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SPECIAL REPORT

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Advocacy Group's Online Savvy Nets More Than Donations

By Grant Williams

When MoveOn.org, an online advocacy group, sent a short e-mail message to its supporters last month urging them to make an online contribution to the international-relief group Oxfam America, more than 6,900 people responded with donations totaling more than \$500,000. The money accounted for nearly two-thirds of all dollars the relief group has received so far for Iraq.

The Oxfam appeal marks the latest in a string of milestones for the five-year-old MoveOn, showcasing its ability to use the Internet to encourage large-scale civic action. Best known today for its recent efforts to mobilize opponents of war in Iraq, MoveOn has attracted 1.3 million people to join its e-mail list and be "online activists" in the United States—and another 750,000 abroad—in support of causes that domestically include influencing policies on energy, environment, campaign-finance, and economic and tax matters.

With just four paid staff members and an annual operating budget of \$330,000, MoveOn uses e-mail messages written in straightforward prose—and forwarded by recipients to friends and relatives—combined with an easy-to-navigate Web site to encourage citizens to sign online petitions, write letters to newspaper editors, make phone calls to elected officials, donate money, and weigh in on online forums to help the group figure out what issues to tackle next.

'Online Success Story'

While many people vehemently disagree with MoveOn's viewpoints, the group's approach is widely admired. "They are the online success story that we all want to be," says Mark Rovner, senior vice president at Craver, Mathews, Smith & Company, a fund-raising consulting business in Arlington, Va.

A few months ago, MoveOn asked members to contribute a total of \$27,000 to help pay for an antiwar advertisement that the group planned to run in *The New York Times*. Supporters immediately flooded the organization with nearly \$400,000 in gifts. Those and other donations enabled MoveOn to expand its antiwar advertising and public-relations campaign into a more than \$1.3-million effort that has included television and radio spots, billboards, and print ads in more than 100 newspapers, promoting its theme: "Inspections Work/War Won't."

United Nations Petition

MoveOn's appeals do far more than attract donations. When the group asked supporters to sign an "emergency petition" to be handed to the United Nations Security Council during its debate about Iraq, more than 550,000 people from dozens of countries signed an online version in less than two days. In the end, the petition collected 1,030,775 names.

And when MoveOn worked with other peace activists to promote a Global Candlelight Vigil for Peace last month, organizers say 6,700 events were held.

Spreading the Word

MoveOn.org was created in 1998 in Berkeley, Calif.—as a “Censure and Move On” campaign to drum up opposition to the impeachment of President Clinton—by two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, a husband-and-wife team whose software company created the Flying Toaster screen savers.

The couple initially sent e-mail messages to 100 friends asking them to help. Soon, their messages were forwarded and eventually reached more than 500,000 people, generating a wave of e-mail messages and phone calls to members of Congress.

Gratified by the response, MoveOn.org kept its name and has since tackled a variety of new issues, claiming at least partial credit for a variety of triumphs—including campaign-finance legislation that passed Congress and a recent Senate vote to slash the size of tax cuts sought by President Bush.

The group even created a separate political action committee, MoveOn PAC, that collected and contributed \$2.4-million in 2000 to 30 House and Senate candidates and is expected to be a force in next year’s campaigns.

Keep It Simple

Most of its funds come from individuals, but MoveOn has also received financial support for its charitable work from the Ben & Jerry’s Foundation, the Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund, the Tides Foundation, and others.

Many fund raisers and organizations have heralded the group’s online approach. Many credit the organization’s leaders with being smart enough to know how to keep things simple.

“MoveOn was started by people who come from the high-tech sector and are therefore not dazzled by the technology,” says Mr. Rovner of Craver, Mathews, Smith & Company. “MoveOn’s Web site is very accessible. It has almost no graphics. It’s all about the messages. It’s a brilliantly low-tech use of high technology.”

MoveOn officials say keeping online communications simple requires careful attention. Peter Schurman, the executive director, says he and his colleagues work hard to keep messages short and clear and to make sure every Web link sent out functions just right.

“If something doesn’t click smoothly, we just won’t ask our members to do it,” says Mr. Schurman.

When the organization prepares an electronic communication, he says, it adheres to a “mantra of one thought per e-mail.”

