



Overview

In July 2008, T. Boone Pickens launched “The Pickens Plan,” a campaign for American energy independence. From the start, the Pickens Plan internet strategy was central to the development, education, organization and activation of a supporter base – the “New Energy Army” – to put pressure on the Presidential candidates and Congress to take action on an energy plan within the first 100 days of the new Administration.

1.5 million supporters were recruited and activated within a 9 month period and are still taking action in support of energy independence. As of May 2009, over 40% of the New Energy Army has taken action at least once on behalf of the Pickens Plan, and over 1.1 million emails have been sent to elected and administration officials. The Pickens Plan has played a galvanizing role in building genuine, bi-partisan momentum for key components of an energy plan to reduce America dependence on foreign oil.

Building a Social *Action* Network

When the Pickens Plan was launched in July 2008, T. Boone Pickens firmly believed from the beginning that he would need an army of supporters who could eventually help him take his fight for energy independence to Washington, DC. Our feeling was that having a strong website and social network was going to be key to building that supporter base.

In addition to capturing the information of direct visitors to the website, the campaign launch also consisted of a large-scale paid media, earned media and online ad campaign to raise awareness and drive supporters to the Pickens Plan website.

The next step of building online support for the Pickens Plan was to engage users in a social **action** network. The concept of an online social networking service is now very well established. It refers to any web platform that provides users with a means of establishing connections to other community users based on common interests. Such services (e.g. Facebook, MySpace) provide users with communications tools (email, chat, status updates, photos, video) and modes of interaction (games, quizzes, polls) in order to encourage ever-deepening activity.

A social **action** network deploys many of the very same web technologies, but it possesses an organizing principle – a defining purpose, or a goal, such as a political campaign or an effort to win a legislative battle. Users join a social **action** network in order to help shape a debate, identify and mobilize with other like-minded activists, and promote an idea, issue or political agenda. Social **action** networks combine top-down management and editorial guidance with online grassroots activism and bottom-up community building.

You can think of it this way: If joining a standard social network is like walking into a bar, then joining a social **action** network is like walking into a campaign office.

The Pickens Plan social **action** network – Push.PickensPlan.com – was built using the Ning.com social networking platform. The campaign also developed a presence on major social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn to identify supporters from existing social networks and either engage them on those platforms or drive them to the custom Push social **action** network for a higher level of engagement.

Growing the Social Action Network

When the Pickens Plan was launched in July 2008, most social media tools were largely untested for organizing a comprehensive, large-scale political or public affairs campaign. The Obama campaign had begun to pave the way during their primary campaign by using social media to identify and organize volunteers, and much of their victory is credited to their use of Internet tools. But during the summer of 2008, even the Obama campaign was still in the process of figuring out how to harness the power of social media to their advantage.

Within a month of the launch, the Pickens Plan social action network at Push.PickensPlan.com had over 100,000 members and was growing fast. Due to the impact of heavy earned and paid media, the social network was attracting people who were really passionate about energy independence and who believed Boone was the only person having an honest conversation about America's dependence on foreign countries for oil. And those people who took the extra step of joining the social action network after visiting PickensPlan.com weren't just looking to join an email list – they wanted to play a role in making the Pickens Plan a reality and they were ready to take action immediately.

What was also interesting is that a lot of the people joining the Push community had never belonged to a social network before. While they were learning about the issues, they were also learning how to interact using social media tools. And they were hungry for guidance from the Pickens Plan campaign team and wanted to know how they could take action in a meaningful way.

Also unique to the custom Push.PickensPlan.com social action network is the make-up of the membership which is diverse in terms of age, background and political beliefs – the community has a fairly balanced number of supporters from both the right and left. But what members of the community have in common is their belief in energy independence, and because that's what the Pickens Plan social network is focused on, they are able to put aside their differences and organize around the cause.

Organizing the Social Action Network

When the Push.PickensPlan.com social action network was launched, only a couple staff members were dedicated to moderating conversations. It quickly became clear that in order to get the most out of the community, a much more organized structure was going to be necessary to harness the energy of the community, drive activity and deliver results.

10 Regional Leaders were hired by the Pickens Plan to organize the social action network geographically. The number of Regional Leaders was actually reduced to 7 a couple months later – despite the fact that the social network was growing and becoming more active, we were actually able to become more efficient in the use of social media tools which allowed us to reduce the number of paid staffers while continuing to increase what the Army was producing. Moreover, we were able to manage a national-scale volunteer organization of 200,000+ people with just 7 Regional Leaders – all of whom are part-time employees who work remotely. If a political organization similar to this had been built without the use of social media tools, it would have required dozens of paid staffers positioned on-the-ground around the country to organize and activate a volunteer force. But social media tools have made it possible for the Pickens Plan campaign to direct a large volunteer network with significantly fewer paid staffers than what would be required for a traditional political or public affairs campaign.

