

An effective petition for a winning campaign

A guide in 11 steps

At Stroomversnellers, we have a love-hate relationship with petitions. Too often, they are poorly structured, serve as a surrogate for a real campaign that causes change, fail to put enough pressure on decision-makers, or exist mainly to give the signer a sense of satisfaction. Because does anything truly change because of that petition? Or does it just provide a false sense of being able to take action and contribute to change? Do you recognize this dilemma? At the same time, petitions can make an important contribution to winning a campaign, or even make the difference and be the direct catalyst for a campaign's success. But how do you achieve that? In this guide, we outline our guidelines in 11 steps.

Step 1. A plan, target and audience

A plan

A petition starts like this. But in order to win with a petition, you first need a plan so that you know how to effectively use your petition. Think about what you want to achieve and what kind of responses you want to receive from whom. What steps do you want to take together with (part of) the signatories after the petition to address the injustice you are highlighting? Petitions without a well-thought-out plan often don't deliver enough, usually because they're based on wishful thinking. So, first and foremost, make it as clear as possible to yourself what collective problem you're addressing, what you specifically want to achieve with the petition, and who you want to target.

Who is your target?

In your plan, you should write down what change looks like to you. You describe how this petition will be the first step in putting pressure on a specific person, company, or institution. A petition called "World Peace Now!" sounds sympathetic, but it has no clear target. Therefore, no one will feel pressured. People sense that and will likely not sign the petition. A petition aimed at the responsible councilor who wants to cut down trees in your street, however, has a clear starting point and target. You can also make it clear what the urgency is. The councilor will make a decision next week, so you need to sign this week.



Who is your audience?

In a petition, you explain why you're right. But you'll only be proven right if you can build enough pressure. This is why a winning petition is part of a broader campaign. A petition is a way to further engage signatories in that campaign. Set a goal and choose a specific target audience. You want to show with your signatures that many important people agree with you. 1,000 signatures from Amsterdam residents against the cutting down of a tree in Appelscha won't impress the councilor. 100 signatures from local residents will, because they are voters. Of course, when there are enough signatures and who the relevant signatories (could) be will differ depending on the campaign.

Step 2. An Anger-Hope-Action story

What you need is a text that makes it crystal clear to both the signatory and the recipient of the petition what the problem is and what the recipient can do about it. This is called an Anger-Hope Action story. It should be a text that evokes emotion, is easy to understand, and isn't too long. And it should ask the target audience, without beating around the bush, to sign the petition, ideally somewhere near the beginning. And yes, that's easier said than done. So take a good look at other petition texts for inspiration. It takes quite a bit of effort to create that text. Once it's signed, you can no longer change it with good conscience. So it's worth sitting down and really taking your time on this, and testing your message, for example, with a small group of people outside your organization. What works well, and what do you need to adjust? What might you not have thought of yourself?

Step 3. Fix a powerful image

"Show don't tell": make sure to include a powerful, matching image. You want to bring attention to your petition on social media, and the best way to do that is by using a video, photo, or illustration that does the same thing as the text. Both the text and the image should evoke emotion and clearly convey the urgency. Transform anger into hope by offering action and representing the demand as powerfully as possible.



Step 4. Chose the best platform

You want to make it as easy as possible for people to sign your petition online. Every extra click people have to make will cause at least 50% of your audience to drop off. There are plenty of online petition platforms you can use, each with its own pros and cons (see the list of options at the bottom of this document), but there are also good reasons to host the petition on your own website.

Is there a clear 'sign here' button that you can integrate everywhere on your website and social media channels? Can you display a counter that shows signatories how many signatures have already been collected? Is it easy for signatories to share the petition on social media and WhatsApp? What information do you ask from signatories? Is there an automatic thank-you email that invites signatories to do more for your campaign? Do you have a GDPR statement that allows you to use those email addresses later in the year for a donation request?

Step 5. Get your first signatures

Do you know that trick street musicians use? They place some coins in their hat, and people are much more likely to drop in a coin themselves. This works the same way with petitions. Before you send the petition to your public, first send it around to your warm allies—the people who are definitely going to sign. Even better, give them a call and ask. Then have them help by reaching out to their own networks. Once you're ready to go public, send a message to as many group chats as you're in, with a well-designed message and a direct link to the petition. Be very clear about what you're asking from people. With group chats on WhatsApp, Signal, or Telegram, you can reach a lot of people in a very direct way.