“We will not take an issue and tell people, Here are the eight ways this issue is moving on Capitol Hill right now and here are eight actions you can take on it,” Mr. Schurman says. “We’ll say, Here’s the most important one thing you can do, and then at the bottom of the e-mail we’ll provide links to more information if you want to really research it. We don’t want to drown someone in data.”

MoveOn’s communications are usually signed by one official or the six people who run the organization, using first names only. “We write in a personal voice, as real people and not as a stodgy organization,” says Mr. Schurman.

Online petitions are designed by MoveOn so that a person can read them and sign on in between two to five minutes.

Word of Mouth

MoveOn says much of its rapid growth is due to its ability to get supporters to help spread its message. “This movement is based solely on word of mouth,” the organization tells people when they sign up to receive e-mail updates. The organization also sends new members a letter designed to be forwarded to friends.

“Just copy and paste the text into your own e-mail, then personalize the message,” MoveOn writes. “Your own words are always best.”

Mr. Schurman says he learned valuable lessons about what works and what doesn't from his experience as founder of Generation Net, an online advocacy organization aimed at young people that merged with MoveOn.org two years ago.

“Some online groups ask too much initially, when it's important to ease someone along,” he says.

He adds, “The traditional giving theory—get the gift, repeat the gift, upgrade the gift—parallels what we do. We give someone an initial action to take, and then over time we give them more information, then more opportunities to take different action. Over time those actions are upgraded in their impact and power.”

People who first sign a simple MoveOn petition could wind up being encouraged by the group to take more complicated steps, such as contacting a news organization to protest its portrayal of antiwar advocates as not being supportive of U.S. troops.

MoveOn activists could also be asked to do something that takes them away from their computers, such as handing out fliers to neighbors or meeting with a member of Congress—“offline” actions that MoveOn is increasingly promoting.

A Big ‘Disconnect’

MoveOn attributes much of its success to two trends that intersected at its birth: a widening gulf between public opinion and public policy, as seen in the disapproval by many Americans of the impeachment of President Clinton, and the increasing use of the Internet by “everyday people.”

When war with Iraq began to loom last fall, the big “disconnect” between the public and government reappeared, says Mr. Schurman, as many Americans opposed unilateral military action by the U.S. government.

“Large numbers of Americans felt there was something going drastically wrong, and MoveOn provided a vehicle for them to express that,” he says.

MoveOn has tried to position itself as a “mainstream” organization, says Mr. Schurman. “There are many groups that take a more strident and polemic tone, which we strive to avoid,” he says. “For example, we don't refer to President Bush as the ‘shrub.’ We refer to him as President Bush.”

The approach has helped attract a massive following, with people in every state, as well as other countries, signed up to receive e-mail messages from the group.

“Our members are very normal, mainstream people: soccer moms, plumbers, teachers, grandparents, veterans,” says Mr. Schurman.

MoveOn uses its online forum on its Web site to help it identify issues its supporters care most about. In addition to looking for places where public opinion seems to be at odds

with government action, the organization looks for “populist issues, ones that have real, broad resonance, and are easily understood,” says Mr. Schurman, while avoiding “really wonky issues that are hard to understand, even if they are strong on their merits.”

“There are a lot of great causes out there,” he adds. “MoveOn typically won’t engage on an issue until it’s close to a tipping point where engaging a large number of our members can really make the decisive difference.”

For example, when the Senate recently decided whether to allow oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, MoveOn alerted members and some 2,000 people quickly called the offices of key senators to oppose the drilling. A ban on drilling passed by a vote of 52-48, and the group takes partial credit for the outcome.

Mr. Schurman says that MoveOn is committed to building a “lasting, sustainable organization” that will evolve along with the issues of the day.

“We still have an awfully long way to go,” says Mr. Schurman. “But my core personal belief is that the way to solve pretty much every problem we face is by getting enough people involved in the process.”

MoveOn.Org

Purpose: To serve as a “catalyst for a new kind of grass-roots involvement, supporting busy but concerned citizens in finding their political voice” through online advocacy efforts. Focus on topics that deal with peace, energy, environment, campaign-finance, and economic and tax matters.

Finances: Total income of \$868,876 from October 1 through December 31, 2002.

Sources of funds: Individuals and foundations.

Key officials: Wes Boyd, president; Joan Blades, treasurer; Peter Schurman, executive director; Eli Pariser, international campaigns director.

Web site: <http://www.MoveOn.org>