How to promote your petition

by Laura S. Quinn and Kyle Hendri Andrei at [Idealware](#)

Petitions and pledges provide ways to effect change by letting people add their names to a particular cause to show the amount of support for it. They can also help your organization build a list of people interested in its causes. So how do you implement these measures?

Looking to win friends and influence people? When used as part of a larger strategy, online petitions or pledges can be useful for both. They allow people to virtually sign their names to a statement, usually a web-based form, to show their support. As the creator of the petition, you can see who has signed—and in many cases, you can also their contact information.

The electronic delivery of petitions—for instance, ways for people to email their congressperson—is a form of advocacy, and delivery methods are another topic entirely. This article looks only at the online petitions and pledges themselves. The two are similar, and often use the same tools, but they're used for different purposes. People sign petitions under the agreement that their names will be submitted to a legislator or other elected official. Pledges are less direct, and usually function as statements of affinity. For example, people might sign a pledge to stop drinking bottled water, but sign a petition to ask their state senator to support a law banning bottled water.

If they have strong support, both pledges and petitions can circulate beyond your own circle of influence as supporters forward them to their own friends. This can make them a useful way to build a list of people interested in your cause. Send a comprehensive follow-up to inform signers about the progress you've made, and to ask them to take further steps, and you may even convert some of those signers into activists or donors. But it's worth noting that pledges or petitions should be designed to effect change in the world, not just to build your lists; otherwise, you're essentially tricking people with false pretenses. It's best to follow a petition by giving signers an opportunity to subscribe to your email list. This provides a way for them to receive updates about the cause and for you to be sure they're interested in other things you might be doing.

For petitions to be effective, they must have a substantial number of signers whose

opinions matter to those you are trying to influence. Presenting public officials with a large list of their constituents who agree with your cause can be a powerful statement—especially if you do it in person, which can provide tangible results for your constituents, and possibly media coverage, as well.

A number of online tools allow you to create petitions and collect signatures at no cost, but then charge for certain services, such as promoting the petition on the vendor's homepage, or granting access to the full list of signatures. For organizations creating one-off or infrequent petitions, these tools provide a simple and easy-to-setup solution, but only basic petition functionality. Use such sites with care. Make you're able to export data about your supporters from the website, check that the costs are explained up front, and ensure that the site does not retain the right to email the people who sign your petition, as this is seen as spam.

Options include:

Change.Org (www.change.org)
This popular, simple petition tool allows you to create a petition for free, but charges a fee for exporting or downloading the final list. It does have a sizeable, active community, which makes it an attractive option for more reach.

The Petition Site (www.thepetitionsite.com)
One of the oldest online petition tools, this site run by Care2 offers free basic features, similar to Change.org, but charges fees to promote the petition or download the names.

Causes (causes.com)
Mostly known as a fundraising tool, this site provides some basic petition and pledging abilities that let people stand up and be counted. Because it integrates with Facebook, Causes is easy for Facebook users to pass on—a useful feature for those with active audiences on the social networking site.