Step 6. Organise your data

Do you have a newsletter or membership list with email addresses? This is gold for starting petitions (and organizing campaigns). Your petition text should easily convert into an email with a compelling story about why people need to sign right now. Tip: make it an email that is solely focused on your petition and nothing else. Any other question or message you include in your email will decrease the number of signatories. Important: your email list will yield more signatories than social media posts! The warmer and more direct the contacts, the more likely people are to take action.

If you don't have a large email list or newsletter yet, make this the reason to start one, and ensure that everyone who signs your petition is asked to subscribe to your newsletter in the thank-you email. The petition will help you build a contact list and generate sign-ups for your newsletter. Then, make it easy for both you and the signatories by providing an automatic sign-up link or button that lets them do this in a flash. Congratulations! You've just started collecting contact details from people who, like you, are concerned about your campaign issue. Also, ask for their phone number right away, and you can organize them even more effectively. The chances of people helping with your campaign goals in the future will also increase.

Step 7. Use social media

Your petition is online. The first signatures should already be collected through your initial email or phone campaign within your direct network. Now it's time to reach a wider audience. We hope you've already been building your social media reach. Sharing your petition on your own channels should help you get more signatories. The advantage is that if those people leave their email addresses, you can now reach them more effectively without relying on the algorithms of big tech companies.

If you want to boost your petition on social media, tailor your message to those algorithms. So, use a good image and share your post at a time when many people are online (sometimes, your statistics will help with this).



But there's more you can do:

- Ask each signatory to share your petition with an easily shareable message on their own social media accounts.
- Use a #hashtag that's already being used by people who are likely to want to sign as well.
- Ask people or organizations with a large social media following to share your petition call.

Step 8. Try reaching mainstream media

Sometimes, it's as simple as sending a press release to relevant media about your petition, especially once it has already gathered its first signatures. Local issues often get attention from neighborhood newspapers eager for easy news. For national media, you'll need to put in a little more effort—perhaps with a small protest action, a letter to the editor featuring some notable people pledging to sign, or an exceptionally high number of signatories. Or, of course, by getting your "opponent" to respond to your petition.

- **Form**

Make sure it looks good because this makes it easier for journalists to take a photo and get it into the newspaper. You could create a giant envelope, bring in hand trucks full of printed petitions, or present your petition in a quirky way, such as in the shape of a log if it's about deforestation.

- **Status**

Not all petitions are the same. A petition can have a political or legal status. For example, a petition addressed to the Dutch Parliament that meets all the requirements and has at least 40,000 valid signatories automatically places the topic on the Parliament's agenda. But don't be misled by that. A petition with "only" 10,000 signatures and that doesn't meet the formal requirements can still send a strong political signal. And a petition delivered on the doorstep of a ministry, rather than the Parliament, will still get the message across.



- **Audience**

Have you organized an audience for your petition handover? Have you invited all the signatories to join you? Or are you doing the handover at a place with an already large crowd? Remember to invite journalists in advance. All that extra attention will put even more pressure on your opponent. It's also the perfect opportunity to ask your opponent for a public response to the petition. Maybe they'll even make the first commitment.

Step 9. (Also) go offline

If you really want to collect a lot of signatures, go offline. Go old-school with your petition list—knock on doors, stand at the market, or attend gatherings where you expect many like-minded people. On October 26, 1985, the Dutch Peace Movement collected 3.7 million signatures against nuclear weapons. Far more than any online petition collects today. And this was done by people going door to door asking for signatures.

Another advantage of going door-to-door and/or personally engaging with people, for example, in a shopping street, is that you're building a support base. You get to know this support base better, and face-to-face, you learn how people react to your message and communication style.

Step 10. Take care of a good follow-up of your petition

You want to be able to ask everyone who signs the petition if you can keep them updated on your campaign or organization. And you want to gradually encourage them to do more for your campaign than just sign the petition. Think ahead about how this "engagement ladder" will look.

- Start with a thank-you email where you ask signatories to share the petition call further and whether you can keep them updated on your campaign. If they say yes, you'll want to ask for at least an email address, but perhaps also a postal address and phone number. A small portion of your signatories can be activated to take on a role in your group by emailing them. A phone call with a concrete request for help is invaluable, but that can't happen without a phone number. Think ahead about how and when you'll ask for this.



