

Drawing Supporters Up the Ladder of Engagement

What is the Ladder of Engagement?

A “ladder of engagement” is a defined set of levels of action that nonprofits can use to strategically enhance supporter involvement and transition your emails and communications from slight bumps in to explosions of action. Different groups – from small nonprofits to the [Obama campaign](#) – use these types of increasing asks to walk supporters up the figurative ladder to attend events, serve as volunteers or donate, ultimately becoming leaders for their cause.

Every organization will have different levels of supporter engagement, but most will have a pattern similar to this proverbial ladder, with a majority of people toward the lower levels of “Inactives” and “Listeners.”

- **Inactives:** are on the email list, or have looked at your social media pages, but have not engaged yet.
- **Listeners:** follow on social media channels but rarely engage.
- **Spreaders:** like and share content from social media channels or emails.
- **Evangelists:** engage beyond the digital world by attending events.
- **Instigators:** join in the work as a champion or donor for the issue.

Should I use the Ladder of Engagement?

Absolutely! Ladders of engagement ensure your digital work ultimately supports your larger goals. Instead of shooting off an email or a Facebook post without much strategy, using a ladder can help bring more and more supporters into the action. You can develop specific ladders for when you gain a large influx of supporters, such as through a successful event, social media campaign, report release or email list-acquisition, such as through Care2.

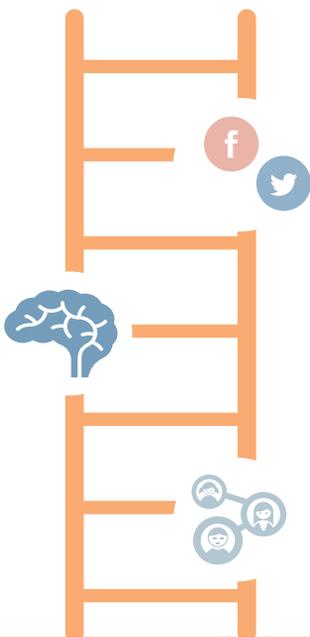


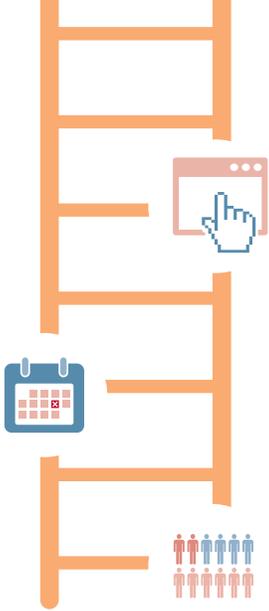
It’s easy to build a ladder after one of these approaches because you know exactly why and how these supporters became involved with your organization. However, it’s always important to know where your supporters are in relation to supporting your organization, what asks you’re giving them, and where you want them to end up. It’s also important to make sure your supporters don’t fall off the ladder once they reach the top rung. Develop a plan to keep them engaged even after they did what you asked them to do.

Defining your Ladder

Before you can start moving people up your ladder, you have to determine the right levels of engagement. Consider what you ultimately need supporters to do. Is it to donate? Write a letter to the editor of their local paper? Organize their friends and neighbors to join in the work? This ultimate step on your ladder should align with your overall communication strategy. (For more on how to build out a S.M.A.R.T. and strategic communication plan, check out [Spitfire’s Smart Chart](#).) Once you’ve established the highest rung, work backwards to determine the steps to get a supporter up to the top.

1. **Welcome:** Become a Facebook fan or follow us on Twitter. This ask is simple and easy. People won’t feel like you’re asking too much, but it will make them feel just a bit closer to your work and learn more about what you do.
2. **Learn:** Visit our website to watch a video and learn about our other programs. This ask should be a way to begin drawing in Inactives. They’ve heard from you already and have shown that they’re willing to participate. Give them the opportunity to learn more about you.
3. **Send/share:** Share a piece of content explaining the importance of Medicaid expansion in your state with your friends. Now that they’ve demonstrated support, turn listeners into spreaders.





Having them share content about why Medicaid expansion is good for your state will both engage these supporters and encourage their friends to get involved to further expand your base. For example, Voices for Utah Children created this graphic to explain why Medicaid is necessary for kids' health:

- 4. Online action:** Sign a petition supporting the legislation or send an email to legislative staff. This is a further step up on your engagement ladder, but still won't take supporters more than a few minutes to complete. You can ask them to complete a few asks like this before moving up to the next step – to take action offline.
- 5. Attend:** Join a house party or host your own to introduce others to the cause. Supporters who continuously engage could be ready to become evangelists, and move beyond online or remote actions to actually joining in person. Not everyone will have the time or ability to attend every action, but give supporters a few opportunities to work around their schedules.
- 6. Organize:** Attend a lobby day to encourage your legislator to support the bill. Such an ask may intimidate some supporters, but by moving them up the ladder with you, they're more likely to feel comfortable and bought-in to your organization by this point. You've transformed a name on a list into an actively engaging volunteer – an Instigator!

It's important to realize that not all engagement ladders will look like this. If your goal is a fundraising push, turning people into donors could work very differently. It all depends on your end goal and the time you have to work supporters up the ladder.

Deepening Engagement

Once you've established the rungs on your ladder, here are a few tips to remember as you move people up them.



Timing matters.

Figure out spacing for the asks so supporters hear from you regularly, but not so much they feel overwhelmed. Whether you're dealing with many new supporters all at once or a slower stream over time, make sure to reach out within the first week of their initial contact with your organization to welcome them in. For those who don't immediately engage, contact them again in another couple of weeks to give them a second chance to participate. When you move up to bigger asks, spread them out a bit so supporters don't constantly feel pressured. Make sure to take advantage of timing hooks. If the president just mentioned your issue in a major speech or there's big news related to your cause, send out an email to highlight the critical moment and make an ask.



Messengers can make all the difference.

Especially the first time you're reaching out to someone, they may not really know who your organization is. Try to give them a familiar name to respond to. If you've gotten an email list through a partner organization, ask if you can include that group in your first outreach, or get one of your more prominent spokespeople to author the first email. People will be more likely to respond to someone they already know.

Be grateful.

Reinforce your supporters' actions by thanking them and demonstrating the impact of their work. Highlight big wins or milestones, but also be sure to send periodic "thank yous" to make sure your supporters know that you value their work. Especially when you've hit a victory, capitalize on the positive moment to inspire additional actions.



Listen and assess.

Keep checking your levels of engagement over time, and pay attention to what type of content and actions are motivating your audiences. You can use analytics through your email provider to see who is opening your emails, clicking on them and ultimately following through with your asks. If you seem to be losing people at a certain rung of the ladder, try adding an intermediate ask to make people more comfortable moving up to that level.