

Case Study
From Petitions to Decisions
By Greg Beato

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2014

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CASE STUDY

AN INSIDE LOOK AT ONE ORGANIZATION

From Petitions to Decisions

After [Change.org](#) opted to place petitions at the center of its platform, the size of its user base began to soar. But operating a high-volume petition site isn't enough for its leaders. Now they aim to transform the site into a venue for connecting those who want to change the world with those who run the world.

BY GREG BEATO

Ben Rattray launched Change.org, an advocacy-oriented social network, in February 2007. In its original iteration, Change.org offered a variety of tools to facilitate fund-raising, volunteerism, and other forms of cause-related engagement. But it wasn't until three years later, in January 2010, that Rattray saw how he could establish Change.org as a platform for shaping laws, regulations, and policies in the real world. "A homeless activist in Boulder, Colo., started a petition calling on the mayor to suspend an ordinance that made it illegal for people to sleep outside at night," Rattray explains.

The ability to create petitions had been a part of Change.org since the site's earliest days, but it hadn't been a part that Rattray and his colleagues had emphasized. Over time, though, users had gravitated toward that service, and by early 2010 petitions at Change.org were garnering thousands of signatures each week. Unfortunately, many of the most popular ones were powered by rhetoric rather than strategy. "Tell Sarah Palin and the Tea Partiers to Stop Lying," declared one. "Demand Global Medical Assistance for All," insisted another. Even if such campaigns had been able to attract millions of signatures, they were nonstarters. There was no practical way to implement the changes that they sought.

But the Boulder homeless rights campaign was different. Two hundred people quickly signed the petition. Each time someone did so, Change.org—as it does with any petition that targets a specific decision maker—automatically sent an email to Mayor Susan Osborne's office. Although the number of signers was relatively small, their messages were going to someone who wasn't used to getting that kind of feedback. "It shocked her," Rattray says. "She'd never seen that much attention and interest from citizens on this issue."

Then some of the petition signers arranged to attend a city council meeting. When they showed up there, the mayor instructed the Boulder

city manager to place an emergency moratorium on the ordinance. "It was a great illustration of the power that everyday people have in making small, incremental changes," Rattray says. "Once we saw how that worked, we decided to start emphasizing petitions as a mechanism."

Throughout its history, Change.org has lived up to its name—not just by empowering its users to pursue social change, but also by steadily refining and repositioning the way that it serves and appeals to users. The decision to focus on petitions helped clarify the purpose of the platform. It also helped create a brand identity that continues to resonate with users. But Rattray and his colleagues aren't standing still. "Signing a petition is the first step," he says. "It's the way of aggregating the largest audience of people who are potentially interested in an issue. But we're not building a petition site. We're building an empowerment company."

BROAD REACH, BIG PLANS

When Change.org started paying more attention to petitions, users started paying more attention to Change.org. As of November 2011, it was adding about 500,000 registered users per month. By the summer of 2012 (when *Stanford Social Innovation Review* first covered the organization), it had 10 million registered users. Today, Change.org has more than 70 million registered users, and it's adding 4 million new ones per month. Each month, moreover, about 40 million people visit the site, and each month users create about 20,000 new petitions. On a regular basis, these petitions result in what the site calls "victories." In 2011, for example, Bank of America dropped its plan to introduce a monthly \$5 debit card fee in the wake of a Change.org campaign. In 2012, the Motion Picture Association of America switched its rating of the movie *Bully* from R to PG-13 after more than 500,000 people signed a Change.org petition.

Now, in 2014, Change.org is ready to build on its success with petitions. It has started to invite elected officials, corporations, and other entities to create special Decision Maker pages where they can respond directly to petitions that target them. The purpose of this



Change.org, despite its suffix, is not a nonprofit organization. It's a self-described "mission-driven social enterprise." It's also a certified B corporation, which means that it aims to prioritize social good over shareholder returns. In any case, it vigorously pursues revenues and profits. It has been operating in the black since 2010, and it has developed multiple revenue streams. In May 2013, most notably, the company secured \$15 million in funding from the Omidyar Network, a philanthropic investment firm created by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. "When Change.org made that transition to a full-fledged peer-to-peer platform, it became a wonderful fit for us," says Chris Bishko, an investment partner at the

