

Activating and recruiting volunteers in one night

Introduction

“Use mass meetings as a technology to put people to work in teams and immediately. Constantly redesign your technique to get more out of your meetings. Ensuring that your meetings can be replicated is key to scaling up for your revolution.”

Rules for Revolutionaries: How Big Organizing Can Change Everything, Becky Bond and Zack Exley

Have you ever had campaign plans that depend on activating many volunteers, but with little time to recruit, train, and support them? Would you like to transform passive supporters on your email list into active volunteers who organize impactful actions? The “barnstorming method” from Bernie Sanders’ campaign offers an inspiring example of how to make this happen.

Based on much trial and error, the organizing team behind Bernie Sanders' campaign designed barnstorming evenings that recruited tens of thousands of new volunteers. These volunteers then formed teams to organize similar events, creating a snowball effect that propelled Sanders toward becoming a near-presidential candidate.

Each barnstorming event lasts around 90 minutes and has one goal: to organize people in the shortest possible time to lead or participate in specific actions. Every part of these events was carefully scrutinized and continuously improved. The measure of success was not the number of attendees, but the number of people who signed up afterward to lead or support an action.

Stroomversnellers translated the barnstorming evening design to make it adaptable for various types of campaigns. At the end of this handout, you’ll find an overview of some key points of barnstorming and its potential suitability for your campaign.



The invitation

Write your promotional texts to be compelling and activating. The goal of the evening is to get people who are already inspired to take action to start working in teams where they can make a meaningful contribution. This will not be a debate, lecture, or informational session. Be clear about that, but also keep the threshold low. Announcing an interesting facilitator can naturally help bring in more people; for example, Naomi Klein supported the barnstorms in the U.S.

Opzet Barnstorm-programma

Zoals gezegd, barnstorms volgen een vaste script die deelnemers verschillende ding leert én laat ervaren:

1. Introduction

Welcome the people and explain the agenda for the evening, giving a rough time indication for each part.

2. The warm-up

Get people excited. For example, tell a humorous anecdote and pump up the crowd with something like: "Who here is planning to win this campaign?!"

3. Icebreaker

In small groups (e.g., with the person sitting next to them), have people share why they are there. Keep it short—two to three sentences per person is sufficient.

4. Get to know the audience

Ask people to raise their hands if they've never participated in a (political) campaign. Then call up two of these people to the front or to the microphone to explain why they decided to get involved. Focus on youth, people of color, and/or women to indirectly highlight that underrepresented groups hold a central place in your campaign.



5. Campaign update

Share what is currently happening in the campaign, what's going well, and what can improve. Provide context on why you need volunteers to carry out specific actions at this moment. Make it clear that these volunteers are absolutely essential. Avoid taking questions from the audience, as this could waste time on minor issues. Instead, pre-prepare answers to frequently asked questions. As the facilitator, you can ask and answer rhetorical questions yourself or do this in a duo format.

6. Discuss relevant actions

To align participants on the importance of a specific action that is impactful right now, prepare a short role-play. For example, how to convince people through a phone call, gather signatures on the street, or conduct door-to-door conversations. Keep it simple and point out that more information is available. If you plan to use multiple actions, focus on the most important one.

7. Find action leaders

Then ask the difficult question: "Who here thinks they can lead this action and will commit to making it happen?" This could involve organizing a phone banking night at home or leading a flyer team in a neighborhood. Have these future action leaders raise their hands and then stand up. Applaud them from the whole room. Then, take these leaders aside to a corner of the room where they can sign up using prepared forms that record the details of the action (date, time, location). Keep the energy high in the rest of the room. For example, ask the audience, "Who is ready to attend an event if one is near you?" And ask some individuals, "What motivates you to act, and why are you excited?"

8. Action leaders call to the stage

Call the upcoming action leaders to the front and ask them to announce their action. In addition to sharing the action's details (time and location), have them briefly explain why they are committed to leading it.



9. Choice moment

Ask everyone in the room to choose which action they want to attend and join the respective action leader in the room to sign up as a team member.

10. Sign-up

Action leaders then give sign-up forms to their team. The central organization takes photos of these forms for mailing lists and other events. The action leader keeps the original sign-up forms to contact their team members.

11. Reinforce the urgency

End with a reminder that excites people about the work they are about to do, which will contribute to winning the campaign.

12. Group moment

Close with a collective moment, such as taking a group photo.

The registration form

The registration form handed out at the barnstorming evenings is thoughtfully designed and as easy to fill out as possible. Action leaders can check which day of the week, time, and approximate date the first action will take place. Additionally, the form is easy to digitize so that you can list the action on your website, and everyone who signs up is added to your database.



