Small List, Big Impact: Getting Supporter Acquisition Right

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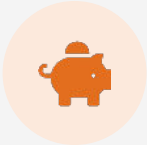
THE SHARED PROBLEM

One pricey channel is carrying most of our growth

Paid social keeps getting pricier

Meta was averaging £2.86 a lead for Freedom for Animals, and The Humane League saw costs climb until scaling efficiently got hard.



Budgets aren't keeping pace

Most fundraising teams are being asked to grow faster with the same, or less, to spend on acquisition.

One channel is a single point of failure

When almost all new supporters come through one platform, every cost rise or algorithm change hits the whole programme.

THREE CHARITIES, THREE STARTING POINTS

What made acquisition actually pay off?

Building from zero
International Council for Animal Welfare (US)

Small team, growing
Freedom for Animals (UK)

Scaling serious spend
The Humane League (US)

Very different budgets and teams. Look out for what they had in common.

Lesson 1: reach people who already care

Starting point

Brand-new organisation, around a $225k operating budget, and no supporter list.

What they did

Went where people were already taking action on their cause, instead of running their own paid petitions.

What happened

Supporters across the US, UK and EU acted like activists from day one, even emailing staff to flag bounced campaign targets.

TAKEAWAY **Start with people who already care. A mission-aligned audience behaves like activists from day one.**

Lesson 2: the journey turns sign-ups into gifts

STARTING POINT

A small UK team with 4,770 contacts, competing with large national charities, and paying £2.86 a lead on Meta.

WHAT THEY DID

Added a second channel reaching people already active on animal welfare, and put every new supporter straight into their advocacy and fundraising journeys.

"We had to do it in a way that wouldn't overwhelm the team." Laura Tomlinson, Co-Director of Fundraising

2X
email list within a year

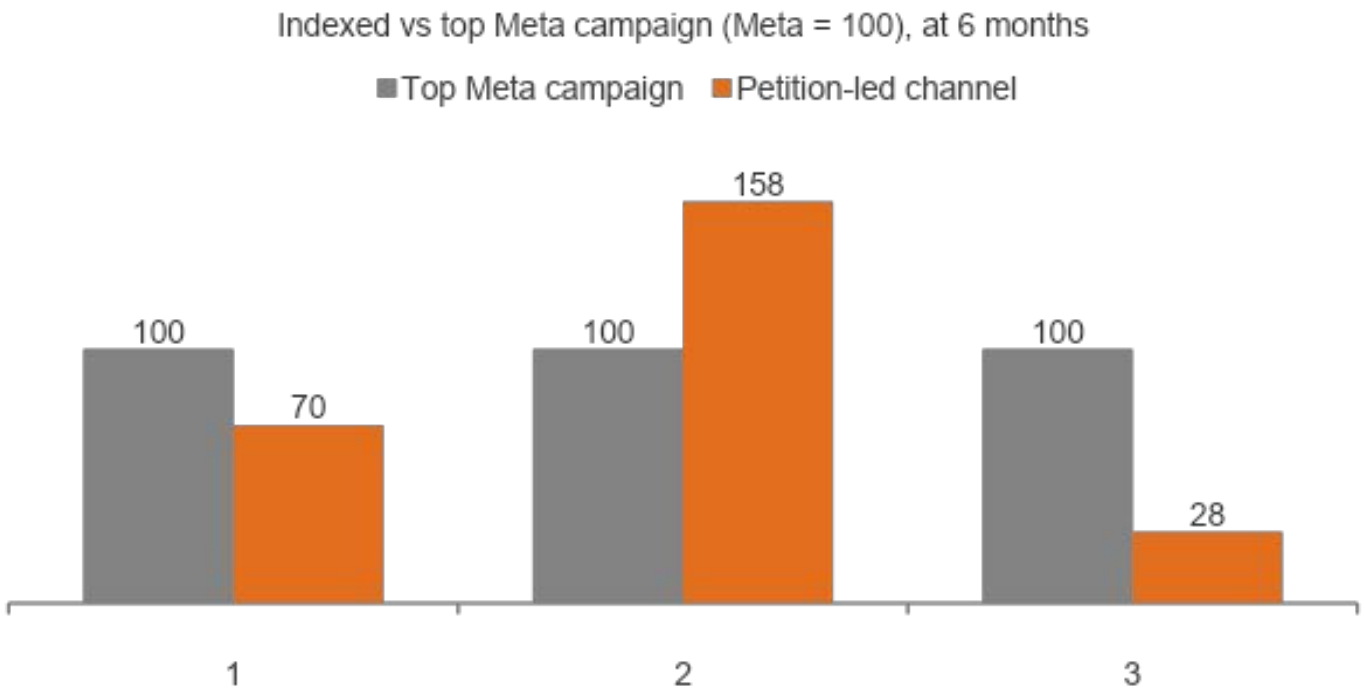
215%
higher donation conversion vs M+R benchmarks