CAMPAIGN

Governor Quinn: Don't Let Big Plastic Bully Me

CREATOR	TARGET	DATE	VICTORY	SIGNATURES
Abby Goldberg petitions the governor of her state to veto a bill that prevents cities from banning plastic bags.	Pat Quinn, governor of Illinois, and other parties	Petition created: June 2012 Goal reached: August 2012	Governor Quinn vetoes the bill in question.	174,817 (June 2014)

evolving functionality is to establish Change.org as a place where multiple stakeholders can craft solutions through extended debate and negotiation. If you'd like to see the federal government devote more money to science education, for example, you could target Representative Mike Honda, a Democrat from California, who serves on the House of Representatives Commerce, Justice, and Science Committee—and who maintains his own Decision Maker page.

Honda and other Decision Makers on the platform—they range from politicians like Representative Paul Ryan, Republican of Wisconsin, to companies like Ikea and Etsy—are not obligated to respond to petitions that target them. But Change.org leaders certainly hope that they will. "We've built this incredible megaphone for everyday people to have a voice that is much louder than it was before," Rattray explains. "But we want to make sure that Change.org is more than just shouting at decision makers."

Change.org, in short, is positioning itself as a locus of policymaking that is more accessible and more transparent than traditional venues of governance. It's an extremely ambitious proposition. But as the Internet continues to decentralize power in all facets of life, people are developing new expectations about the way the world works. When they tweet a message to an elected official, they expect a reply. When they lodge a complaint with a major corporation, they demand more than a boilerplate response. Rattray and his colleagues understand the appeal of an institution that can help meet those expectations. That's one reason that their company is on track to reach 100 million registered users worldwide.

Omidyar Network who now sits on the Change.org board. "We are huge believers in the power of platforms that allow people to collaborate deeply around shared interests in a ways that have positive impact not only on their own lives but on the lives of those around them."

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

As a child, Ben Rattray didn't want to change the world. He wanted to own it. "I idolised Gordon Gekko and was obsessed by the idea of wearing a double-breasted suit and strutting down Wall Street," he told the *Guardian* in 2013. Then, when he was a senior at Stanford University, he learned that his younger brother was gay. His brother said that the hardest part about being closeted had been (in Ben Rattray's words) "seeing good people refuse to stand up and speak out against LGBT discrimination all around him."

That moment led Rattray to question what he wanted to accomplish with his life. His old dream of stylish predatory capitalism no longer seemed so appealing; he now wanted to help people in some way. But he wasn't sure how. He completed a one-year graduate program at the London School of Economics and then joined a political consulting firm in Washington, D.C. His work at the firm quickly disenchanted him. "It wasn't about corruption or anything mendacious," Rattray says. "It was just the clear disconnect between policymaking and everyday people."

Next, he applied to and was accepted by the NYU School of Law. But just a few weeks before what would have been his first semester there, he saw a website that was then known as TheFacebook.com.

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What would happen, he wondered, if you used the power of a social network to promote social change? “I had my dorm room set up on West 4th Street,” Rattray says. “Then I had the idea for Change.org and pivoted everything.”

It was the first of many crucial pivots in the history of Change.org. True to its roots in Silicon Valley (it’s based in San Francisco), the company has treated audacious iteration as a best practice. When Change.org began operation, its primary feature was a nascent form of crowdfunding. The idea was that nonprofit organizations would publicize their projects on the Change.org site, and Change.org users would donate to those projects. Such campaigns would inspire message-board conversations and other forms of social interaction, and that interaction would in turn drive more giving. In return for facilitating this process, Change.org would take a 1 percent cut of the donations.

In 2007, however, online crowdfunding was all too nascent. (Kickstarter didn’t exist yet.) Introducing a more efficient way than direct mail for nonprofits to raise money was a smart idea, but it was ahead of its time. And the twist to the fundraising process that Change.org introduced—allowing nonprofits to propose specific projects that users could support—wasn’t enough to create significant user engagement. Within three months of its launch, Change.org announced that users could make donations to political candidates as well as nonprofits. But that didn’t help much. By October 2007, total contributions made via Change.org had reached a mere \$51,878. Change.org’s cut of the bounty came to \$518.

