



**Friends of
the Earth**

How to: get your campaign online



The internet is one of the most effective ways to publicise your campaign. Web Managers Christian Graham and Jonathan Nichols explain how easy it is to campaign online

The internet continues to boom. Figures vary drastically depending on what you read, but at least half of the UK population now has regular access to it, from home, work, libraries or internet cafés. It has become an immensely popular way to campaign for change, as well as to do your shopping, research, play games, or check your bank balance.

Why use the web for your campaign?



It's quick

One of the internet's big advantages is that it makes it easy to react quickly to events – a call to action can be put up on a website or circulated by email within minutes. Leaflets don't have to be written, copied and handed out. It's also simple and quick for a recipient to take action – usually by clicking on a web link or sending an email.



It's cheap

Once you are online it costs a few pence (the price of a phone call) to send an email to potentially thousands of people.



It's big

Using the internet enables a campaign to spread globally, as recipients forward it on to their friends and colleagues. Bear in mind that as emails get forwarded, they can be taken out of context, and the name of the original sender can be lost. Take the time to check the content of the email very carefully, including any relevant facts, and in particular the details for the target of the campaign. Once you send it, it will be difficult to correct mistakes.

Of course, in many cases online actions can never replace the effectiveness of face-to-face campaigning methods. Instead they should complement them. Don't forget about the significant number of people who don't have online access, but who still want to make a difference. There is a lot to be said for the power of a handwritten letter versus an email.

What makes an effective online campaign?

If you want to get the most out of your web campaign, make it...

1 ▶ Eye-catching and creative

StopEsso and **Miracle-Gone** are both examples of online campaigns that work by exposing dodgy corporates and greenwash. They both have strong eye-catching designs intended to subvert the existing brand (petrol and peat), and so appeal to jaded web users. StopEsso's message was also spelled out, Boycott Esso. Though simple the campaign has adopted a variety of online tactics for promoting this message far and wide. These have also included humorous polar bear video clips as well as the promotion of special club nights via email which people pass on to friends – also known as viral marketing.



Send out links to web-actions
If publicising an action by email, don't send out the action itself but send out a link to a webpage that holds the information. You can change the webpage whenever you like and anyone clicking on the link will see the most up-to-date information. When the action is over (hopefully successfully) you can change the info to tell people this, and share the success.

2 ▶ Easy to do

Miracle-Gone had a particularly easy to do action: email a leading chain of retailers to ask them to stop selling Miracle-Gro (a compost product which includes peat). As each retailer capitulated the target was changed. This was coupled with positive information on alternatives to peat-based composts. Some workers inside one of the retailers also used the site to demonstrate to their marketing department why they should stop selling Miracle-Gro compost.



Have a cut-off date
It's a good idea to put a clear time limit on your action – it can be counterproductive if emails are still going to the campaign target months after the action was required. A cut-off date for actions required before a key meeting or decision is crucial.

3 ▶ Media savvy

Increasingly we are finding that online campaigns work best if they can tap into existing public or media interest. This creates additional pressure on the targets and ensures a ready audience for your campaign. **Dump Nuclear** (operating in the run-up to the publication of the Energy White Paper) and Flood Bush (launched within days of the US pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol) are both examples of effective online campaigns.

So, how do I do it?

This is a typical rundown on setting up an online action. We won't deal much with the technology as that will vary depending on what you have available. The guide below is as relevant to a simple text email as it is to a full-blown website-based action

In the psychiatrist's chair

What's your motivation? Ask yourself the same questions a potential viewer would ask.

Why now? For example, a decision is about to be made. If you can, say when the action should be done by (or at least put the date your action was launched in a prominent place). You can also press release the launch of the site/action if it is particularly innovative and/or a current issue in your area.

Why is it important to me? Here you'll have to set the context and background to the action. But keep it short and easy to read. Reading text on computer screens is difficult and people often exhibit shorter attention spans. Keep the language simple and break text up with bullet points and headings. Use bold sparingly to highlight key phrases that can be understood out of context.

