

User/Buyer Model for Action Network and the Argument for Software Freedom

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Action Network is a web platform offering users mass email coordinating, event mapping and planning, and petition creating (Anzilotti, 2017, March 29). Its website lists four tiers of service with monthly fees ranging from the free "Grassroots" tier through the one hundred dollar per month "Network" tier to the unspecified "Enterprise" tier (Action Network, n.d.c). Action Network is a 501(c)(4) non-profit organization, with an associated 501(c)(3) Action Network Fund (n.d.) and a company, Action Squared, Inc., which it wholly owns that develops what it refers to as its toolsets, the SaaS platforms Action Network and Action Builder (Action Network, n.d.a).

A look at Action Network's client organizations, which include the AFL-CIO, NEA, Women's March, United We Dream, the New Economy Coalition, DSA, and CPUSA, make it abundantly clear that Action Network is focused on providing software tools to progressive organizations (Influence Watch, n.d.). This is directly stated on its home page, which prominently displays the message, "We're like you: a mission-driven organization dedicated to building online power for the progressive movement. We don't have clients – we have *partners* (Action Network, n.d.b). Executive Director Brian Young says "we are proud of the powerful, intuitive digital mobilization toolset we've built collaboratively with our progressive partners" (2017).

Our textbook defines "attitudes" as, "'mental positions' or emotional feelings, favorable or unfavorable evaluations, and action tendencies people have about products, services, companies, ideas, issues, or institutions". It then states that because attitudes are based on values and beliefs, they are hard to change and thus tend to be enduring (The University of Minnesota, 2010, p. 67).

American Marketing Association blogger Melanie Courtright tells us it is important to understand the "why" behind the "buy" in developing an effective marketing strategy (2019).

The users / purchasers of Action Network's platform, whether individual activists or large organizations like the NEA, are motivated by necessity to find on-line tools to engage with their constituents, and they are led by attitude to meet their digital needs through Action Network's toolset. In an article titled "Progressives Have A Secret Tech Weapon In The Fight Against Trump", Emily Peck and Ryan Grim describe the role Action Network played in organizing the march (2017). Given the user model proposed in this paper of an activist motivated by the need to get work done and led by a desire to do what's right, Action Network could not ask for better advertising. "Secret tech weapon" for fighting Trump, how cool is that?! This was only one of many articles that appeared around that time with similar themes. In an article on The Hill website titled "Left finds new online tools to fight Trump", Ali Breland features Action Network along with the peer to peer texting application Hustle as key tech tools for organizing the Women's march (2017).

The choice of Action Network is strengthened further when it is compared with its competition. On the website AlternativesTo.net a search for alternatives to Action Network on all platforms with any license yields Change.org, AVAAZ, Civist, and RallyCall.io (Action Network Alternatives and Similar Websites and Apps, 2019). These alternatives are mostly limited to managing on-line petitions, so Action Network's toolset is significantly broader, and none of the alternatives make as explicit their commitment to the progressive cause as Action Network does.

For the small tech startup of which I am a member, NOVA Web Development, what is most relevant to us is what happens when the search criteria for alternatives to Action Network is set to include only open source licenses. The list comes back empty. Action Network maintains ownership of their toolsets as an explicit part of their strategy. Board member Nicole Aro (n.d.) writes that we need a model for toolset development that assures we "won't service Republicans" or change mission at the behest of a Silicon Valley or Wall Street firm. She says that, "[a]s progressives, we believe that our movement's tools should be cooperatively owned by the people who rely on them the most -- organizers and campaigners in the progressive movement" (2019). The problem is that organizers and campaigners of the progressive movement do not cooperatively own Action Network's toolsets, Action Network does.

I believe that Action Network is run by dedicated, committed activists convinced that what they are doing is in the best interest of the movement for progressive change. With a President's salary reported at \$63,636, the organization demonstrates both that it is not out to steal from the popular movement by earning exorbitant salaries, and that it has a sense of humor (Influence Watch, n.d.). In working with its Action Squared workers to unionize, it squares its reality with its values, which is good both for its workers and its marketing efforts (NPEU, 2019). It is an organization that is in the right places and working with the right people to help progressive activists feel confident in becoming "partners" with it.

Yet as a progressive activist myself who is thoroughly committed to solidarity and progressive change, I am compelled by Action Network's business model to go into competition with it instead of collaboration. A few years back when investigating available digital organizing tools for the movement and coming across Action Network, I emailed the organization asking if

Action Network had considered releasing its software under a free software license, which would enable software activists to contribute to its development. I was amazed to receive a reply from Director of Technology Jason Rosenbaum three minutes after hitting send, but then disappointed to read that Action Network had no plans to release its toolset as free software. Jason cited assuring that only progressive causes could use their software as the principal reason (personal communication, September 17, 2017).

Again, I do not doubt the sincerity of Action Network's position. For me, however, the present social relations and the ideology of privatization and commodification of everything that underlie it are core attributes of what progressives must fight against if we are to achieve the world we want to live in. Is it possible that if the progressive movement collaborates in producing open source tools for our organizing efforts that our opponents, even some very nasty ones, may make use of them? Certainly, but as Molly Fosco points out in "Welcome to the App-based Resistance ... Used by Both Sides", today's deep political divide tends to give these tech tools clearly defined markets (2018). More fundamentally, my commitment to software freedom is rooted in my commitment to democracy. We are the ninety-nine percent, after all, so if powerful organizing tools are made available to everyone, it is we who will benefit disproportionately.

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