In November 2007, Change.org tried a new tack, positioning itself as “the Ning for nonprofits.” In this incarnation, it offered qualifying organizations a chance to build proprietary pages on the Change.org website. By doing so, they would be able to use Change.org’s social networking tools and gain access to Change.org’s user base, even as they retained their own branded identity. But Change.org’s user base was quite small at the time, and few nonprofits felt that they needed their own Ning.

In June 2008, Change.org reinvented itself again, this time as a blogging network organized around categories like “Homelessness” and “Global Warming.” It employed a dozen full-time editors, and they coordinated contributions from as many as 200 freelance bloggers. “We were getting several million people a month on the site,” Rattray recalls. But when people read the site’s blog content, their most common response wasn’t to donate money or volunteer time to a related cause. It was to sign a petition.

USER-GENERATED IMPACT

Petitions have been a fixture on the Internet since at least the late 1990s. But the rise of social networks has given them new life. In a world of ubiquitous social interaction, petitions are a boon to users—an extremely efficient form of personal expression, comparable to the Facebook Like button. A petition lets users share their values and beliefs with a single click. Petitions are also explicitly collaborative: The whole point is to get more people to sign them.

Still, even after the Boulder campaign, Change.org did not embrace petitions completely. Change.org editorial staff members continued to publish articles. Like traditional gatekeepers, they determined what appeared on the home page and what didn’t. Then, later in 2010, Rattray had another revelation. “I remember Ben coming into my office one morning,” recalls Meghan Nesbit, managing director of sales and marketing at Change.org. “He didn’t look like he’d slept much the previous night, and he was just on fire. He had this epiphany: It was all about the petitions that individual users were posting and sharing with their own communities. That was where we could make a difference.”

What Rattray had realized was that efforts to create editorial content were not only unnecessary, they were undermining Change.org’s identity as a user-driven platform. “It looked like we were trying to set the agenda, instead of empowering others to pursue the issues they cared about,” Rattray says. “We really didn’t have a choice. Either we could be an editorial site that was about curating and crafting a particular perspective. Or we could be a massively scaled Internet platform that focused on empowerment and deference to users.”

In January 2011, Change.org introduced a new look. Petitions took center stage, and staff-written stories no longer appeared on the home page. “That’s when we started seeing really dramatic user growth,” says Nesbit. “That’s when we became a platform: ‘When you want to make change, you go to Change.org.’” In this new incarnation, the site essentially flipped its editorial approach. Whereas Change.org had previously pushed content created by media professionals to its users, it now pushed content created by its users to the news media.

As a fundamentally user-driven platform, Change.org began to function as a kind of eBay for advocacy, and it benefited from the same synergies that had animated eBay’s ascent in the late 1990s. As the number of “sellers” (petition creators) increased, so did the number of “buyers” (petition signers); as the number of buyers increased, so did the number of sellers. It was a virtuous circle that led to rapid growth.

VICTORY MARCH

As the platform grew, so did its ability to achieve social impact. In March 2012, a woman from Texas started a petition on Change.org urging the US Department of Agriculture to eliminate the processed beef product known as “pink slime” from school lunches—and shortly thereafter the agency announced it would do so. That same month, the parents of Trayvon Martin used Change.org to demand that the state of Florida bring criminal charges against George Zimmerman, the man who had shot their son—and before long state prosecutors filed charges. In August of that year, a 13-year-old girl from Illinois named Abby Goldberg petitioned the state’s governor to veto legislation that would have prohibited towns from enacting bans on single-use plastic bags—and he did.

Results like these aren’t always solely attributable to Change.org. In many instances, a company or elected official targeted by a Change.org petition receives protests and complaints from many other sources as well. In 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* asked a data

analytics firm called Networked Insights to measure the impact that Change.org had in the Bank of America user fee campaign and in a similar campaign involving Verizon. The firm studied how frequently social media posts about the two controversies had cited Change.org. The involvement of the site “probably had marginal impact,” a Networked Insights analyst concluded.

