



NGP Software
1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 1225
Washington, DC 20005
P: (202) 355-9330
F: (202) 686-9331
www.ngpsoftware.com

Campaigning on the Internet: A Practitioner's View

By: Chris Casey, Vice President of Online Campaigns, NGP Software

What do you want? A web site like Obama's.

What should it look like? You have total creative license, so long as it's red, white and blue.

When do you need it? Yesterday.

So begins a typical conversation between a political consultant who specializes in online campaigns, and a candidate or their first staffer who is looking to bring their fledgling campaign online. Weeks of effort follow - designs, revisions, development, content, testing - all leading up to a web site launch, which is inevitably followed within a day by a question from the campaign, "How come my site isn't #1 in Google's search results"?

Online campaigns have come a long way in almost 20 years of practice, but we still have a long way to go.

Every presidential election since 1992 has brought renewed attention to the art of campaigning on the Internet. Each cycle sees new innovations that others will want to replicate, and discovers missteps to avoid. And at the end of each cycle, a search begins for the candidate who would not have won were it not for the Internet. In 1998 it was Jesse Ventura's third-party victory to become Governor of Minnesota that was hailed as "the first major election in which the Internet made a difference", and in the dozen years since, scores of campaigns may have turned out differently if not for their use of the Internet. And maybe Obama would indeed not be President today were it not for the Internet. Regardless, while it's a fun discussion to analyze and ponder if the Internet provided a critical push, tipping a candidate to victory, it can safely be said that no serious candidate for elective office can afford to ignore the Internet. Candidates do so at their own peril.

Presidential campaigns are relatively few and far between, a quadrennial Super Bowl of campaigning in which only a few candidates will ever compete. Things are different in the thousands upon thousands of elections that take place every year for lower offices. Can a candidate for a state or local office really expect their shoestring budget to deliver "a web site like Obama's" multi-million dollar effort? And even if it did, can they really expect their campaign to generate similar levels of interest and support? Not bloody likely! But that doesn't mean they can't employ and benefit from techniques developed and refined at a higher level. With realistic expectations, scaled to their appropriate size and nature, even the smallest campaigns can benefit from the advantages of campaigning online and innovations

developed by Presidential campaigns. And guess what? There is plenty of innovation coming from down the ballot as well.

Establishing an online presence, especially getting critical list building and contribution functionality in place quickly, has rapidly climbed the list of high-priority 'to-dos' for all political candidates, particularly for challengers. Content and interactivity can come later (naturally, the sooner the better), but what's needed immediately is a pair of buttons on a web page labeled 'Sign Up' and 'Contribute'. Building an email list of supporters has become THE critical first step for campaigns, as they have come to understand (usually) that with proper care and management said list can grow into one of their most powerful campaign assets. One that they will use to share news, deliver calls to action, and of course, appeal for contributions (again and again).

The self-selective nature of the online audience is probably the most fundamental characteristic that distinguishes it from the typical means of campaign communications such as television, radio, direct mail or phone banks. In each of those instances, the campaign selects an audience and attempts to communicate with them. Only on the Internet does the audience truly self-select. They decide they want to learn more about a candidate, or to find a way to help a candidate, and they go online to find that candidate. They may not yet even know the candidate they are looking for. But campaign webmasters see the proof in their referrer logs, and understand the importance of Google and other search engines for delivering such visitors. Online advertising offers powerful opportunities to bait a hook in search of reaching specifically targeted audiences, but they still must self-select in choosing to take that bait and follow an ad to a web site. This self-selection is not a problem for using the Internet to campaign for office; it is an advantage of online campaigning over traditional means of campaign communication.

The growth of online social networks was to the 2008 campaign, what blogs and Meetups were to the 2004 campaign, the emerging Internet technologies that spread quickly across campaigns at all levels. Some offer technology and audience benefits, such as Flickr for photos and YouTube for video. Each provides an easy-to-use means to share media, while removing the burden of providing the hosting infrastructure from the campaign. Further, they potentially increase the audience for the candidate's content by making it available to users of those sites, rather than just those that found it on the campaign's own web page. On Facebook and Twitter, candidates need to work to engage these networks as their users do, with a genuine personal voice, lest they look too much like an unwelcome intruder. Campaigns shouldn't be looking to control their growing and dispersed online supporters, on the contrary, they need to engage, enable and energize them.

