' for promulgating final regulations on the management of coal ash from power plants, an agency senior official told BNA.

Mathy Stanislaus, EPA assistant administrator for solid waste and emergency response, said Jan. 7 the agency needs to issue an additional notice of data availability prior to issuing final regulations because of new information that 'could potentially influence our risk analysis and cost estimates.'

Stanislaus said EPA is working to issue the notice 'as soon as we can.'"

— Anthony Adragna, *Bloomberg News*

link to article

🔹 Share / Save 🇫🇧 🐦 ♻ ⬍

January 15th, 2013 | Category: Coal, Coal Ash, Energy | **Comments are closed**

Note that the above story includes the same headline that appeared in the original story, the original dateline, Arlington, VA, and the attribution to the author, Anthony Adragna, and to his organization, Bloomberg. Just below the attribution is a link to the full article on the Bloomberg site.

Sometimes you will find articles on subscription-only sites, sometimes called "paywall" sites. These are sites where you need to be a paying customer to read the articles. In that case, the company will not tolerate you creating a direct link into their story, or putting the full story on your site. When they find out what you've done, they will send threatening letters. You are permitted by the law, however, to post a paragraph or two or three from the story, without a link to the full article.

Here is an example of such a web posting:

'Predatory' shale drillers in Ohio legislator's sights

COLUMBUS — "State Rep. **Mark Okey** is trying to turn up the heat on Republican leaders at the Statehouse to get behind a bill to protect landowners from oil and natural gas companies developing the Marcellus and Utica shale plays in eastern Ohio.

Calling such companies 'predatory,' the Democrat from Carrollton is urging Gov. **John Kasich** and other Republican leaders to support his Truth in Leasing Act. It would establish regulations for the oil and gas leasing process and require companies to pay property owners a minimum royalty of 15 percent on oil and gas extracted in the shale plays."

— Jeff Bell, *Columbus Business First*

State Representative Mark Okey (D- Carrollton)

Subscription only; no link

🔷 Share / Save

July 30th, 2012 | Tags: Hydraulic fracturing | Category: Energy, Hydraulic fracturing | **Comments are closed**

You can see that there is no link to the full story, and the web posting tells why there is no link, because *Columbus Business First* is a "subscription only" publication.

Posting your own news

The other kind of news to post is original material the campaign or its allies have prepared. You can follow the same format as news from a newspaper or TV report.

So, for example, Ohio Citizen Action posted the following news item on its website during a campaign to block a new incinerator in Cleveland, Ohio. The story included a link to the research memo on which the story was based.

Basic mathematical errors will doom incinerator project

CLEVELAND — Cleveland Public Power's proposal to build a garbage incinerator on Ridge Road is premised on the idea of turning garbage into pellets and then burning them as fuel. Although Cleveland Public Power Commissioner Ivan Henderson has never released a financing plan or finalized cost estimates for the project, he has repeatedly said the City will rely on the pellets to fuel the incinerator and that the project will generate additional revenue by selling excess pellets to various companies, including Cleveland Thermal. Financing for the project would be based on the generation of electricity from the incinerator.

But an elementary mathematical calculation shows that the city has nowhere near enough garbage to make this project work, much less enough to sell "extra" pellets to make money. The City of Cleveland only takes in enough trash from its own residents, as well as the residents of Lakewood and Brooklyn, to fuel a machine from one quarter to one third of the size of what they are planning.

In this way, the person who updates the website is like the editor of a daily newspaper, making decisions about what news is significant enough to cover, which stories are solid enough and ready to post and which ones need more work. Now you are deciding what's "newsworthy."

3. Photographs

There's an old photographers' saying, "The best camera is the one that's with you." That's why this is the golden age of photography: most people have a camera with them at all times.

It is very hard to buy a cell phone these days that does not have a good digital camera in it. You can load the images directly into a computer and then, with a little preparation, right onto your website.

Photograph everything related to the company, the pollution, the neighborhood, and the campaign, every event, every interview, and post it on your site. People like to look at photos; it is hard to overdo it.

In the long campaign against mountaintop removal coal mining, photographs of the devastated mountains have shocked people all over the country, people who have never been to West Virginia, and would never read a position paper.
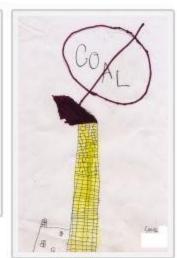
Make testimonials part of your coverage. These are short (or long) interviews with people experiencing to the problem you are working on. A photo two with each one will draw readers interest and motivate them to read the interview.
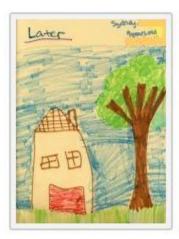
And photograph children's drawings for your website. The following web posting came in the middle of a campaign to persuade U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown to uphold tough new air pollution standards on coal plants. The thumbnail of each photo was linked to a full size version of the child's drawing.