Not infrequently, however, decision-makers targeted by Change.org campaigns do respond directly to those efforts. A Gatorade spokesperson told *The New York Times* that a Change.org campaign against its use of brominated vegetable oil—an ingredient sometimes used as a flame retardant—led the company to speed up its planned phase-out of the product. In another instance, an 18-year-old named Benjamin O’Keefe created a Change.org petition that urged the retailer Abercrombie & Fitch to create clothes in expanded sizes. Abercrombie executives met with O’Keefe, and later they announced that the company would start offering plus sizes.

To increase the odds that petitions will turn into victories, Change.org encourages users to create what it calls “winnable” petitions—ones that demand a focused action of some sort while

targeting a person or institution with the power to take that action. When members of the Change.org staff identify a petition as winnable they go into action. They email press releases to thousands of journalists. They publicize campaigns via advertising on Facebook. They even offer media coaching to petition creators whose stories garner attention from news outlets.

According to Charlotte Hill, a former senior communications manager at Change.org, more than 25 million people—roughly one-third of the site’s registered users—have signed a petition that has led to a victory. That high hit rate is a decisive factor in Change.org’s growth. Countless media outlets battle for people’s attention now, but few of them are able to convert a few moments of attention into a sense of accomplishment. Signing petitions at Change.org requires no more cognitive effort than watching CNN or reading *The New York Times*, but the five minutes that a user spends at the petition site could lead to zero-flame-retardant Gatorade.

Critics have derided online petitions as “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”—a trivial form of advocacy that doesn’t accomplish anything. But Change.org victories belie that notion. They give users a concrete indication that the time they spend on the site matters, that their efforts have real impact. In an era when people are pressed for time and hungry for purpose, the hyper-efficient form of advocacy that Change.org enables can exert a powerful draw on people.

Change.org didn’t emphasize its petition functionality when it launched in 2007. But its willingness to iterate, experiment, and quickly abandon features and services that don’t resonate with users have helped it achieve what people in Silicon Valley call an effective “product-market fit”—a condition in which a company produces a functional product that a large number of customers want to use. “Simplifying where our core value was, it basically felt like identifying true north,” Nesbit says, referring to the decision to focus on being a platform for user-driven petitions. “Once that was set, everything else got a lot easier.”

CHANGE YOU CAN SPONSOR

In 2010, Nesbit joined Change.org to lead its business development effort. At that time, she discovered, advertisers found the site just as confusing as users did. “It was a tough conversation, trying to explain to potential clients what Change.org was,” she recalls. But when Change.org decided to focus on hosting petitions, it not only catalyzed user growth, but also helped advertisers to see why they

would want to be on the platform, too. “Simplifying the brand identity,” Nesbit says, allowed the company to clarify its value offer to customers: “The business side opened up for us exponentially.”

Today, Change.org generates most of its revenue by



CAMPAIGN

Prohibit Gun Sales on Facebook & Instagram Immediately

CREATOR	TARGET	DATE	VICTORY	SIGNATURES
Shannon Watts , founder of Moms Demand Action, petitions Facebook and Instagram to ban gun sales on their sites.	Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook; Kevin Systrom, CEO of Instagram	Petition created: February 2014 Goal reached: February 2014	Facebook and Instagram update policies to ensure that users comply with background checks and other relevant laws.	95,559 (June 2014)

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CAMPAIGN				
Tell Bank of America: No \$5 Debit Card Fees				
CREATOR	TARGET	DATE	VICTORY	SIGNATURES
Molly Katchpole petitions Bank of America to drop a \$5 monthly fee levied on all accounts with debit cards.	Brian T. Moynihan, CEO of Bank of America	Petition created: October 2011 Goal reached: November 2011	Bank of America and other banks announce that they will drop the debit card fee.	306,889 (June 2014)



offering advertisers the ability to launch what it calls “sponsored campaigns.” At the heart of a sponsored campaign is a petition that works much like any Change.org petition. A decision-maker is targeted. A demand is made. Supporters are invited to “sign” as a way to show their support. In this case, though, Change.org intentionally promotes the petition to “issue-aligned” users: When users sign a non-sponsored petition, they are invited to sign sponsored petitions that match their signing behavior. If you sign a petition related to climate change, for example, the site might then direct you to sponsored petitions generated by the Sierra Club or the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). Because millions of users collectively sign thousands of petitions each month, Change.org can draw on a huge amount of data to predict who is likely to sign which petition.

