

BUILDING MOVEMENTS



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Brian Gomez is the finance and operations manager at Sunrise Movement. He's passionate about optimizing digital systems for nonprofits and manages centralized and decentralized finances for Sunrise. Previously, Brian was at the Sierra Club and Earth Guardians, where he did similar operational work supporting young people to act on climate change.

He is a graduate of the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, where he currently lives. He was an Obama Foundation CLC fellow in 2019, won first place at Chicago Techweek Hackathon in 2015, and runner-up at the ThinkChicago Hackathon in 2018.



Building Movements

Building grassroots movements has always been about increasing reach. As we progress into the area of the internet, we've seen that reach has become much easier—but it also comes with a set of challenges. What I've also seen in this generation is that reach is not just about promoting an event or campaign but more about the ability to create touchpoints with your base and supporters.

As organizations, we are expected to respond digitally as fast as people can access new information. Today's population—especially younger people—see a message about an environmental report and if their favorite environmental organization hasn't responded within the day, they begin to wonder “what are they doing about this?” Now more than ever, we are seeing rapid updates about our changing world. People need movements to guide them through the chaos.

As much as this creates urgency, one of the big benefits is that it allows movements to tell the story about the world. They are also able to get on-demand feedback and address what their members care about in real time. A strong grassroots movement today is agile, responsive, and employs email, text, and video to keep a strong pulse on the movement.

Activism, especially digital activism, is in vogue today more than it's ever been. One exciting thing about that is that, unlike the armchair activism we saw in the past (where members were engaged once a year when they donated), the ability to harness passion becomes much easier with “slacktivists” or “clicktivists.” When someone posts on, comments on, or likes your page, you are able to see where they stand on a variety of measures and what you need to do to get them to turn their

digital support into a reality. It also can re-engage members who took some time off but are looking for a way back into your movement.

Relative to an in-person event, the advent of digital events could serve as a better and more accessible point of entry. This could be a video call about a topic, a \$1 or \$5 donation, or access to a members only-hub. Steps like this are small but can actively build supporters' fervor by increasing knowledge on the cause, making them feel invested in the movement, and connecting them to other passionate people.

That's the other big challenge right now: community. Once we got supporters out to an event, we knew that they would feel welcomed by our people and be inspired to act. Now we must figure out how people can find community by acting at home. Membership hubs like online learning platforms or discussion boards on websites can all serve these purposes.

Combined, community and digital engagement are powerful. Finding an online community with which you can act together (and possibly have friends in) is one of the strongest drivers of building a movement at this moment.

An example that comes to mind is in 2018 at Sunrise. We employed an online fundraising platform. One of our benefits was the ability to have community-ran forms. As we were building out capacity in 2019 for our 300 chapters or “hubs” around the country, we also realized they needed their own financial systems. By pairing the online fundraising platform with an online payment system, we were able to replicate a structure that allowed local groups to do their own digital fundraising and spending locally. We also used the program as a community and knowledge-building opportunity for hub treasurers. Now, we are also

using the system to support groups through mini grants. Our finance system to date has impacted hubs' ability to have the materials to create powerful actions, bring support to events that need it, and run great in-person trainings about our campaigns.

Currently at Sunrise, one program we are running is Sunrise School. Sunrise School uses the power of video conferencing to build an online school. We have 3-week courses that meet twice a week and focus on a specific part of our movement. We talk about the Green New Deal in one, Movement Building in another, and offer advanced courses on fundraising, storytelling, and organizing during COVID-19. In a week, we have had over 8,000 sign ups and use an online platform to track attendance and diversity. These courses involve group breakouts, discussions, and opportunities for students to invite their friends on the final day to learn more about our campaigns and how to get involved. We've built this quickly and, though we have had issues with managing multiple courses a day and thousands of participants a week, we are excited to be providing our base with an opportunity. We are committed to getting our digitals right in this moment. We knew we had to build quickly and collect feedback about what could improve.

At the end of the day, we want supporters to know that we are with them day-in and day-out and that we are using digital tools to craft creative solutions to address their needs. They also know we are not experts and are learning alongside them. Doing pilot projects and allowing your organization to fail is the key to developing a strong digital strategy for today and tomorrow.