Regional Leaders are responsible for communicating directly with activists and supporters via the social network at Push.PickensPlan.com. They help supporters get involved and take action – both online and offline. The activities they facilitate include letters to the editor and opinion editorials; personal contact with elected officials; local efforts to sign up new members for the New Energy Army; and organizing local meetings for supporters to discuss ways they can take action to push the Pickens Plan. While Regional Leaders are giving supporters guidance, they are also facilitating a “bottom-up” information flow that allows the campaign to receive constant feedback from supporters. Additionally, the openness of the Push network makes supporters feel like they are an integral part of the campaign – they have ownership in the effort, which leads to increased levels of engagement. The success of the Pickens Plan online campaign is based in large part upon the tools, access and extensive autonomy granted to supporters and volunteer leaders across the organization.

Campaign leadership and Regional Leaders use a variety of tools for communicating with the Army including a video blog called BooneCam, a written blog called Daily Pickens, emails sent to the full Army of 1.5 million several times per week, live events including webcasts and online chat forums, and frequently posted messages on other social networks including Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn. Regional Leaders also interact directly with members of the Army in their region through message boards, group discussions and blogs on Push.PickensPlan.com. The care and feeding of the Army is constant and flexible enough to accommodate both top down and bottom up information flow.

After the Regional Leaders were put in place, the next step was to organize the Army by Congressional District. At this point the Pickens Plan and its social action network had been in place for 5 months, and Election Day had come and gone, so the Army was ready to shift its focus to the pending legislative battle on Capitol Hill. Within 24 hours of announcing the Congressional District program and asking for volunteer District Leaders to step forward, over 1000 people had expressed interest in the job which involved identifying new supporters in their district, submitting letters to the editor and op-eds to their local newspapers, and hosting meetings in-district with members of the Army and elected officials.

The Pickens Plan District Leaders program now has volunteer leaders in over 90% of Congressional Districts. The District Leaders have played a crucial role in driving both online and offline activity around key legislative milestones in coordination with their District Groups, all of which have a homepage at Push.PickensPlan.com. The activities of the District Groups, as well as individual members of the Army, are tracked through leaderboards on the Pickens Plan website. Activists are assigned points based on various actions they have taken to support the Pickens Plan. The efforts of the social action network

have included supporting passage of the federal stimulus package which contained several key components of the Pickens Plan, and ongoing efforts to pass energy legislation to support natural gas and wind energy as alternatives to reduce American dependence on foreign oil.

Activating the Social Action Network

The Pickens Plan website hosts multiple outlets for members of the Army to take action. Congressional contact forms are utilized on the site whenever the campaign wants to generate large quantities of emails to Members of Congress and the Obama Administration. All 1.5 million members of the New Energy Army are driven to the contact forms through blast emails. To supplement the quantitative efforts of the large-scale Congressional outreach programs, qualitative and targeted action is coordinated by the District Groups through Regional Leaders and District Leaders to quickly identify and activate supporters to place op-eds, intercept elected officials, and generate local earned media in targeted districts.

A few highlights of what the New Energy Army has accomplished since July 2008 include:

- Over **40% of the New Energy Army has taken action** at least once on behalf of the Pickens Plan.
- To date, **1,113,358 emails have been sent** to elected officials and Administration officials on behalf of the Pickens Plan.
- **170,985 signed** the Pickens Plan Petition over a 4 week period prior to Election Day.
- **2/3rds of the District Groups have had personal contact with their Member of Congress or staff since the beginning of 2009.**

In April 2009, a “Virtual March on Washington” was conducted to generate a significant level of activity targeting Congressional offices in support of key energy legislation. In addition to activating the New Energy Army of 1.5 million, the Pickens Plan partnered with 40 other organizations who communicated with an additional 3 million supporters about the Pickens Plan and the Virtual March. Activities targeting Members of Congress were also generated via Twitter (supporters on that platform sent “Tweets” to their Members of Congress in support of the Pickens Plan) and Facebook (Pickens Plan supporters on Facebook wrote on the “walls” of their elected officials in support of the Virtual March). In addition to generating hundreds of thousands of messages and emails to Members of Congress and key Obama Administration officials, the District Groups continued taking action through the Easter Recess in their districts through letters to the editor and visits to their Member of Congress in-district.

Summary

Over the last couple years, social media has transformed the way an average citizen can have an impact on public policy, and social networks have become a powerful tool for membership-driven organizations. But an email list or social network is meaningless if it doesn’t deliver results. When organized correctly, a social network can give “power to the people” and generate real support for a cause in a large scale way with far fewer resources than what has been traditionally required for a political or public affairs campaign. The Pickens Plan has benefited significantly from the use of social media to activate its supporter base, and the results are shown in the success that the campaign has had in getting key legislation passed in support of the cause.