Users who sign a sponsored petition can choose whether to receive updates on the petition’s progress. The default is “yes,” and if they don’t explicitly opt out of this arrangement, Change.org provides their email address to the sponsoring organization. (Change.org explains the opt-out provision on the relevant petition page.) So Change.org isn’t selling just impressions or just a list of names of people who show

an interest in a given subject. It’s selling pre-qualified leads: A user must sign the sponsored petition, and also tacitly agree to receive information from the sponsoring organization, before Change.org charges the organization for making a connection to that user.

Sponsored petitions are therefore a very efficient—and a very attractive—form of advertising. (In 2013, according to Rattray, Change.org worked with 250 advertisers over the course of the year.) Sponsors don’t pay for anyone who views their petition but doesn’t sign it. They don’t pay for anyone who signs it but opts out of receiving additional communication. And they don’t pay for anyone who signs it, consents to additional communication, but already appears on their own mailing list. Advertisers specify how many email addresses they want to acquire through the campaign and in what amount of time. Then Change.org exposes likely signers to the campaign until it reaches the advertiser’s target number.

“We’ve been working with Change.org for around five years now,” says Heather Shelby, an online activist coordinator at EDF. Her organization runs as many as 10 sponsored campaigns at a time on Change.org. EDF, she says, “consistently gets a return on [its] investment within two years.” In that span of time, in other words, those who join the organization’s mailing list through Change.org donate more money to the organization than it cost to acquire their addresses.

Julianna Egner, a media associate at the advertising agency Blue State Digital (BSD), says that Change.org was extremely effective in helping a client called Shatterproof to find supporters. “When we started, we had maybe 3,000 email addresses on our list,” Egner says. Then Shatterproof, a nonprofit that focuses on addiction issues advocacy, ran a sponsored petition to support better implementation of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, a recently passed US law. BSD ran ads for Shatterproof on Google and Facebook as well, but Change.org proved to be its most effective recruitment venue. “We ran the campaign for less than a week and generated 10,790 ‘uniques,’” Egner says. Those “unique” petition signers account for 43 percent of the roughly 25,000 names that Shatterproof has on its email list today.

The leaders of Change.org won’t reveal how much revenue the company generates from sponsored campaigns. As a B corporation, Change.org is supposed to meet certain transparency standards. But in at least one important area, Change.org is not particularly transparent: Because it’s neither a nonprofit nor a publicly traded for-profit company, it has no obligation to disclose its financial information. But there are publicly disclosed data that hint at the scale of the company’s sponsored campaign business. At least two nonprofit customers reported what they spent on Change.org advertising in US Internal Revenue Service filings for 2012. StudentsFirst, a school reform

PHOTOGRAPH BY CLIFF OWEN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

advocacy group, paid a little less than \$640,000 for that service, and Kaboom!, an organization that helps build playgrounds for children, paid \$35,000. In 2012, meanwhile, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Change.org was forecasting revenues of \$15 million for that year.

Although sponsored campaigns generate the largest share of Change.org's revenue, other lines of business bring in money as well. In 2013, for example, the company introduced a service that lets users promote non-sponsored petitions to a certain number of fellow users. The cost of promoted petitions varies by country, but on average it's about 20 cents per impression. According to Charlotte Hill, about 16,000 people per month promote petitions on Change.org, and 30,000 people view a promoted petition on any given day. "Promoted petitions continue to make up a higher percentage of our revenue every month," she says.

PLATFORM POLITICS

From the start, Rattray conceived of Change.org in broad and essentially nonpartisan terms. He wanted the site to be a platform where people with varied interests could pursue collective social activism.

