

RESURFACING THE TRAIL

POLITICIANS ADD DIGITAL DIMENSION TO CAMPAIGNS

By Matt Ottinger

During his election and re-election campaigns, President Barack Obama's staff enlisted what communications analysts refer to as a "digital first" media strategy. A January 2014 article in *Forbes* credits the effort for targeting undecided voters in key swing states – and motivating them to get to the polls.

The emergence of web sites, microsites, email, online videos, and social media engagement and advertising has undeniably changed the game and forced campaign operatives to add a new layer to their approach.

According to Google's Politics and Elections division, 83% of mobile phone owners are registered voters and 50% of voters have their decision influenced by comparing candidates online. In addition, Google notes that approximately one-third of people who viewed a political ad on YouTube had not seen it before on television.

"Now, strategists have to figure in digital strategy on top of (traditional media), so it's still just a piece," explains Jeff McCall, author, analyst and media studies professor at DePauw University. "But you can't minimize traditional media because that's where a lot of people expect you to show up, and you also have to have that extra layer of web-based ads."

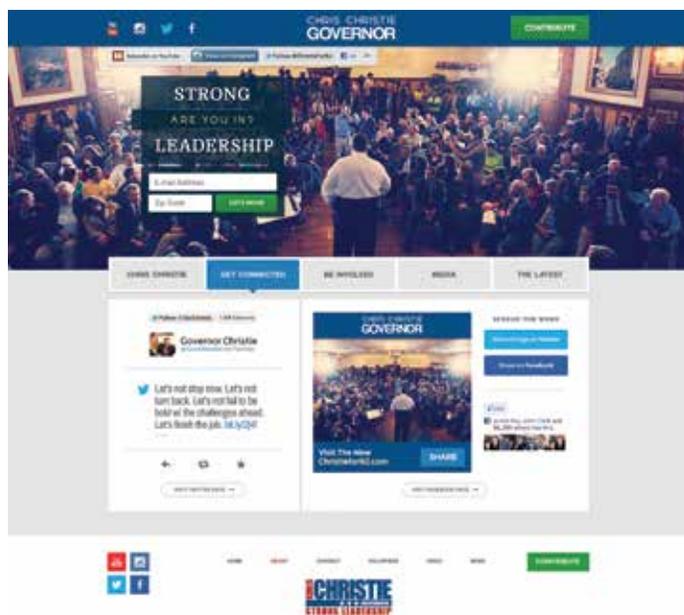
While digital and social media are appealing, Chris Faulkner of Granger-based Gridiron Communications concurs it should not be viewed as a means to replace traditional forms of campaigning.

"There are a lot of cool, bright, flashy things that say 'Oh, look at this, this will work,' but there aren't hard numbers that say there's an actual ROI when it comes to that type of advertising," he argues. "I always tell people to look at it as an amplifier. Do whatever your traditional media is, but layer that social media along with it – but it won't replace it. It's a cheese for your hamburger, if you will."

'Screening' candidates

As candidates look to expand their appeal, reaching a broader – and younger – voting audience remains a challenge for would-be officeholders of all stripes. Google contends that launching a four-screen campaign (with components touching television, personal computers, tablets and mobile phones) is 48% more effective in generating campaign awareness than television alone.

"Younger voters aren't sitting in front of a television and watching a major network in the evening," McCall iterates. "To reach them, you have to find ways to do that. In some races, they may be the difference."



Governors Chris Christie (New Jersey) and Mike Pence have used The Prosper Group's expertise in building and executing digital and social media efforts en route to winning campaigns.

Eric Bassler (left) and Bob Behning, both victors in their 2014 primary races, haven't let the importance of digital media trump the necessity of meeting voters face to face.



He contends technology, as well as messaging, need to be catered to the audience. A recent Pew Research Center report states Millennials (ages 18 to 31) consume only about half as much news as those 48 years of age and over.

“When going after younger voters, politicians cannot get wonkish and too deep in the political weeds with policy mumbo jumbo,” McCall says. “They want images and emotion – and they want to see how politics relates to them. Longwinded TV commercials and big newspaper ads explaining policy positions are probably not that effective.”

Politicians need to appear relevant in their outreach, he adds.

