

Color Of Change delivers nearly 80,000 petitions in front of Pasadena Courthouse calling on Judge Elaine Lu to free Jasmine Richards.

Strengthening Black America's Political Voice Through Online Campaigns & Fundraising

By Sheena Brown

COLOR OF CHANGE KNOWS THAT BY BRINGING PEOPLE together around targeted and strategic actions, we can create real and lasting change in the fight for racial and social justice.

Our work targets the symptoms and manifestations of racial injustice, and seeks to shift public opinion and policy, both through broad-based educational campaigns with our 501(c)(3) and campaigns targeting politicians and policy makers with our 501(c)(4).

Our strategies include digital organizing and public education efforts; a robust social media presence designed to expand both the impact and reach of our work; and broad-based educational campaigns. By ensuring that the voices of those most impacted by racial and social injustice are front and center, Color Of Change is building greater political power for Black people that can be sustained for generations to come.

Color Of Change was created in 2005 by a single email in a historic moment of crisis for the United States. Co-founders James Rucker and Van Jones launched the organization in the

aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when entire Black communities were abandoned by local, state and federal officials. People in crisis were treated as criminals instead of victims. Our co-founders realized that there was no national organization that was equipped to quickly and creatively lift up the voices of Black people in moments of crisis, particularly by using online platforms. Post-Katrina, Color Of Change was a major catalyst in raising the national consciousness about the life-and-death consequences of the invisibility of Black people and the silencing of our voices.

Our work is unified around a common purpose: elevating and amplifying the voices of Black people and our allies so that those in power understand that we will hold them accountable on policies and actions that impact our families, communities and lives.

Member Engagement

Today, Color Of Change has over one million members, making it the largest online civil rights organization in the nation. Color Of Change mobilizes the power of its members and allies—through

social media, online activism, and grassroots organizing—to demand accountability and equity from political, corporate and other decision-makers.

There is a particular context to how and why our membership has grown over the years. We see spikes in membership during “flashpoint” occurrences of racial injustice. Be it when Trayvon Martin’s killer went free, when Mike Brown was gunned down in the streets of Ferguson, or the horrifying massacre of nine Black individuals at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, our members come to us to learn what they can do to make a difference.

Year	Percentage of member growth from prior year	Number of actions taken
2013	+3.8%	1,432,758
2014	+37%	1,939,497
2015	+12.5%	2,406,018

Color Of Change has developed a continuum of strategies and tactics to carry out its work at the intersection of civic engagement, economic justice, racial justice, and criminal justice including:

- **Rapid Response Engagement.** Using our online capacities to conduct rapid response campaigning, Color Of Change identifies and amplifies moments for galvanizing online and offline action. We connect multiple moments to create persuasive narratives and leverage specific truth-telling moments to shift critical momentum.
- **Social Pressure Engagement.** For example, in the aftermath of Walter Scott’s murder, a donation drive was started on Indiegogo to raise money for Officer Michael Slager. Five fundraising pages had been created and initially, Indiegogo refused to take them down. Outraged, thousands of Color Of Change members flooded the Indiegogo Facebook page with comments demanding that they remove these disturbing and hurtful fundraisers from their platform, which enabled Officer Slager to profit from killing an unarmed Black man. Our members were victorious when Indiegogo quickly took down the fundraising pages.
- **People-Focused Media.** Because of our online organizing efforts and proximity to the media echo chamber, we are uniquely situated to push stories, issues and moments to the forefront of the media conversation. Color Of Change aims to lead with storytelling by developing people-focused media, spotlighting authentic, individual stories of Black folks—often Black women—across the nation to make our issues and our members impossible to ignore.

- **OrganizeFor.org.** Our distributive organizing platform is employed as a tactic to grow membership and spark greater participation by enabling local partners to turn their members into campaign leaders, and equipping Color Of Change members to recruit and mobilize their networks. The impact of this platform may include driving a neglected issue into the public discourse and keeping it there, or forcing key players to meet with organizers and answer questions they would otherwise ignore.
- **Represent.ColorOfChange.org.** The hub for all of our media accountability work, this site challenges media producers in entertainment, advertising and the news to take responsibility for their dehumanizing portrayals of the Black community.
- **Moments to Movements.** We connect multiple moments to create compelling and persuasive narratives, deepening our members’ understanding of issues, political dynamics, and the ability of everyday people to make long-term impact through sustained activism.