In practice, however, most of Change.org's early employees were politically progressive, and most of the content on the site reflected that orientation. There was substantial coverage of topics like "Animal Rights," "Women's Rights," and "Gay Rights" but little or no coverage of, say, "Gun Owners' Rights." Although users could and occasionally did create petitions in favor of limiting abortion or expanding right-to-carry laws for people with firearms, they were an exception to a widely perceived rule. "The site continuously featured left-leaning, liberal petitions," says Jeff Bryant, an associate fellow at Campaign for America's Future, a progressive advocacy organization. "It also posed itself as David versus Goliath. That was a recurring theme in its marketing efforts—that it would be for the little guy."

In the summer of 2012, the tension between those two aspects of Change.org—its claim to be a platform with broad appeal and its affiliation with traditional progressive causes—led to another turning point. The company accepted sponsored campaigns from StudentsFirst and another school reform group, Stand for Children. Because those organizations take positions on education policy that teachers unions oppose, a backlash ensued. A group of big-name labor unions, including the AFL-CIO and the Communications Workers of America, sent Change.org an open letter in which they asked the company to clarify its policy toward "prospective clients who have a history of attacking workers and supporting the dismantling of public services." If Change.org continued to take advertising from such clients, the letter suggested, these unions would abandon the platform and encourage their "brothers and sisters in labor and in the wider progressive community" to do so as well.

In the face of such pressure, Change.org initially suggested that it would forgo future contracts with StudentsFirst and Stand for Children. But the situation prompted the company to review its advertising policy. With regard to user-generated petitions, Change.org

had always positioned itself as an "open platform." Its policy regarding advertisers, by contrast, was more restrictive. "We accept sponsored campaigns from organizations fighting for the public good and the common values we hold dear—fairness, equality, and justice," this policy read. "We do not accept sponsored campaigns from organizations that consistently violate these values, support discriminatory policies, or seek private corporate benefit that undermines the common good."

Rattray had always envisioned Change.org as a global information utility—a platform that, like Twitter or YouTube, would be open to all. So when he and his colleagues reassessed their existing advertising policy, they concluded that it undercut the site's position as a resource that anyone could use to pursue change. So they decided to revise it. The new policy reads as follows: "As an open platform with tens of millions of diverse users, Change.org hosts sponsored petitions representing a wide range of viewpoints. We do not endorse nor are we affiliated with any sponsored petition or associated organizations."

The revised policy bans advertising by hate groups and bars sponsored campaigns that "promote hate, violence or discrimination." Overall, though, it broadens Change.org's potential advertiser base considerably. Under the original policy only nonprofits could advertise on the site, and they were subject to evaluation and approval on a case-by-case basis. Under the new policy, commercial entities, political parties, and people who run for public office can advertise as well.

"OPEN" SEASON

For Change.org, adopting an open advertising policy was risky. It would undoubtedly alienate many of the US-based progressives who had come to think of the platform as their own. But in Rattray's estimation, the new policy simply made the site more coherent, extending to its sponsored content the same neutral perspective that had always governed its user-generated content.

According to an internal Change.org memo that Bryant obtained and passed on to the *Huffington Post*, the new policy would potentially allow advertising on behalf of "anti-abortion, pro-gun and union-busting" causes. In the wake of that revelation, other petition-oriented websites moved to present themselves as venues where only progressive-leaning campaigns would take place. "Care2 will never run a campaign for the NRA [National Rifle Association], or from advocacy groups that don't support a woman's right to control her own body," said Clinton O'Brien, a vice president at Care2.com, a pioneer in the online petition space. "When you see MoveOn.org promote a petition, you never have to wonder if we're doing it because someone paid us to," said Steven Biel, the director of SignOn.org, a petition site run by MoveOn.org. "For years, progressives have built a huge advantage over the right wing on the Internet, and it would be awful to lose that in service of a short-term payday." (Both men made those comments to the *Huffington Post*.)

Change.org, to be sure, is vulnerable to criticism regarding its financial motives. It uses a domain name suffix typically associated with nonprofits, and it positions itself as a "social enterprise" with

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a commitment to “fairness, equality, and justice”—yet it’s also a remarkably efficient advertising platform, with a mandate to generate revenue. In this instance, however, Change.org wasn’t looking for a “short-term payday.” StudentsFirst had a large contract with Change.org, but it was just one customer. In the near term, by revising its advertising policy in a way that would alienate unions and other progressive groups, Change.org stood to lose users, clients, and revenue.