£33
average gift

<24 mo
payback, their fastest-ROI channel

TAKEAWAY **Growing the list is the easy part. Plan the journey that turns new supporters into donors.**

Lesson 3: don't let one channel carry your growth



STARTING POINT

Established international charity, Meta as the main channel, and costs rising.

WHAT THEY DID

Added a petition-led channel alongside Meta, with a campaign on Subway's cage-free pledge, and judged both on engagement six months later.

16,233 new leads · 20,000 signatures delivered

TAKEAWAY **Diversify beyond one channel, and judge every channel on engagement, not cost per lead.**

THE COMMON THREAD

Three lessons, one pattern

1 ICAW

Reach people who already care

New supporters had already acted on the cause, so they were warm from day one.

2 Freedom for Animals

Build the journey to match

Journeys, pages and follow-up turned sign-ups into activists and donors.

3 The Humane League

Don't rely on one channel

Mix your own organic acquisition with partners, so no single channel carries your growth.

TAKEAWAY **The channel opened the door. What happened after sign-up decided the result.**

THE OPPORTUNITY

If diversifying is the answer, UK charities have just been handed a big opportunity to do it.

Charitable soft opt-in: in force since February 2026

WHY IT MATTERS FOR THE WHOLE SECTOR

Charities now have what businesses have had since 2003

2003

Businesses get soft opt-in

PECR lets companies email people who've shown interest, with a clear opt-out.

2024–25

The sector makes the case

The DMA, Chartered Institute of Fundraising, Fundraising Regulator and leading charities push for the same rule.

Feb 2026

Charitable soft opt-in arrives

The Data (Use and Access) Act extends it to charities, with ICO guidance following in April.

£290m

a year in extra charitable donations the soft opt-in could unlock (DMA estimate)

Sources: DMA; ICO; Fundraising Regulator

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU

More people who care can now hear from you

Reach people who've shown interest

Anyone who takes action on your cause can now hear from you, unless they choose to opt out.

Make diversifying easier

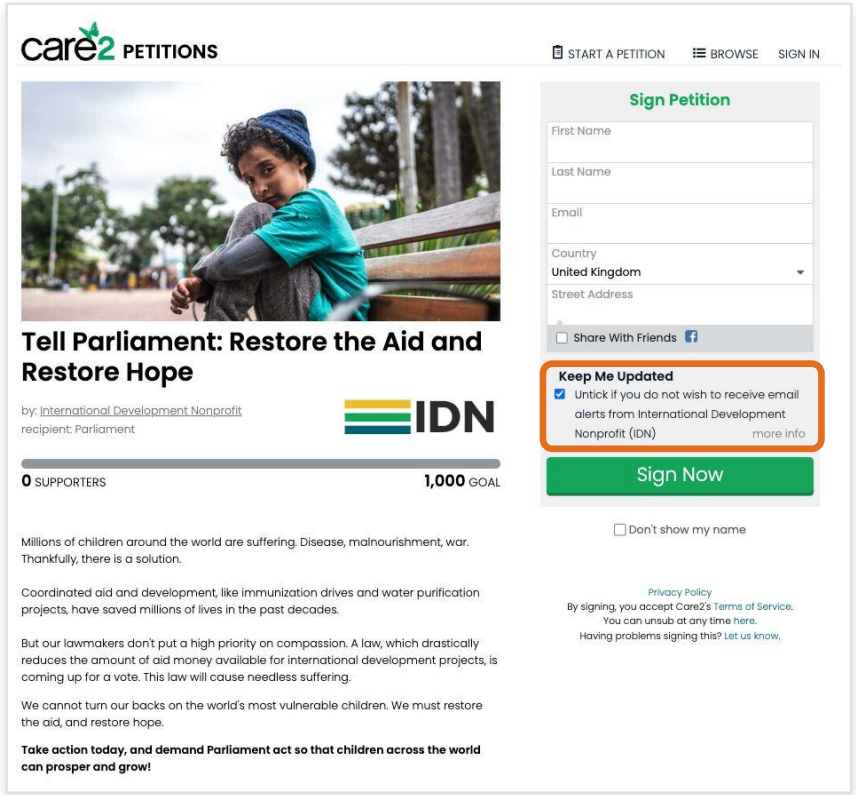
Your own petitions, campaign actions and website sign-ups now bring in more supporters, alongside any partner channels.