Strengths of barnstorming

- The strong focus on one goal: There is little time spent on persuasion or content details. Once the decision is made about which actions should be taken, everything is focused on finding as many people as possible to participate in those actions.
- Efficient use of time: The 90 minutes that a barnstorm event lasts makes it accessible to many people and requires less energy from the organizing team.
- Building on what we know about successful organizing: A sense of a shared story, a shared strategy, a very clear structure, measurable actions, and widespread personal connections are all key elements of the process.
- It enables action leaders to identify themselves on the spot: Those who are willing (literally) to step up and take responsibility for getting things done. This also gives them recognition for the contribution they are about to make.
- It creates a norm and an expectation: If you show up, you are expected to do something. Even if you don't take the lead, you will still make a (minimum) contribution to an action.
- Everyone leaves with very concrete information about an upcoming action.
- Everyone has interacted with at least two other people who want to be part of the campaign. This can foster a sense of community, connection to something larger, and a sense of mutual responsibility.
- The design and script ensure it can be repeated in different locations with different people leading (staff or volunteers), creating similar experiences and results.



Considerations for Whether the Barnstorming Method Is Right for Your Campaign

- In an election context, it was an advantage that senior staff members from the Sanders campaign traveled to the town. People sometimes signed up just to meet and hear that one person. For issue-based campaigns, the question is which facilitator can also serve as a figurehead.
- One of the efficiency improvements in barnstorming is not taking questions from the audience but having the facilitator provide prepared answers to the most common questions. Participants will need to get used to this. We are accustomed to answering questions from the floor as part of every event.
- There are specific types of actions where barnstorming works well: easy-to-execute actions that volunteer teams can repeat themselves, actions that can be performed in many different locations and at various times. These actions need to be standardized.
- You need a long-term campaign strategy that supports and can rely on a high level of distributed and decentralized work.
- The action type should fall within the comfort zone of many people: handing out flyers is something most people would probably try, while blocking roads might be too far for many.
- A large group of people is needed to make the actions impactful. Therefore, the subject of your campaign needs to be appealing and/or have “mobilization potential.” Barnstorming is especially effective for addressing a large social issue or for election campaigns.
- You need a core team that is willing to travel from city to city for an extended period to lead the initial meetings. It may take some time before local groups start organizing their own barnstorms.



Finally

The barnstorming method breaks many of the sacred rules of campaign events. There are differences in the Dutch electoral context and in comparison with 'issue-based' campaigns that need to be taken into account. The format of the event imposes a fixed structure on the room, which might generate more resistance in the Netherlands. At the same time, barnstorms welcome anyone who wants to contribute, without extensive screening or high expectations. This could potentially be a tool to spark the larger mobilization needed by left-wing movements and social movements.

"In an exciting, growing movement, most people will probably be totally new to politics. Don't weight these enthusiastic leaders down with the old baggage of past movements. If we're not winning with the leaders we have now, why not embrace more and newer leaders?"

Rules for Revolutionaries: How Big Organizing Can Change Everything, Becky Bond and Zack Exley

This guide is based on the article Barnstorming in Australia from Anita Tang and the book Rules for Revolutionaries.



We are Stroomversnellers

Stroomversnellers is a trainers' collective of experienced campaigners, organizers, facilitators, and trainers. We have all been active in environmental organisations, grassroots initiatives, trade unions, or anti-racism movements. Through trial and error, we have learned how to run effective campaigns, build organisations, and create social change.

We are constantly learning and love sharing our knowledge and experiences with others. The world does not move in the right direction on its own, far from it. Only with many well-prepared people can a different, more just society come closer. That is why we support a wide range of groups fighting for social and ecological justice, offering advice, strategy and brainstorming sessions, (action) trainings, and workshops. Together, we grow, strengthen our impact, and work toward a better world!

Toolbox for movements

This guide is part of the "Toolbox for movements." The toolbox includes a collection of short digital guides covering the basics of strategy, movement building, activism, and organizing. It provides a solid foundation for beginning activists, while also offering fresh insights for experienced changemakers. [Here](#) you will find all other guides published so far.

Book a training

Curious to know how to put this into practice? We offer custom trainings and workshops. Want to know more? Check out our [training offers](#).

We love learning too

If you have ideas for improving this guide or adding your own experiences, we would love to hear from you!

www.stroomversnellers.org

info@stroomversnellers.org

IG: [@stroomversnellers](#)

Bluesky: [@stroomversnellers.bsky.social](#)

Linkedin: [Stroomversnellers Trainers](#)

STROOMVERSNELLERS 