Indeed, for Rattray and his team, adopting the new, more open policy was a long-term play—a bid for positioning and growth. “I think we live in such a pitched, partisan environment that many people think, ‘You’re either with us or against us,’” he says. “This idea that there are neutral platforms that are disrupting a system, instead of trying to advance a cause, is new to people. But if we have a specific political agenda, it undermines the entire pursuit. It undermines people’s ability to own the agenda themselves.”

Change.org’s decision to amend its advertising policy did have some short-term costs attached to it. There were “a number of efforts to steer people away from Change.org,” Bryant says, and certain exclusively progressive petition sites—including SignOn.org and CredoAction.com—benefited from their status as alternatives to Change.org. But a large exodus of clients and users never materialized. In fact, it was after Change.org implemented the new policy that its growth began to skyrocket. In October 2012, when the new policy took effect, the platform had about 23 million registered users. Since then, its user base has roughly tripled in size.

DECIDE AND CONQUER

About one week after the mayor of Boulder declared an emergency moratorium on the city’s ordinance against overnight camping on public property—and shortly after Change.org declared victory—she changed her mind. Despite the surge of activism that had occurred both online and offline, she lifted the moratorium. Sometimes, as it turns out, it’s difficult to make even a “small, incremental change” stick.

This basic truth points to the potential of Change.org’s emerging Decision Makers functionality. According to an update posted on Change.org by one of the Boulder campaign’s organizers, the mayor explained her change of heart by saying she had felt “boxed in” by the petitioners. But what if the platform had given her and the petitioners a forum for dialogue and deliberation? In that case, might her response have been different? “This is the next iteration of online advocacy,” says Jake Brewer, managing director of internal affairs at Change.org. “How do we bring decision makers onto the platform to allow for an exchange of ideas and work toward solutions, so it’s not just about who can be the biggest and the loudest?”

The Decision Makers functionality is still in its initial stages, but the outcome of one recent petition suggests how that functionality might work. Earlier this year, a blind college student named Jamie Principado asked Representative Mike Honda to support the TEACH Act, a bill in the US Congress that would increase the availability of electronic educational materials for blind students. “Jamie, thank you for bringing attention to this issue,” Honda replied at his Decision Maker page. “Your struggle moved me. Because of this petition, I am now a proud cosponsor of the TEACH Act.”



CAMPAIGN

Prosecute the Killer of Our Son, 17-Year-Old Trayvon Martin

CREATORS	TARGET	DATE	VICTORY	SIGNATURES
Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton , the father and mother of Trayvon Martin, who was shot to death in Sanford, Fla., launch a petition to prosecute his admitted shooter, George Zimmerman.	Pam Bondi, attorney general of Florida; Bill Lee, Sanford police chief; and other parties	Petition created: March 2012 Victory declared: April 2012	A Florida state attorney charges Zimmerman with second-degree murder.	2,278,959 (June 2014)

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN MINCHELLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

SSIR ONLINE

Visit ssireview.org to learn more about Change.org.

- “Change.org: What’s in a Domain Name?” sidebar
- “Change.org and Openness” blog post
- Video clips of petitioners Abby Goldberg and Molly Katchpole

The practical import of Honda’s co-sponsorship is debatable. Govtrack.us, a government transparency website, reports that the TEACH Act has 41 other co-sponsors and estimates that the bill stands only a 10 percent chance of getting out of committee. Still, this example shows that at least some elected officials are open to using the platform as a venue for communication with constituents. “We’re not just trying to put the voice of nonprofits or our users inside the halls of government or in the boardrooms of companies,” says Brewer. “We’re incentivizing decision-makers to come to where the people are, on Change.org. And they’re doing it.”