An opportunity for every charity

Smaller charities that can't outspend the big names on paid social can still reach people who care about their cause.

TAKEAWAY **More reach, without trading away quality: every new supporter has already acted on your cause.**

A clear opt-out, and the charity stays in control



The supporter sees the charity's opt-out before they submit.

Supporter
Acts on a charity-branded petition

Care2
Captures data as processor

Charity CRM
The charity is data controller

Meets the four ICO conditions

- Expression of interest
- Clear opt-out at capture
- Solely charitable purpose
- Data obtained directly

Why Care2 is making the move

An extended legal review: the Act's charitable soft opt-in provisions, ICO guidance and independent UK data protection advice. Rolling out to UK clients from October 2026.

Supporters are still choosing

~30%

of signers keep the box ticked and join the charity's list. Plenty still choose to untick it.

Early data from Care2's UK flow; expected to settle.

People see the choice

Many still untick the box, which shows they understand what they're signing up for.

The old model didn't create better choices

The extra step of active consent just made people drop out instead of engage.

TAKEAWAY **Supporters haven't stopped choosing. They've just stopped dropping out, and the ones who stay chose to.**

GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT

More people coming in means your journey matters more than ever

They showed interest, not commitment

A soft opt-in supporter acted on your cause but didn't tick a box to hear from you. Your first emails have to earn the relationship.

Silence turns interest into unsubscribes

Every email has to carry an easy opt-out. If people hear from you rarely or without a reason, that's what they'll use.

Pathways turn interest into support

A planned route from first action to next action to first gift is what turns a bigger list into real support.

Acquisition is the starting point, not the finish line.

Welcome is the on-ramp, not the finished product

SIGN-UP
Day 0
They took an action on an issue they care about

WELCOME JOURNEY
Weeks 1–3
Who you are, what happened next, a first action, a first ask

ONGOING PROGRAMME
Month 1 onwards
Where activists become donors. This is where long-term value is built, so plan it with the same rigour as the welcome.

The welcome journey's job

Get people ready for the programme that follows: set expectations for how often they'll hear from you and why.

Don't let it end in silence

If week 4 is a drop-off into occasional newsletters, you've spent your acquisition budget on a warm-up act.

Measure further out

THL measured engagement at six months, not six days. Judge the whole journey, not the first three emails.

Unsubscribes are healthy. A cold list isn't.

An unsubscribe

HEALTHY

Someone who was never going to act or give tells you so. Your list gets smaller, and more responsive.

A cold list

THE REAL RISK

Thousands who never open, act or give. They hide your true list size and hurt deliverability for the supporters who do care.

Plan it: an example month

Week 1	Action	Story
Week 2	Win / update	Ask
Week 3	Action	Story
Week 4	Win / update	Ask

Illustrative only. An action can be a petition, quiz or survey; just feed back the result in the next win/update.

TAKEAWAY **Don't send less. Send more, and make every email worth opening.**

Make every step of the pathway work

Show people what their action achieved

ICAW: signatures became letters to decision-makers, with corporate reactions within days.

The Humane League: 20,000 signatures delivered to Subway, contributing to a win for hens.

Not a campaigning organisation? A quiz or survey is an action too. Feed back what you learned and close the loop.

Keep action and donation pages clean

- One clear ask per page
- Only the fields you really use
- Mobile-first by default
- A direct path from action to gift

TAKEAWAY **Every action deserves a follow-up, and every click deserves a page that doesn't leak.**

THE SELF-AUDIT

Are your basics ready for new supporters?

Handover

Does your welcome journey hand people into a planned ongoing programme, not a newsletter?

Cadence

Have you planned months 1–12 with the same rigour as weeks 1–3?

Frequency

Are you sending enough to stay front of mind, or holding back for fear of unsubscribes?

Follow-up

Does every action get an email showing what it achieved?

Pages

Are action and donation pages one-ask, short and tested on mobile?

Measurement

Do you judge new supporters at six months, not just on cost per lead?

Thank you

Want to get going with Care2? We're booking inventory now for UK campaigns for the rest of this year. Get in touch at rhiannan@care2team.com, or if you have any questions.

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