Children's drawings for Senator Sherrod Brown

Share / Save

August 31st, 2011 | Tags: air pollution | Category: Coal | **Comments are closed**

4. Digital video

Similarly, many cell phones have video capability, and every group will have members who own digital movie cameras. What to film can include the condition of the plant, the latest fireball coming out of the stack, interviews with neighbors. Your video can be a 10-second clip of an accident, or a 10-minute interview with one of the group members.

You can post the results YouTube, free, and then a link can go directly onto the campaign website. You can learn how to do it from the YouTube website (http://support.google.com/youtube/bin/topic.py?hl=en&topic=2888648&parent=16547&ctx=topic).

5. Scanning company documents and public records

Exposing a company's inner workings to the public shocks the company as much as it does the public. If, for example, the local polluter has been in a lawsuit that made public internal documents on their emissions, groups should consider putting all of them on their website.

The Environmental Working Group in Washington, D.C., for example, used one of these machines to scan thousands of pages for their chemical industry archives project.

These days it's an easy thing to do. A sheet-fed document scanner with an automatic document feeder can take mountains of paper documents and turn them into searchable files for the web. Commonly the documents are converted to "portable document format" (pdf) files. You can read pdf files with a program called Adobe Acrobat Reader, available for free download from http://www.adobe.com. Community groups can usually find bulk scanners at community colleges, universities, and law firms. Or you could buy one at a reasonable price on eBay.

If you are scanning less than a mountain of paper, you can choose from a number of smartphone apps that do the job. Some are free and some cost a few bucks.

Here are a few to start: http://howto.cnet.com/8301-11310_39-57496711-285/five-apps-for-scanning-documents-on-your-iphone/

The same is true for public records obtainable from government agencies. This type of information can be like a gold mine, particularly in cases where citizens can obtain copies of emails, contracts, and other documents that are frequently withheld from the public.

We have found that the use of a free Dropbox (https://www.dropbox.com/) storage website can be excellent for posting these public documents, allowing the creation of public links to the documents from the organization's website. Since Dropbox essentially stores the information in the "cloud," there is no charge for a significant amount of storage space, and the documents can be accessed easily from mobile devices.

What if someone comes to you with a pile of internal company documents? This is one of those times when consulting with a friendly lawyer is the smartest move. You should be aware of whether there are legal risks involved in posting them. In some cases, there aren't. In some cases, there are risks, but you'll decide they are worth taking. In other cases, you might decide to pass.

6. Mobile website

By the end of 2012, 45% of American adults owned smartphones, according to the Pew Research Center. Of people between 18 and 29 years old, 66% owned smartphones. More American adults now own smartphones than own feature cell phones, which can be used only as a phone and for texting. Some 34% of adults have a feature phone; 5% say they do not know if they have a smartphone or not, and 15% have no cell phone at all.

One of the advantages of smartphones is that you can use them to go on the web. This is why, once you have a website, many of your site visitors will be coming from a smartphone.

Of course, the screen on a smartphone is pretty small. You website will be close to unreadable on a smart phone. Most smartphone have features that allow you to expand the size of chosen areas of the screen, but these methods are cumbersome and awkward.

That's why some websites now come in a different format suited to smartphone visitors, called a "mobile website."

The image below shows the Ohio Citizen Action website in its normal format on a smartphone. Good luck reading it.

The image below shows the same website in a mobile format. Headlines are much bigger, and clicking on them goes to the full article.

The pages of a mobile website load much faster, and the font sizes and links are much bigger. Mobile sites work on all major smartphones, including iPhone, Android, Windows Phone and Blackberry.

As with everything else in this guide, you can add a mobile site with no money and no technical expertise. It just takes a few minutes and a Google company called Dudamobile (http://www.dudamobile.com/) does all the work.

After your mobile site is set up, anyone using a smartphone to visit your site is redirected automatically to the mobile site. Those who want to use all the features of the full website can choose a link to take them there.

(OK, it's not free forever. It is free for the first year, and then if you want to continue, it costs $9/month. There is no obligation to continue.)

7. Getting the word out

While your website will never have as many visitors as Amazon or eBay, it doesn't matter. The goal of the website is to win your campaign, and you don't need that much traffic to win. Depending on the issue, your website can have a big effect with as few as a few dozen regular visitors, if they are the right people. In other campaigns, you would need a few hundreds or thousands.

Either way, you need to figure out how to get the word out about your great website.

Word-of-mouth

What the most powerful communications medium in the world? You should know, because you use it every day: it is word-of-mouth. It can capture other people's attention like nothing else. It is unfiltered. It can't be censored. It invites a response. It has the most credibility.

In your plan to get the word out about your website, at the top of the list should be how you are going to use word-of-mouth. Tell everyone you know and everyone you meet. Make a list of people who should know about your website, and meet with or call them all. Somewhere in every conversation, include this sentence: "Did you see what's on our website today?"