One big question, of course, is whether users actually want to use a platform like Change.org to engage in dialogue and deliberation. Stuart Shulman, professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has doubts on that score. “You’re back to chasing the great white whale here,” says Shulman, who studies how people use electronic comment-submission tools as part of the US federal rulemaking process. “People do change their behaviors when they’re exposed to new technologies. But so far they’ve done it for updating their Facebook statuses, not for deliberating about the finer points of [environmental] habitat.”

Stephen Zavestoski, professor of sociology and environmental studies at the University of San Francisco, notes another aspect of Change.org’s effort to increase opportunities for discourse on its platform. “When we interviewed environmental organizations, they more or less said that they didn’t really care much [about increasing democratic deliberation],” says Zavestoski, who collaborated with Shulman on several studies on the electronic rulemaking process. “For them, it was about aggregating preferences—being able to overwhelm a server with hundreds of thousands of comments. That creates a spectacle for them. That gets traction.” The kinds of organizations that advertise on Change.org, in other words, may prefer a platform that emphasizes preference aggregation (that is, signature collection) to one that encourages dialogue and debate.

For Change.org leaders, introducing the Decision Makers functionality is one more instance of the company’s efforts to improve the site experience for users. “No victory can happen for a user without a decision by the person who’s receiving the petition,” says Brewer. “We’re making that a transparent process. Bringing light to the negotiation process will empower users more effectively.”

A GROWING CONCERN

Change.org, which claims a larger audience than many well-known news organizations, has taken on several functions that those organizations have traditionally claimed for themselves—informing communities about issues that affect them, serving as a watchdog against powerful interests, and (as the old newspaper maxim has it) working “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

Just as Change.org is becoming a new venue of governance, it’s also becoming a new and important conduit of public information. To play that role, the company needs to maintain a high level of credibility.

“We’re working to revamp our fact-checking process for petitions and trying to figure out a process that is scalable,” says Brianna Cayo Cotter, communications director. “We want to make sure that we have systems in place so that our users will continue to see us as a reliable source.” (At present, Change.org users publish more than 600 new petitions every day, and Change.org screens none of them in advance.) To some degree, the Decision Makers functionality will increase the trustworthiness of the platform. That functionality gives an entity targeted by a petition the ability to publish a rebuttal on the same platform where the petition appears. Every time a verified Decision Maker writes a response to a petition, moreover, everyone who signed the petition receives a copy of the response via email.

Earlier this year, Change.org worked with the *Guardian* on a pair of campaigns related to female genital mutilation (FGM). In one campaign, a woman in the United Kingdom petitioned her country’s secretary of state for education to push for adding information about FGM to UK school curriculums. In the second campaign, an Atlanta-based woman petitioned President Obama to commission a report that would assess the number of US women who are victims of FGM. To support these efforts, the *Guardian* created a page on its website that included articles and video clips about FGM, reports on the Change.org campaigns, and links to the petitions, both of which ended up attracting more than 200,000 signers.

In signing petitions at sites like Change.org, millions of people have shown that they seek forms of interactivity that go beyond adding a comment at the end of a news story. The *Guardian* collaboration shows how news organizations could add value to Change.org campaigns by checking their accuracy and providing context for them. At the same time, news media partners would benefit from the high level of user engagement that Change.org helps create. Yet news outlets have not yet capitalized on the platform to the degree that they might. “They’re very happy to report on petitions,” says Cayo Cotter. “But so far they want to keep a bit of objective positioning around their stories.”

At some point, Change.org will likely introduce a tool similar to the social media buttons that have become commonplace on news websites. Bishko, of the Omidyar Network, suggests how that functionality might work: “Instead of just tweeting something, you ‘change’ it. You go directly from an article that inspired you to Change.org to launch a petition on that same topic.”

The history of Change.org suggests that it won’t be just one tool or tactic that helps the platform realize its full potential as a venue for transparent deliberation and substantive decision-making. Change.org will likely try many options, and some of them will fail. Iteration has been a defining characteristic of the company from its inception. Its willingness to change—to learn from how people actually use the platform, to make adaptations, and to accommodate its users’ needs and interests over time—helps explain how Change.org has grown so big so fast. In the world of Silicon Valley start-ups, that mindset is commonplace. Change.org has shown that it can flourish in the world of social innovation as well. ■