

Is your organisation ready for the European Citizens' Initiative?



From 2012, petitions signed by one million citizens from seven EU Member States will force the European Commission to respond by a Communication addressing the petition's demands and potentially proposing action. This new EU petition scheme, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), has the potential to dramatically reshape the public affairs landscape in Brussels: one million signatures cannot be ignored by EU policymakers. While European institutions used to have the monopoly on initiating policy debates, the European Citizens' Initiative now gives the opportunity for anyone to set the agenda. Although reaching out to one million citizens across Europe can seem a daunting task, it has already been done successfully by some organisations, and the emergence of online networking tools has made it easier to rapidly reach out to the required one million supporters. Is your organisation prepared to deal with the impact of

an ECI? Has it considered launching an ECI itself to change or initiate legislation? This Fleishman-Hillard paper explores the threats and opportunities that the new instrument might represent for your organisation, how the Internet will enable future pan-European petitions to gather grassroots support, and gives predictions of what the first European Citizens' Initiatives might be about.

THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE IS NOT A FANTASY, SOME ORGANISATIONS HAVE MADE IT WORK ALREADY

The European Citizens' Initiative is not a tool reserved for NGOs; corporations can use it too. Below are two examples of successful pan-European petitions, one led by eBay, the other by Greenpeace. When similar petitions are carried out in 2012, they will result in policy actions by the EU institutions.

E-BAY'S PETITION TO STOP UNFAIR TRADE PRACTICES

"We, the undersigned, oppose attempts by certain brand owners and manufacturers to unfairly limit the sale and resale of their products on the internet."

Launched in July 2009, this petition had already reached 750.000 signatures in just a couple of months when it was officially presented at the European Parliament. The petition was made available on the eBay Grassroots Campaigns website, which is managed by the Government Relations Team. This made it easily accessible to the community of eBay users who were willing to support it.

GREENPEACE'S 1 MILLION FOR FACTS NOT CROPS

"We call on you (the President of the European Commission) to put a moratorium on the introduction of GM crops into Europe and set up an independent, ethical, scientific body to research the impact of GM crops and determine regulation."

This petition was carried out in 2010 in cooperation with Avaaz, a website that provides free online campaigning tools to help politically-minded citizens to organise themselves. It reached a million signatures in just seven months. The petition is now aiming for 1.500.000 signatures.

"This is a milestone in the development of European democracy. I warmly encourage the European public to make use of the European Citizens' Initiative to bring matters of their concern to the top of the European agenda."

Jerzy Buzek, President of the European Parliament

"I can assure you that there is a political will to listen to everybody and one million signatures is a voice that we should listen to."

John Dalli, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, when receiving the '1 million for facts not crops' petition

THE POWER OF THE INTERNET FOR MOBILISING GRASSROOTS SUPPORT

In 2006, Greenpeace had already organised a petition to ask for mandatory labelling of animal products based on GMOs. Back then, it took Greenpeace a year and a half to gather a million signatures. Four years later, thanks to the development of free online networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter and Avaaz, the above “1 million for facts not crops” campaign managed to reach its target in half this time. Also, in the midst of the debates in early 2010 on the Commission proposal on the ECI, bloggingportal.eu – an aggregator of blogs that write about EU affairs – ran an experiment to test the potential of

their network for supporting an ECI. It published on its blog a short text, which respected the rules of the ECI, and asked its readers to translate it in the languages they spoke. While the experiment was initially supposed to run for a week, all 23 official EU languages were translated within 20 hours! These examples show that if properly used the Internet provides powerful tools for free that can help any organisation easily and cost effectively mobilise citizens around an issue in record time. As a consequence, it has changed the rules of political campaigning and public affairs alike.

WHAT ARE THE FIRST EUROPEAN CITIZENS’ INITIATIVES LIKELY TO BE?

The Socialists and Democrats Political Group in the European Parliament have already expressed their intention to use the ECI instrument to request new EU legislation on taxing financial speculation. Environmental organisations have also shown their willingness to use the ECI. Surely other NGOs will follow. Other ECIs likely to emerge in the future could concern Internet-related hot policy issues such as net neutrality and piracy.

These are controversial topics that can easily leverage grassroots support amongst the well-networked Internet community. Therefore Internet companies are in an optimal position to use the ECI. Google, Facebook or msn for example, which receive millions of visitors every day, could theoretically post a petition on their homepage and gather the required signatures for an ECI in a matter of days.

Is your organisation ready for the advent of the European Citizens’ Initiative?

1. HAVE YOU THOUGHT OF WHICH ORGANISATIONS IN YOUR POLICY ENVIRONMENT COULD START A EUROPEAN CITIZENS’ INITIATIVE?

The ECI scheme is likely to be used by others to promote proposals that go against your policy goals. Conversely, organisations that share your views could be potential partners for launching an ECI.

2. DO THESE ORGANISATIONS HAVE A STRONGER PRESENCE IN SOCIAL MEDIA THAN YOU?

The Internet will play a key role in the success of future ECIs. Naturally organisations that have already successfully integrated online tools in their advocacy strategy will surpass others in promoting an ECI. Organisations that have a less developed presence in social media will face difficulties in challenging threatening ECIs.

3. HAVE YOU DISCUSSED INTERNALLY THE OPPORTUNITY OF USING THE ECI AS PART OF YOUR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STRATEGY?

The ECI presents an exceptional opportunity to shape up the EU policy agenda (potentially initiating legislative proposals). Therefore, organisations should reflect on the possibility of integrating grassroots campaigns into their public affairs strategies.

4. DOES ONE OF YOUR CRITICAL POLICY ISSUES HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO RESONATE WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC?

An ECI will work if the proposal you want to promote is easy to understand, relates to the daily life of citizens and is emotionally appealing. It can be easier than you think – and cost effective – to broaden up the frame of your policy request.

5. IS YOUR MAIN POLICY ISSUE IN A DEADLOCK DUE TO THE IMPOSSIBILITY FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO ARBITRATE BETWEEN CONFLICTING STAKEHOLDER POSITIONS?

An ECI could help you overcome this deadlock by getting the debate out of Brussels, reframing it and gathering the support of the general public.



WE CAN HELP YOU

The Fleishman-Hillard team of seasoned public affairs and online communication professionals can help you monitor emerging European Citizens’ Initiatives, assess their potential impact, and support you in launching your own ECI. Our Brussels team includes digital strategists able to integrate innovative ways of using the Internet into traditional government relations campaigns. Thanks to our multilingual staff and broad network of offices, we are well placed to assist your organisation in rolling out pan-European grassroots campaigns to support your advocacy goals.

For more information

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