- One or more weeks later, send them an update email where you tell them how the campaign is going. Is there news about the number of signatories? Or a response from your opponent? In this email, ask them for just a bit more, like a donation or participation in a small online action.
- Finally, send an invitation for the petition handover or an event that will help you involve new people in your campaign.

Not everyone will always respond to those emails, and some may not respond at all. And that's okay. The people who are truly excited about your campaign will read your emails. And when you ask them for help at the right moment, they will be willing to contribute to your campaign. Sometimes that means offering the little money and time they have. Other times, it's about fully immersing themselves in the campaign and becoming part of your team.

If you expect a lot of signatories and responses, make sure to automate your follow-up as much as possible. You don't want to be managing a member list on Excel or manually sending emails with everyone in the bcc if you have over 500 people supporting your campaign. With online platforms like Action Network, Nationbuilder, or the more commercial Mailchimp, you can automate sending thank-you emails, as well as sending a second or third email. Plus, you'll automatically be building a database.

Wil je helemaal professioneel gaan? Met dit soort platforms, maar ook met de statistieken uit je social media platforms en bijvoorbeeld google analytics op je website kun je veel data verzamelen over hoeveel mensen je bericht zien, er op klikken en waar in de paar stappen die ze moeten maken er mensen afhaken. Op basis daarvan kun jij je website en e-mails zo inrichten dat zoveel mogelijk mensen wel ondertekenen. Leerzaam, -en ja, dat levert wel privacy-vragen op. Voor meer, zie onze handleiding over 'People Power data voor je campagne'.



Step 11. Hand over the petition

Have you collected enough signatures to make an impact? It's time for the handover. And remember, you only get one chance to do this, so do it right. When presenting the petition, your goal is to apply pressure on a politician, company, or institution.

There are a few key factors to keep in mind during the handover:

- **Timing**

If you want to influence a decision, you should hand over the signatures at a moment when that decision has not yet been finalized. For example, just before the party faction meeting of the local party you want to pressure. This is when they will take a stance that will influence their voting behavior in the council meeting later on.

- **Target**

You want to hand over the signatures to the person you're addressing with the petition. For example, the alderman or minister. It's usually possible to contact them and negotiate how, where, and when this will happen. Sometimes, your opponent may avoid you. In that case, it could be an option to find that person at a public event where they are speaking. Also, think carefully about how you want to come across to the recipient. Angry? Reasonable?

Encouraging? Ideally, all of the above, at the same time. You can do this via a PM, by tagging them, or, even better, in person.

- **Keep Sharing Your Call to Action**

Continue sharing your petition, but use different wording and images to avoid repetition and keep drawing attention. Create a schedule with varying content in advance.

- **Want a Big Reach?**

Buy ads on Facebook, Instagram, and Google. On these platforms, this is practically the only way to get the algorithm working in your favor.

- **Share Your Message in as Many Relevant Facebook Groups as Possible**



Overview of Possible Petition Platforms

1. **A Petition on Your Own Website.** There are various WordPress plugins that allow you to create a petition platform on your own website. This is highly recommended because it gives you maximum control over the petition's appearance, the email addresses it generates, and you can direct people to the place where they can learn more about your organization.
2. **Action Network.** With the free version of Action Network, you can create petitions on your own website, and you immediately get your own database, sign-up forms, and a way to automatically send thank-you emails. Visit [Action Network](#) for more information.
3. **Petities.nl.** This is the most well-known petition platform in the Netherlands. Creating a petition is super easy, but you'll need to do everything else yourself, and the format is predetermined. You cannot send emails to signatories, and your petition will appear alongside others, which you may not agree with. Visit [Petities.nl](#) for more details.
4. **De Goede Zaak.** This progressive ally regularly starts new petitions either independently or with partners. In such cases, they ask tens of thousands of their supporters if they want to support the petition. They also back petitions by setting up entire campaigns around them. In short, working with De Goede Zaak can give your petition a significant boost. Additionally, you can create your own petition on De Goede Zaak's platform. The downside is that you won't be able to collect email addresses from supporters, as those belong to De Goede Zaak. For more information, visit [De Goede Zaak](#).
5. **Avaaz or Change.org** (and other international petition platforms). These platforms are as easy to use as Petities.nl, and sometimes they can boost your petition globally and make it really big. However, they have the same downsides as other platforms. You have little control over the format, and you don't own the email addresses generated by the petition.



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 

