

List

News

Anti-Gun Nonprofit Builds E-Mail List Through Viral Activism

By Kristen Bremner

Though the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence United With the Million Mom March expanded its e-mail list fivefold in the past five months through viral e-mail campaigns, it hopes to increase it several more times in its continuing fight for stricter U.S. gun laws and against gun violence.

The organization teamed with application service provider Convio last fall to increase its e-mail list of 30,000 names and to boost efficiency in managing the file, said Heather Schatz, director of Internet advocacy at the Brady Campaign, New York.

"This is the first time that the organization has actively pursued e-mail list building," she said.

The group was founded in 1974 as the National Council to Control Handguns. It went through a few name changes before being renamed the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence in 2001 in honor of James Brady, the former press secretary to President Reagan who was shot during the assassination attempt on Reagan.

Later in 2001, the group merged with Million Mom March, which also advocated stricter gun laws.

The decision to use Convio to build the e-mail list was based on the activist nature of the group's members, Schatz said.

"We knew that people who are really interested in sensible gun laws in America today are very active through telling friends and contacting Congress," she said. "Convio allowed us to encourage our e-mail list members to forward e-mails and to personalize them."

The initial effort to build the group's list centered on the NRA Blacklist, a National Rifle Association list of anti-gun people such as Hollywood celebrities, said Vinay Bhagat, founder and chief strategy officer of Convio, Austin, TX.

"The Brady Campaign/Million Mom March created a campaign to have people sign a petition and join the blacklist as a statement of honor as

opposed to a negative," Bhagat said. "They encouraged people to sign it and then forward it to their friends."

The group sent an initial e-mail to its list of 30,000 addresses and also got some publicity. Of the people visiting the Web site, 40 percent signed the petition and then received an e-mail asking them to forward it to 10 friends.

Another e-mail campaign focused on a bill in Congress that would have given immunity to gun manufacturers against being sued for gun-related crimes. The Brady Campaign opposed the bill and urged members to do so. But then amendments were added to the bill, one of which the organization supported.

Without a strong e-mail file, it would have been impossible for the Brady Campaign to act quickly enough to mobilize its members, Schatz said.

"We wanted the senators to vote 'no' on the immunity bill, but then when these amendments came up we wanted them to vote 'yes' on renewing the assault weapons ban," she said. "So, all of a sudden you have complex and what seem to be polar opposite messages within 48 hours of each other. E-mail allows the campaign to communicate all of the complexities of our legislative process."

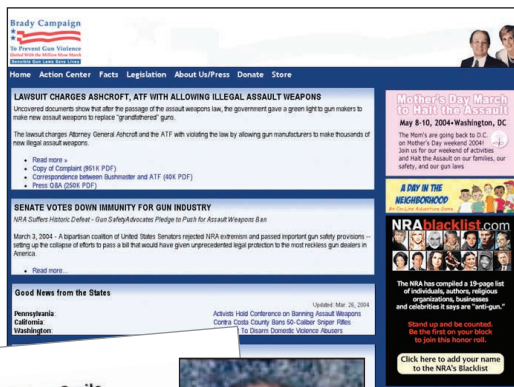
Brady Campaign members e-mailed their representatives and passed along the e-mails. The bill failed.

"They had about 115,000 people send legislative messages to people in Congress on the two legislative issues," Bhagat said. "When 115,000 of 163,000 people respond, that's more than two-thirds of the list. That's a 70 percent response rate. Normally, a national campaign gets a 5 percent response rate."

This indicates how viral e-mail is an excellent way to build a qualified list, he added. Still, the Brady Campaign is not resting on its laurels with the more than 163,000 names it has built on its e-mail file.

"The assault weapons ban expires in September, so now we have to go back and fight for it," Schatz said. "That's our next goal, and it is going to require that we have even larger numbers of people to participate."

The organization needs to determine what sort of numbers really would have an effect on Washington. Though she did not state it as a concrete goal, Schatz said, "The word 'million' has always been good to us." ■



James Brady

The organization has added more than 130,000 names to its e-mail list since October.



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