Online fundraising is clearly an area where innovations at the presidential level have been successfully adopted by down ballot campaigns. Three innovations of Howard Dean's campaign in 2004 stand out as excellent examples. The Dean campaign stole a page from Jerry Lewis' telethons with their baseball bat thermometer, and setting a fixed fundraising goal amount to be raised by a fixed deadline. They pioneered a successful approach that has been repeated with countless variations at campaigns of all levels since. Another innovation was for a candidate to send an email appeal to their own mailing list, seeking support on behalf of another candidate, as likewise demonstrated by Dean in 2004 with his

appeal to his enthusiastic supporters for contributions to Iowa Representative Leonard Boswell, whose support Dean sought, and who reaped the financial boost as Dean's supporters obliged. The creation of tools to allow supporters the ability to create their own fundraising goals, solicit their friends and family, and raise money for a campaign has also now come within the reach of smaller campaigns, though it may be impractical to those below the state level that lack potential for very broad based support.

How much money will I raise online? That's an easy answer: "None, some, or a lot. It depends". It's actually becoming harder to raise 'none' anymore as online contribution services such as ActBlue now make it possible for supporters to contribute to campaigns that haven't yet bothered to implement a contribution system of their own. 'Some' is a relative term that can mean vastly differing amounts to campaigns of different levels, budgets and interest. But few campaigns today would be satisfied with the modest goal typical of the late 90's, that an online campaign just raise enough money to pay for itself, a budgetary wash with some promotional value. And 'a lot' is what every campaign wishes for, and it can strike when you least expect it. Such as when the Congressman you are challenging yells "You lie!" at the President on television. It's times like those that the decision to go with bargain priced web hosting at \$20 a month proves not to be the good idea it seemed at the time. Campaigns can't know how much money they will raise online, but they must prepare for such unexpected opportunities, or be left to wonder how much they might have raised if their web site hadn't buckled under the load when lightning struck and people who an hour earlier had never heard of them, suddenly wanted to contribute to their campaign. A meaningful investment in infrastructure, people and technology, is necessary in order to reap the maximum benefit of online campaigning.

Online innovations can come from down the ballot as well. In 2009, Bill de Blasio, a candidate for the office of New York City's Public Advocate sought to bring attention to the issue of poor housing conditions and negligent landlords. His staff worked with NGP Software to develop a Google map mashup dubbed the 'Slumlord Watch List' that allowed visitors to submit their buildings for consideration for inclusion on the map. While this particular feature may not be the sort that lends itself to widespread use among other campaigns, it certainly served a useful purpose in generating earned media attention for de Blasio's winning campaign. And that is but one example among many many others, some of which may take hold and see widespread use, and others that will pass by unnoticed. As online campaigning approaches 20-years of practice, it remains the area of political campaigning that is ripest for innovation.

It's no surprise that innovation is more likely to come from a challenger with nothing to lose, than from an incumbent who is campaigning defensively and hoping to avoid making any fatal mistakes. Likewise, a minority party might be quicker to embrace new technologies, as pointed out by Heaney that they have done so far on Twitter. They do, after all, have more time on their hands while the Democratic Majority and President work at governing. My own partisan stripes will show in my disagreement that their current Congressional majority and hold on the White House will not necessarily foretell a technological pendulum swing towards the GOP. I believe both parties will continue to seek to innovate online, and sometimes those efforts will fall flat, as with the recent problem filled re-launch of the GOP.com web site demonstrated. Others will become the sort that campaigns in future cycles will

replicate, joining a growing number of proven techniques for online campaigning. But don't expect Democrats to rest on their online laurels in cycles to come.

As online campaigning has matured over the last decade, expectations for what it can deliver have increased tremendously. Campaigns can't fake it and expect to reach their high expectations. They must dedicate genuine effort, staff and resources to the development and management of their online campaign. Despite the growth of the professional class of online political consultants, this remains the portion of a campaign most likely to be tasked to the inexperienced.

The fictional sports agent Jerry McGuire asked his football star client to, "Help me help you". A candidate for office turns that around, seeking to use the Internet to "Help you help me". Help me to win my election with information, tools and resources that allow my supporters to make meaningful contributions to the effort. Campaigns that best utilize the proven strategies of the past, while seeking new innovations for the use of rapidly changing technologies, may gain an online advantage that just might be enough to help deliver an electoral one.

Chris' contribution can be found in the following volume:

Craig, Stephen C. and David B. Hill, eds. The Electoral Challenge: Theory Meets Practice. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010.