How will it make a difference? Use past examples of actions that have worked.



Miracle-Gone website: eye-catching and still live.



Flood Bush website: easy to do and media savvy.



Stop Esso website: creative with a simple message.



Dump Nuclear website: media savvy.

Make it easy

Include a standard letter people can send if your action involves sending a letter – but give ideas of what else people can do if they want.

On target

Think carefully about how wide you'd like your campaign to spread, bearing in mind that once a campaign is on the web, it's very difficult to stop it spreading. The global coverage of the internet isn't always a good thing – a local campaign target, such as a local councillor, may not take kindly to emails arriving in their inbox from all over the world.

You'll need to find the email address (or fax number if you use an email to fax conversion tool like www.tpc.int) of your target. Don't forget you can ask people to contact their MP using our online tool at http://community.foe.co.uk/resource/tools/contact_mp/.

Testing, testing

Whatever technology you use to send your message, test and test again. And ask your family and neighbours to test it too. You could enlist some help from other forum users at <http://www.foe.co.uk/forum> as well...

Build and they will come?

So your online action is complete and you've tested until your finger tips have calluses – what's next?

Back in the early days of the web, it was enough to let a single website know of your existence and you could pretty much guarantee that everyone on the web (all 5,000 of them) would visit you. Sadly, now you have to do real work to get people to do your action. Here are a few ideas:

Your own webpage

Friends of the Earth local groups can have a webpage hosted on the Friends of the Earth's national website, eg: www.foe.co.uk/coventry.



The page is very simple – basically text only – with the co-ordinator's contact details and three paragraphs (where and when you meet, an introduction to the group, and a bit about your current campaigns). This page can also link to your own site if you have one. The page can be kept up-to-date by local group members via email as often as you like – you don't need to have any particular web skills.

For more information, email
lcd_data_administrator@foe.co.uk

Community website

Let us know (use the email above) and we'll feature your action on <http://community.foe.co.uk> or you could post it on one of the discussion forums.

Community website

Friends of the Earth's Community website at <http://community.foe.co.uk> is a great place to publicise your campaigns. There are discussion forums where you can share them with others, and get advice on what works and what doesn't.

Email lists

Email lists are useful tools – especially if you are running a long-term campaign and need people to do another action in the future – you'll always have a pool of eager activists to tap into. A list of email lists hosted by Friends of the Earth is available at www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/local_groups_and_campaigns/email_discussion_groups.html. If there isn't one which meets your needs, we may be able to set one up for you – email localgroups@foe.co.uk for details. Yahoo! Groups is also a useful tool to use to set up discussion lists on various topics – see <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/> to see what lists already exist, and for information on setting up your own list. The simplest way to set up an email mailing list is to use the address book facility of whichever email package you use, such as Hotmail or Outlook. If you do this, you should Bcc (blind carbon copy) recipients so that their email addresses aren't circulated. When posting to other people's lists, always be respectful of the list moderator's rules. Also, when using your own list, it's polite to always include instructions on how recipients can unsubscribe.

Search engine optimisation

It's a fact that for most websites, more than 60 per cent of their traffic comes from search engines like Google. So if your action has a fairly long life, say a couple of months or more, then it's worth optimising your website for search engines and submitting it to them. You can get further background information from www.searchenginewatch.com.

Finishing off

Make sure you communicate successes and thank people for taking part. You could do this via your website or by email if you have a list.

Useful links and further reading

<http://community.foe.co.uk> – Friends of the Earth's community website

http://community.foe.co.uk/resource/how_tos/cyw_18_diy_website.pdf – a guide to setting up your own website

www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/alm.cfm – a list of all MPs; you can email them directly from this site

www.netaction.org/training and www.fraw.org.uk/resources/gn-irt/irtb06.pdf – two in-depth guides to online activism