

# Consumers' Online-Petitions Put Pressure on Businesses

Difficulty:



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## *Discussion activities to be done after completing this EA lesson*

Today's report is about an online petition. A petition is a list containing signatures of many people who support a specific cause, or want changes made. Who started the petition? What was the petition about? Why were people upset? What was the result of this petition?

## *Extension discussion topics*

### **A. Talking about and going over the specific topic / idea / issue in listening text**

*Introduction = What did you learn about this online petition? What was the problem which started this petition? What did the people in the report say about this problem? What happened after the petition was started?*

1. What did you learn in the report about this petition?

- The petition was started online at Change.org.
- Change.org is a social action website.
- It was started by Lauren Todd, because of a message on a shirt.
- The message was sexist.
- She saw the picture of a girl's shirt on Facebook with this message on.
- The shirt was sold by J.C. Penney.
- The petition got over 2,000 signatures.
- The aim of the petition was achieved.

Have you signed a petition? Why, why not? Was it online, or done face-to-face?

2. Why was the shirt's message a problem, and what did people say about it?

- The shirt had a sexist message on it.
- The message was "I'm too pretty to do homework, so my brother has to do it for me."
- It implied boys were good at homework, and girls were just pretty and not interested in studying.
- Lauren Todd thought it was outrageous.
- Shelby Knox agreed, and started tweeting about it.
- J.C. Penney did not say anything about the shirt.
- Robin Sackin did not think the message was a problem because she thinks that children are influenced by their parents, not the words on a shirt.

What do you think about the message on the shirt?

3. What happened after the petition was started?

- It got 2,000 signatures.
- With each new signature, an e-mail automatically went to J.C. Penney's public relations team.
- Shelby Knox, the director of women's rights organizing for Change.org, started tweeting about the shirt.
- There were over four hundred tweets a minute about this shirt.
- The shirt was withdrawn from sale by J.C. Penney.
- Then another clothing seller, Forever 21, got into trouble not long after J.C. Penney.
- Forever 21 were selling a girl's shirt that read "Allergic to Algebra."
- Forever 21 stopped selling them the day after the story about their shirt spread.

Do you use Twitter? If so, do you follow people, or do you tweet?

4. What did you learn about online petitions?

- They are easier to start than standing on a street for hours.
- No pen and paper is needed, as they are Internet based.
- Internet consumers who take offense can do more than just write an angry letter to the company.
- The top causes for online petitions range from animal protection to criminal justice to women's rights.
- Online petitions can lead to change.

Are there online petition websites in your country?

## B. Expanding on (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

*Topic = Petitions and social change.*

1. Are petitions common in your country? Are they used as a way of asking for changes? If so, what recent petitions have there been? Are there online petitions, or just petitions in the street? If petitions are not used, why not?
2. What do you think about the use of petitions? Do you think they can be effective? Why, why not? Have you ever signed a petition? If so, what was the petition about? Why was this issue important to you? How many signatures did it get? Did this petition lead to any change? Would you sign an online petition? How are online petitions different from face to face petitions? Do you think they are more, or less, effective?
3. A petition is one way people can get together and ask for changes. Note down three other ways in which people can show, or ask for, changes. (Suggestions: demonstrations; voting; boycotts of companies or shops; posters; use of violence; strikes.) Put your list into an order of how effective you think each action is. Compare your list with a friend's.
4. Have you ever participated in any action designed to change something? If so, what action was it? What was the change you wanted, and why? Was your action effective? Why, or why not? Make a list of the top three issues which would lead you to take action asking for change. Why are these issues important to you? Compare your list to a friend's.

### C. Extending discussion of (one of) the topics / ideas / issues in listening text

*Topic = Men and women.*

1. The petition in the report was started because of a sexist message. The message was "I'm too pretty to do homework, so my brother has to do it for me." What do you think about such a message? Is it just fun, or is it a serious issue? Would you buy such a shirt? Could men and women have different views about the message do you think? Would people be upset by this message in your country?
2. Have you ever been treated differently because of your sex? If so, how? What happened? How did you feel? Was it fair? If you have brothers or sisters, were you treated differently as children? Did you do different sports at school? If so, what were they? Why were they different, do you think? Have you been treated differently at work because of your sex?
3. In your country, what roles do men and women generally have? Who is usually responsible for looking after the children in a family? Is it the woman, or the man? Who usually cooks the meals? Who usually drives the car? Who usually does the washing and the ironing? Who usually earns the most money? What do you think about the roles men and women usually have? Are these roles changing?

### *Audioscript*

The modern way to collect signatures on a petition requires no paper or pen or standing on a street for hours. All it requires is going online.

Change.org is a social action website where people around the world can start or sign online petitions. The top causes range from animal protection to criminal justice to women's rights.

There are many different reasons why people start petitions at the site. Lauren Todd of New York told CBS television that she started a petition a few months ago after she saw a picture of a girl's shirt on Facebook.

The shirt read: "I'm too pretty to do homework, so my brother has to do it for me."

"It was outrageous enough to be posted on Facebook, but it was actually more outrageous than that, and I felt like I needed to do something about it."

Ms. Todd's petition urged shoppers to boycott J.C. Penney stores until they stopped selling shirts with what she called sexist messages.

Five hours later, Shelby Knox started tweeting about the petition to her thousands of Twitter followers. Ms. Knox is the director of women's rights organizing for Change.org. Some of her followers also started tweeting about the shirt and signing the petition.

"From the time that Lauren started the petition on Change.org and J.C. Penney pulled the shirt, it was about ten hours, in which it got over two thousand signatures and at one point was generating over four hundred tweets a minute."

Ms. Knox said that with each new signature, an e-mail automatically went to J.C. Penney's public relations team. Another went to the company's chief.

J.C. Penney, without comment, discontinued the shirts.

Clothing designer John Noone has worked with a number of large stores. He says he has always used words like "pretty" or "princess" when he creates shirts for girls.

"Because it's easy to do, I guess it's just so ingrained in our culture that... that just it's... it's an easy sale. It's going to be easier to sell a shirt that says, you know, 'My little princess' than, uh, 'My A student.' "

Mr. Noone says fashion designers find their ideas in many places. It could be a celebrity's tweet or something said on a TV show.

But now, with the Internet, consumers who take offense can do more than just write an angry letter to the company, another clothing seller, Forever 21, got in trouble not long after J.C. Penney. Forever 21 was selling a girl's shirt that read "Allergic to Algebra." It stopped selling them the day after the story spread.

Robin Sackin is a professor at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. She thinks people should not get so angry. Children are influenced by their parents, she says, not the words on a shirt.

"So if my child says to me 'Mommy, I want to get that,' I've said, 'OK, you can have it, but just remember something -- I don't care if you're pretty, you're doing your homework.' "

And that's the VOA Special English Technology Report.