We employ a ladder of engagement to leverage the full capacity of our members (see Figure 1 on next page).

Online Fundraising Success

Our online fundraising efforts are led and carried out through our campaigns team. The goals and strategies for our online fundraising are an important part of our email campaign work. This member-focused strategy is based on analytics that tell a different, yet important, story about how members engage and what inspires their giving. Our development department is gaining the necessary capacity needed to weave in more traditional cultivation and stewardship programs for our members. This dual approach both provides members with a framing for what action is needed, and aims to increase their longer term support of the organization—deepening their connection from supporting one-off campaigns to supporting long-term organizational sustainability.

Similarly, our development team is set up to piggy-back on the engagement momentum that our members experience. We want our campaigns team to remain focused on building and running hard-hitting, successful campaigns. Therefore, the development team brings that deeper layer of strategy and infrastructure to support member engagement through a more focused and intentional cultivation strategy. The development team can do the important work of building out what we call a “ladder of giving.” Many of the asks coming through our campaigns are targeted at the \$3 to \$15 level, allowing our development team to review donor engagement, learn what’s important to donors, and build a deeper connection that often motivates increases in donation amounts.

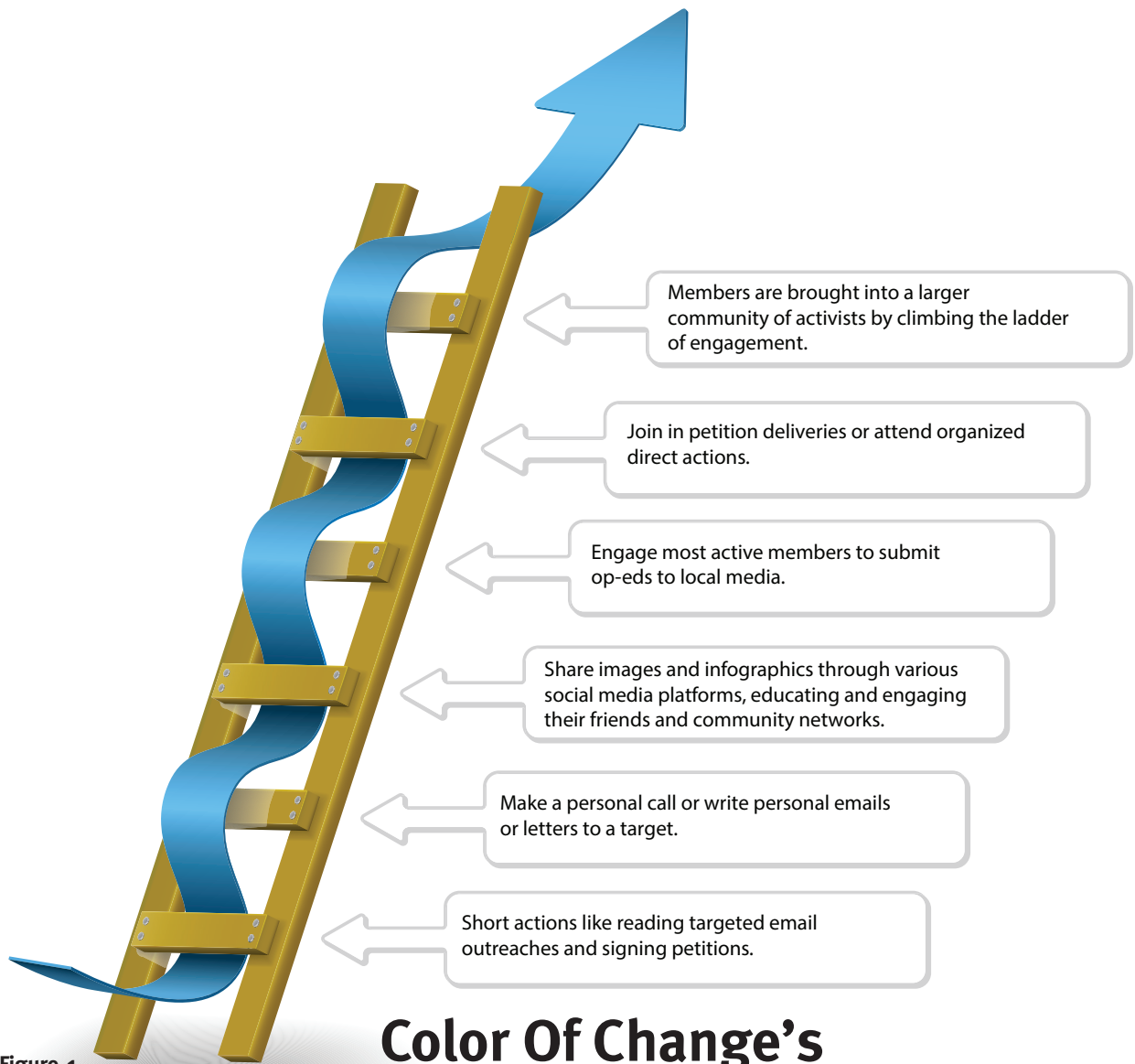


Figure 1

Color Of Change's Ladder of Engagement

In many instances, a donor's support grows beyond contributing to a few one-off campaigns each year to providing deeper core support that allows the work of the organization to flourish. That said, we are working on launching an events program to support our ability for more direct interactions between staff and members so that we can learn from each other. We are looking to hold two events this fall in NYC and the Bay Area, focusing on members who show consistent engagement through taking action or making donations.

In recent years, Color Of Change has exceeded our online fundraising goals. Nonetheless, we are certain that these achievements came as a result of many prior years of learning about our members, experimenting to find the right message, and recalibrating our strategies to engage folks more deeply. We still have a lot to learn, and could be doing a lot more if we had additional staff capacity. But we feel confident that we are on the right track to getting there.

Change in Online (Member) Fundraising Revenue 2013 - 2015	
2013	-41%
2014	+224%
2015	+54%

Team Fundraising Strategy

