

Petition Power

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Action What Works

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Change.org, a five-year-old San Francisco-based startup, has emerged as one of the leading platforms for online activism **BY PHUONG LY**

WHEN SHE WAS 20, Billi du Preez came out as a lesbian. As a result, she says, she was raped. In South Africa, such an attack is called “corrective rape,” when a man assaults a lesbian in an attempt to “cure” her of her sexual orientation. For more than three decades, du Preez thought she would never see justice. Then last fall, du Preez, a blogger on gay issues, read news articles about the rise in corrective rapes and abuse of gay teens at schools. Du Preez and a handful of fledgling activists had a balky computer from the 1990s and spotty Internet service—but that was enough.

Du Preez logged on to Change.org and started an online petition demanding that the South African government declare corrective rape a hate crime. The cry for help ricocheted around the world. More than 170,000 people signed the petition on Change.org—the largest response ever on the social activism website. Each time someone signed the petition, Change.org sent an e-mail to officials in South Africa’s Ministry of Justice. The flood of e-mails crashed the government’s computers. Change.org editors then worked with du Preez and her group to coordinate a strategy that included international media coverage and a rally outside the Parliament building.

Government officials met with the activists three months later, in March 2011. And eventually South Africa established a national task force to investigate hate crimes against gays and lesbians. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think this would happen,” says du Preez, 52. “This would have been impossible without Change.org. They had the means to help us push this.”

Through Change.org, grassroots activists like du Preez are tapping into two essentials of movement building—media attention and connections—and doing it on a shoestring budget. In the past year, the San Francisco-based startup has emerged as one of the leading platforms for online activism, branding itself through petition drives. Unlike some of its competitors, the site doesn’t fund-raise or sell products.

Since Change.org’s founding in 2007, about 5 million people have registered as members and 25,000 petitions have been started.

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First-time activists, with the help of the site’s tutorials, start many of the petitions, but large organizations are turning to the platform as well. The Guggenheim Museum wrote a petition demanding that the Chinese government release dissident artist Ai Weiwei. About 140,000 signatures and three months later, he was freed.

The platform is free for anybody to use, and about 10 percent of the petitions receive extra help and promotion from editors, says founder Ben Rattray. Change.org, which is an accredited B Corporation (structured as a for-profit but with the social mission of a nonprofit), also makes money by providing organizing and engineering services to veteran advocacy groups, such as Amnesty International and the American Heart Association. The company has raised \$2.5 million from angel investors. Rattray told *The Sacramento Bee* in July 2011 that Change.org would bring in \$5 million in revenue that year.

For all Change.org’s success, Rattray says he and his colleagues worry that online advocacy can be viewed as weak, since one can support a cause by clicking a button. The 60-person staff is refining offline strategies to generate more interest and most important, action.

Emboldened by a Change.org petition, activists protest “corrective rape” outside the South African parliament.

"How do you cross the chasm between people being interested in social issues and their ability to act?" Rattray says. "We're looking at someone's click as the beginning and not the end of their experience."

LADDER OF ACTIVISM

Rattray knows firsthand how easy it can be to talk, but not act. As an undergraduate at Stanford University, he organized Tuesday night discussions of current events in his dorm. Just before he graduated in 2002, he realized that although the talks were enlightening, he hadn't really done anything. He had never even voted or donated to charity.

After studying at the London School of Economics, Rattray worked for a lobbying firm in Washington, D.C. There, he learned about political influence and the power of connections. Rattray and Mark Dimas, a dorm-mate at Stanford, started Change.org as a social networking site for nonprofits. A year later, the startup added bloggers to report on human rights issues.

Traffic jumped from 100,000 unique visitors a month to 400,000. Rattray says he realized "people care more about issues than organizations." Rattray then decided to ax fundraising requests. About \$1 million had been raised in one year for individual nonprofits, but Rattray says that donation drives can turn users away from the site.

By 2010, petitions had become Change.org's core. The startup advises a practical, stripped-down approach to petitions and campaigns. Users are encouraged to make their petitions as targeted as possible. One activist wanted 1-800-FLOWERS.com, an online florist, to deal in only fair trade flowers. A Change.org editor suggested a rewrite: Ask the company to include fair trade products among its offerings. Rattray says the campaign was won in two days and moved to convincing other companies to adopt fair trade practices. "Simplicity sells, and specificity sells," he says. "Small changes can lead to a bigger impact."

Change.org creates a "ladder of activism" that doesn't overwhelm first-time visitors, says Julie Barko Germany, vice president of digital strategies for DCI Group, a Washington, D.C.-based public affairs firm. Germany says Change.org's sharpened mission and easy navigation hook users and visitors. The site's bloggers promote petitions started by members, posting related news, so that the campaigns seem dynamic. They also send members e-mails tailored to their interests and geographic region.

"A lot of nonprofits will throw up a donation page and then just walk away. That doesn't work," says Germany, a former director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet at George Washington University. "They need to take people step by step and cultivate their interest. It takes time, personal attention, and communicating through multiple channels."

FROM PETITIONS TO CAMPAIGNS

A petition by itself, no matter how many signatures it has, isn't always a game changer. Critics of online petitions often question the veracity of signatures. One county official in North Carolina publicly dismissed a Change.org petition, saying that he didn't care what people outside the area thought about cuts to a pre-

school program. Others have complained that Change.org petitions directed at city governments are awash in signatures from people out of state or even out of country.

Change.org says it checks that each electronic signature is connected to an e-mail address and it closely monitors the site for suspicious activity, and it is working on limiting petition signers by geographic area. But its chief answer to critics is that the petitions are a foundation for other strategies. The people behind the signatures can be mobilized.

Recently, more than 6,000 people signed an online petition asking the San Francisco Giants to become the first professional sports team to record a video for the "It Gets Better" project, to offer hope to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teens. Change.org editors suggested that Sean Chapin, 35, the petition writer, ask San Francisco mayoral candidates to sign the petition and talk about the

issue, to generate media coverage. They also made suggestions when Chapin posted a plea to the Giants on YouTube. In less than a month, the Giants agreed to make a video. Subsequent victories have been won from other pro sports teams.

Chapin, who had previous experience on gay rights advocacy, said that he has a network, "but nothing like Change.org. I saw

how much time and care they took in wording the messages and reaching the intended audience," he says.

Benjamin Joffe-Walt, a Change.org human rights editor, says that when issues get attention, it becomes harder for the decision makers to ignore them. Change.org e-mails and calls journalists, buys advertising on Facebook and Google, and makes sure petitions are worded for search engine optimization. People might not sign a petition and a journalist might not write a story, but "we want people to be asking questions," he says. "We want people to be talking about it."

Such digital strategies can be more effective for some campaigns than physical protests, says Jillian York, who specializes in digital activism issues at the Electronic Frontier Foundation in San Francisco. Most corporations, she says, care about being "named and shamed," something that can be done effectively online.

Change.org's future plans include growing in local and global ways. Engineers are working on ways for members to receive highly personalized e-mails about what campaigns are happening nearby, down to the school district level. The startup also wants to hire about a dozen people to develop activism overseas.

Joffe-Walt says that Change.org aims to be the YouTube of social activism. Just as YouTube made it so easy for people to upload videos that it attracted amateurs, Change.org seeks to make taking action on a cause as simple as possible. "It's not enough to reach out to the so-called change makers," Joffe-Walt says. "They already have extensive resources. We're interested in reaching out to people who don't have resources."

These days, the women in South Africa who are fighting corrective rape aren't using the Change.org platform that much. They're fundraising, networking, and setting up meetings with government officials on their own. And that, Joffe-Walt says, is Change.org's ultimate achievement. ■

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