

Text Messaging to Save Trees (*Argentina*)

Issue: Protecting Argentina's Forests

Every hour, trees covering an area the size of forty soccer fields are cleared from the old growth forests of Argentina, home to indigenous tribes and numerous endangered species. According to Greenpeace, 300,000 hectares (3,000 square kilometers or 1,150 square miles) of native forest are cleared in Argentina each year. To confront this rapid deforestation, Greenpeace Argentina used the web, mobile phones, and publicity on television and in newspapers to gather 1.5 million signatures for a petition supporting *La Ley de Bosques*, or the Forest Law.

Response: Mobilizing the Public for Environmental Protection

The Forest Law, Argentina's first federal forest protection act, was passed in 2007. It includes a one-year moratorium on clearing native forests, giving the forest service time to develop appropriate forest management regulations. The law, funded in part by an export tax on genetically engineered soy, also establishes public hearings and environmental impact studies.

Greenpeace was able to effectively advocate for the *Ley de Bosques* by building a large database of supporters. Through a form on the organization's website, individuals were asked to sign a petition supporting the Forest Law, and submit both email addresses and mobile phone numbers. About 300,000 phone numbers were collected from this web form, and an additional 50,000 were collected via other means, such as email or through volunteers stationed on busy streets. This 350,000-number mobile phone list is one of the larger active mobile phone lists used in advocacy today. By the end of the campaign, over 1.5 million people had signed the petition supporting the Forest Law.



Greenpeace used their mobile phone network in several ways. The organization collected about 3,000 signatures for the petition via text messaging. Greenpeace also sent out text messages asking people to call specific legislators to lobby for the law. Text messages were sent out to specific target audiences, so that people would be directed to their legislator. Finally, Greenpeace used the mobile network to send urgent alerts about other actions or news.

Using text messaging for advocacy requires an active list of mobile subscribers who have agreed to receive communications from a campaign. Hernan Pablo Nadal, Greenpeace Argentina's online organizer, describes how Greenpeace expanded its mobile list: "Two years ago, we had 10,000 mobile numbers. By October 2007 with a lot of outreach, we had 45,000 numbers. With the campaign for the Forest Law, we gave signers of the petition the option of giving us their mobile number. As a result, we now have 350,000 mobile activists and 1.5 million people on our list—and a law on the books that protects Argentinean forests."

The Forest Law campaign was not the first time that Greenpeace Argentina successfully used mobile phones for a campaign. In 2005, Greenpeace lobbied for a "Zero Waste" law in

Buenos Aires that mandated that the government reduce urban waste sent to landfills by 50 percent by 2012, and by 100 percent by 2020. The city produces between 4,000 and 5,000 tons of waste each day. Using text messages, Greenpeace encouraged supporters to call their legislators and urge them to pass the bill during critical hearings, and prior to city council votes. Greenpeace also used text message alerts to coordinate lobbying meetings and demonstrations. As a result of this comprehensive approach, the Zero Waste Law was successfully passed.

Outcome: A Rapidly Deployable Cadre of Activists

Greenpeace Argentina has established itself as one of the premier advocacy organizations in the country and region. Alongside the direct-action flair for which Greenpeace is famous, its grassroots organizing, online advocacy, use of social media, and innovative use of mobile technology has enabled it to win remarkable legislative victories in Argentina.

Organizers are clear about what makes mobile messaging effective in an advocacy context: the ability to mobilize large numbers of people wherever they are at a given moment. As demonstrated by its legislative victories, Greenpeace Argentina has been particularly effective at deploying this tactic during strategic times, such as in the lead-up to legislative deliberations. Greenpeace Argentina has also used text messaging to mobilize supporters to attend mass rallies.

Says Nadal, “We mobilized our database of *móvil activistas* even from inside the Congress building several times. City politicians from Buenos Aires are used to being pushed by Greenpeace, but this was a national campaign and representatives in Congress are not used to our pressure. Our constituents made some 300 calls an hour to legislators. That definitely made an impression.”

Challenges: Managing and Maintaining a Growing List

With relatively scant resources, Greenpeace Argentina has long shown that it can still achieve impact. The organization used an in-house technical team to write the software handling bulk text messaging, keeping costs low. Beyond those programming costs, Greenpeace Argentina spent about 1,000 euros¹⁸ per month on text messaging transmission charges, at about 5 euro cents per message. As Nadal notes, “Negotiating the costs with the telecom carriers is imperative now that we have such a large mobile list of 350,000 numbers.”

With so large a list of mobile constituents, list segmentation—or the process of targeting specific constituents based on some characteristic—becomes important. Yet this would require merging mobile contact information with a sophisticated database of constituent information. Because the mobile constituent system that Greenpeace Argentina is using is homegrown, integrating it with their member and supporter database has presented challenges.

Response metrics for text messages are notoriously hard to determine, so it is not clear how many people read a message or forward it to a friend. Greenpeace Argentina reports anecdotal evidence that about 15 to 25 percent of mobile activists report back to the organization that they participated in a particular action. This is a high response rate for a direct marketing effort, and can be explained in part by the strong commitment of the organization’s supporters.

But as Nadal notes, “Mobile marketing for NGOs [non-governmental organizations] is hard and is just starting. There needs to be a greater depth of discussion with the carriers and vendors in many countries about what

¹⁸Greenpeace Argentina uses the euro as its benchmark currency because the organization’s headquarters are based in Europe.

nonprofits need.” In Argentina, as in most other countries, text message marketing is almost entirely focused on commercial uses and often associated with selling content. Greenpeace is now exploring hiring a mobile vendor that is capable of handling the volume of supporters on its mobile list, and is also negotiating directly with Argentinean mobile carriers for more favorable text messaging rates.

Next Steps: Replicating the Greenpeace Argentina Model

The work of Greenpeace Argentina in using mobile phones in advocacy campaigns is closely watched—not just by intermediaries such as MobileActive.org that are monitoring the industry—but also by other advocacy organizations, and, of course, by Greenpeace affiliates in other countries. Several other Greenpeace offices will test the Argentinean method of mobile activism in 2008. Greenpeace Argentina, meanwhile, has set its own goals, including expanding its mobile infrastructure with a more robust platform; integrating its mobile activist list and constituent database for better list segmentation; increasing sending speeds and delivery rates; and generating better reports on actions taken.

Greenpeace Argentina’s text messaging campaign clearly struck a chord with the general population. The tremendous participation rates have not only empowered the organization with a core group of mobile activists, but have also demonstrated the power of mobile phones to serve as an effective tool to influence political change. ■

Live Earth’s Mobile Campaign

Live Earth, a global music event on 7 July 2007, raised awareness about climate change through live concerts in Hamburg, Johannesburg, London, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai, Sydney, and Tokyo. The 24-hour concert was broadcast on television and streamed online to an audience of an estimated two billion people. Live Earth also featured a coordinated four-country text message advocacy campaign encouraging individuals to pledge to take action to solve the climate crisis.

The campaign generated thousands of text message sign-ups and action pledges via text message (exact figures were not released by the campaign). Audience members in the four countries were able to see their mobile pledges projected on giant screens at event venues and on television.

However, with little time to prepare and no engagement prior to the events, the text messaging component was well integrated with the broadcast of the show in only three countries—a critical success factor for a live-event mobile campaign.

Catherine Geanuracos, senior strategist for interactive media for the campaign, notes: “It’s amazing how few people are thinking about how to use a mobile as community organizing tool. One of our successes was a group on Twitter (a mobile and online social network) that had thousands receiving updates on the event and a daily climate change tip, fostering a sense of community via mobile.”