One of our core operating strengths as an organization is that we have clearly defined SMART (Specific, Measurable, Aspirational, Realistic and Time-bound) goals across the organization. The executive, development and campaigns team all have specific goals attributed to fundraising. The campaigns team uses data and analytics on member actions to inform their goals and strategies. They focus on those important low-dollar donations that come in as a result of a hard-hitting campaign. Our campaigns team is broken down into smaller issue-focused teams (criminal justice, economic justice, media accountability, etc.). Each issue team is responsible for reaching a certain fundraising target, and each member of the campaigns team has individual goals. Each set of goals is assessed on a monthly basis, and appropriate adjustments are made as needed to ensure individuals and teams stay on track to meet these goals.

The executive and development teams are focused on bringing in major donations and grants from individuals and institutional partners. Similarly, their goals are clearly defined, and they assess progress on a monthly basis.

Lessons Learned

Connect to hearts & minds.

Our members make donations when they understand our strategy and can clearly see how their donation is going to have a collective impact on an important issue. We have learned over the years that we need to educate our members not just on the issue we are trying to address, but also on how their donations help us to be successful.

A powerful example of this was a campaign we led around the tragic death of Sandra Bland in 2015. Essentially, we were learning from folks close to the Waller County, Texas criminal justice system that her death pointed to a deep-seated problem of corruption and racial bias that Attorney General Loretta Lynch is responsible for addressing. This type of “good ol’ boys” culture exists in counties across the country and has long served as a way to ensure Black families and victims of state and interpersonal violence are denied justice.

We were able to build a good relationship with Sandra’s family, and they supported our desire to invite our members to donate to our campaign. More than 3,000 Color Of Change members re-

sponded to our campaign¹ and donated approximately \$73,000 in three days to fund a journalistic investigation into the policies and practices of Waller County officials. Part of the investigation’s findings was published in the Huffington Post². Our members received a clear message from us not only about the atrocities surrounding Sandra Bland’s death, but how we could take collective action to create tangible change in Waller County.

The right messenger matters.

Sometimes, the issues we run campaigns on are not highly visible in the press, which can make it more challenging to engage our members. For instance, it was difficult in the beginning to get people to see what was at stake and stand with us on the issue of net neutrality. During a critical time in our campaign, we needed our members engaged and taking action. We partnered with #BlackLivesMatter Co-founder Alicia Garza to help raise the visibility of the FBI’s surveillance of Black activists on the internet.³ Alicia’s high profile as an activist and public figure helped raise awareness of the issue and articulate the level of severity of this issue as a human rights violation. Our members got it and responded by contributing over \$42,416 in just a few days to support our work on this important issue.

Pitch clear asks.