Email

Plain old email has been around for thirty years now, but it is still a superb way to communicate information in a big hurry. Any member of your group with a computer on the internet can use their email program to create a group list of everyone who wants to receive update emails about the campaign. Instructions for your email service (Microsoft Outlook, Gmail, Yahoo, or others) can be found by typing "contact group" into Help.

When it is time to alert people, the same email can go out to 10 or 50 people at the same time. Be sure that everyone on the list has agreed to be on it; most people don't like unsolicited emails.

Even if many people in your group don't have email, it is still a time-saver to use it for those who do, and keep in touch with the others in other ways. Group emails are free, and you can keep adding new contacts for quite a while before they become unwieldy.

Emails are great for bulletins and for routine arrangements, like what time is good for everyone to meet. Emails are not helpful for dealing with difficult or negative matters; they tend to make things worse. For touchy topics, there is no substitute for face-to-face discussions.

Social networks

A "social network" is a group of people a common social, cultural, political or business interest who use the internet to communicate with each other. The new social networks are widely used, and they can help your group -- no matter how small -- to get the word out.

In February, 2013, the Pew Research Center in Washington, DC, reported that 67% of Americans adults online use at least one social network such as Facebook, Google Plus or LinkedIn.

More specifically, the study found the following percentages of Americans online who use --

Facebook   67%
LinkedIn   20%
Twitter   16%
Pinterest   15%
Instagram   13%

This means someone in your local group is probably a member of one or more of these groups. Even if they have only used their social network to share recipes, discuss sports, or trade family news, they still understand how it works well enough to use it to get the word out about the work of your group. Go ahead and experiment: These networks are so new that no one knows all the things you can do with them.

Keep in mind, however, that they are no substitute for a website. They are just helpful way of getting the word out about your superb site. Even if you don't want to get involved with social networks – they're not for everyone – you can still do a great job of outreach with word-of-mouth and email.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind.

Facebook (www.facebook.com): One pitfall to avoid with Facebook is assuming that everyone is a currently active member. Last fall, the company announced that it had over a billion active users in the world, and Pew Research estimated that 67% of Americans online adults use Facebook. That leaves out the 33% of adult Americans who are not Facebook users, and the large but unknown number of Facebook "users" who either use it rarely, or are taking a break from Facebook right now. In the Pew study, 61% of Facebook users said they had taken a break from the service for several weeks or more. Pew reports, "The reasons people gave for taking a sabbatical from the network were varied. The most common motivation was not having enough time for the site, with 21% of people saying they were just too busy with real-life responsibilities to spend time reading posts, liking and commenting."

There's another new development with Facebook you should keep in mind. If you create a Facebook page for your organization, you can no longer rely on Facebook to forward all your posts to everyone who "likes" you. Only a fraction of your posts will be circulated.

The lesson is that Facebook is an important way to get the word out, but it can't do all the work. It is only a supplement to word-of-mouth and email.

Twitter (https://twitter.com/): In 2012 Twitter was the fastest growing social network in the world in terms of the number of active users. In the United States it almost doubled in size that year. Even though many of the messages on Twitter are boring bulletins about celebrities or political name-calling, it remains a useful way to communicate about the most serious subjects around. Don't dismiss it.

Pinterest (www.pinterest.com): Pinterest is a new photo-based network whose users display and contribute to collections of photos on any subject, from hobbies, to event-planning, travel, food, pets and fashion. Use of the Pinterest network grew explosively in 2012.

People are now beginning to experiment with it for grassroots campaigns. So far, the key to success seems to be making sure that the postings fit Pinterest's focus, which is images: anything with a picture. If you have, for example, testimonials about your issue, accompanied by photos of the person speaking, it can work. Or, photos of the beautiful landscape about to be torn up by a drilling company or a new interstate highway. Or children's drawings of the problem or the solution. People are drawn more to beautiful pictures than to ugly ones. (And vertical photos do better that horizontal ones on Pinterest.)

Instagram (http://instagram.com/): This photo-sharing social network has 90 million monthly active users. With it, you can share photos on the Instagram network, or through Facebook or Twitter. **Postagram** (http://postagramapp.com/) is a way to share Instagram or any other photos through custom-made physical postcards that arrive in regular mail.

Ohio Citizen Action has taken Postagram a step further by developing the ActionGram (http://ohiocitizen.org/action-gram/) for use in grassroots campaigns.

One final caution about social networks: They can be habit-forming and time-consuming. You'll need to keep them in their place. The first priority for your time and energy is the campaign. If you decide to do a website, it is a lower priority. Below that is getting the word out about the website, and within that comes, in order of importance, word-of-mouth, email, and social networks. Don't let time on social networks displace higher priorities.

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We're still learning about how to best use the internet in grassroots campaigns. If you have ideas, suggestions, criticisms, new things you've tried that work, or things you've tried that don't work, please let us know. Call or write Angela Oster, Digital Communications Director, Ohio Citizen Action, 614 West Superior Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44113, (216) 861-5200, aoster@ohiocitizen.org.

Thanks.

Paul Ryder, Assistant Director
Ohio Citizen Action