Our most successful fundraising asks come when we make very specific asks of our members. Our members look to us to help them manage their political lives. When we send an email out asking them to take action, it is important that we clearly lay out the crisis or opportunity and we are clear about how the action we are asking them to take connects to a solution. When we do this well their engagement soars. For example, in response to Glenn Beck spreading dangerous lies about Black people on his Fox News show, we let our members know that his contract was up in a month. In response, 285,000 members took action, putting pressure on Fox News to fire him, which they did.

Major Donor Strategy

As we continue to learn and improve our online fundraising strategies, we are working hard to build out our major donor program. Right now, we are defining major donors as individuals who make at least a one-time donation of \$1,000 within a calendar year.

¹ Visit bit.ly/1CSmOIQ to view the campaign page, screenshot on next page.

² See huff.to/29Wm5um to read the article.

³ Read more about the campaign at bit.ly/1LcvXwf, screenshot on next page.

The Donor Pyramid For a healthy individual donor base

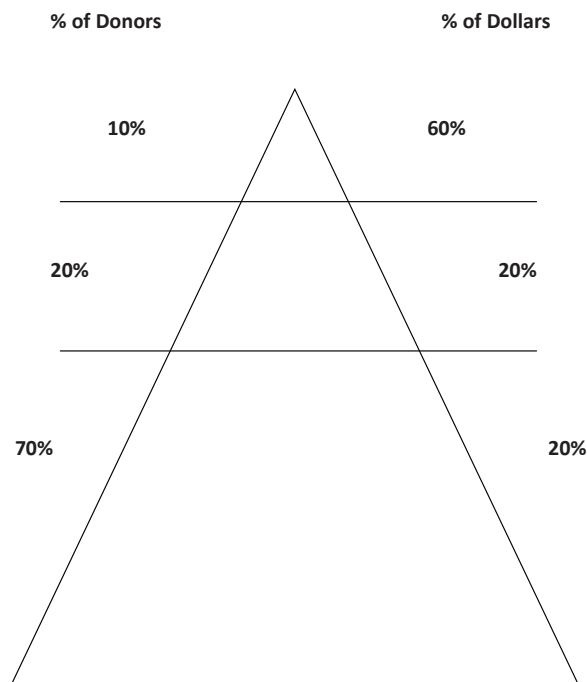


Figure 2: What “shape” is your donor base?

A base with no mid-level donors might be an hourglass. A base with no high-level donors might be a trapezoid. A base with no small-dollar donors might be a truncated triangle. Determine your “shape” and figure out next steps to get it closer to the pyramid above.

Landing on the right definition of a major donor for our organization required thoughtful considerations. Some organizations have robust donor programs that represent depth at many levels of a donor pyramid (see Figure 2 above). The base of our pyramid was plentiful with those who give between \$50 to \$250 per year. The top tier of our pyramid represented a handful of individual donors who were making contributions over \$10,000.

In prior years, Color Of Change has lacked the staff capacity to dive more deeply into a major donor campaign as it takes significant focus and intention. Today, we are setting out to do just that. We aim to learn more about those \$100 donors and understand if they have the capacity to make substantially larger donations one day. We expect that over time we will be able to bring more donors into a higher tier of giving. For now, the executive, development and campaigns teams are employing an all hands on deck approach to our overall fundraising efforts.

It is an exciting time to be in a building out phase for the development team. Our members are engaged with what is happen-

Color Of Change’s #JusticeForSandy and Net Neutrality fundraising campaign pages.

ing in the Black community, particularly as the world watches us address the issues around community policing practices. As we continue to help our members effectively respond to injustice with action, we are developing opportunities to encourage their ongoing financial support. Color Of Change has a unique ability to see opportunities others may have missed and make the strategic moves we need to make, until justice is real.

We have a rich and deep grassroots donor environment that holds tons of potential. Every day our campaigns team is improving upon their fundraising skills as they learn more about what sparks our members’ responsiveness. When I think about what success looks like in two to three years, Color Of Change has a robust events program in three to four cities; our major donor program represents 35 percent of our individual giving program; and, our base of grassroots donors make consistent annual contributions that represent 40-60 percent of our individual giving program. Wish us luck! ■

Sheena Brown serves as the development director at Color Of Change, leading the organization’s efforts to strengthen its relationships with supporters and donors to secure the financial sustainability of the organization.