“One thing about digital media now is that it rhetorically signals your campaign has a dynamic, cutting-edge presence to it,” McCall explains. “No candidate wants to be viewed as an old fogey. Even if you have a candidate who’s a senior in terms of experience, they’ll still need that dynamism of a social media campaign – Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr.”

But digital media’s appeal transcends Millennial outreach, according to Kurt Luidhardt, vice president and co-founder of Greenwood-based The Prosper Group. (His company has developed digital and social media strategy for high-profile candidates like New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, among many others.)

“I think there’s a misperception that you use digital just to reach young people, and then to reach older people you need to be on

old-fashioned media,” he asserts. “That might have been true 10 years ago, but it’s not anymore. My parents are well into their 70s and my mom’s on Facebook as much as I am.”

He adds that it doesn’t just transcend generations, but also bridges the urban-rural divide.

“That’s another misperception – that people in rural areas don’t have access to this,” he contends. “My parents also live two miles out of a town of 1,500 people in a county of 25,000 in Ohio and they get broadband Internet off a Wi-Fi antenna on top of the grain elevator in town. So it’s pervasive for all types of people.”

In fact, Luidhardt finds candidates from smaller geographical areas are most open to digital advertising as a cost-effective measure.

“They can’t afford television because it’s so expensive, and digital’s an effective way to deliver an emotional message in a video,” he notes. “If you’re a state legislator running in Indiana and you want to present some emotional video message, it can be cost prohibitive to run it on TV. But you can hit many of those same voters with a digital pre-roll ad (an advertisement shown before a video, commonly featured on YouTube) and get the same benefit, if not more.”

Big data

Gaining information and results for clients is a critical aspect of digital marketing, according to those in the field.

“When it comes to collecting data, in

digital advertising it’s about collecting email addresses,” Faulkner points out. “Those equal fundraising dollars.”

Follows on Twitter and Likes on Facebook are difficult to turn into meaningful results – or votes – Faulkner offers, elaborating on the importance of email as a voter contact tool.

“In politics, the most important thing is the voter file,” he explains. “If I have an email address, that means I probably have a first and last name, and a better chance of matching that to the voter file and turning it into actual information. Whereas on Twitter or Facebook, it’s hard for me to match that with an actual person.”

Luidhardt adds that – fair or not – clients hold digital marketers to a higher standard than television advertising because there is more that can be measured.

“I have hundreds of data points generated from our ad campaigns – how many people saw an ad, how many clicked on it, when they clicked on it,” he expounds, adding that he then asks questions like, “What did they do? How long did they watch the video? How many times?”

“All of this is available to us, and it’s not to someone who does mail or television,” he clarifies. “So they don’t have to tell anybody. (Television stations) can’t tell you how many people watched a TV ad; they can tell you when it played and how many people Nielsen says watched the show, but not how many people recorded it and fast forwarded it or left the room.”

Ritz-y business

Social media is widely credited for helping little-known underdog Democrat Glenda Ritz unseat incumbent Tony Bennett in the 2012 Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction race.

“Ritz spent almost her entire budget on social media,” Luidhardt offers. “Some may say getting another Like on your Facebook page doesn’t mean they’re voting for you. And yes, that’s true. But it’s like yard signs; just because you have more doesn’t mean you’ll win, but each of those tools have their purpose. Social media has a purpose of driving a message to your voters, branding your candidate, pushing a message that you’re trying to get across.”

He likens social media to earned media such as coverage in a newspaper, but adds that being able to control the message is a notable distinction.

“Candidates are always excited to get mentioned in *The Indianapolis Star*. But I can get something on Facebook with a \$500 budget and get in front of more people with that money ...,” he quantifies. “So that’s where social media is important in getting a message past traditional media sources and push it directly to the people you’re after.”

Faulkner agrees in part, noting social media is beneficial as a tool to enhance an existing message. He believes, however, that Ritz’s election should be analyzed in context, and too much emphasis shouldn’t be placed on the triumphs of social media.

“Specifically with (Ritz), what you had was not lightning in a bottle, but darn close,” offers Faulkner, who discloses he supported Bennett and donated to his campaign. “You had two interest groups – anti-Common Core folks and teachers – both of which were highly sensitive about one particular issue and both tend to be very active



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online. So you had a perfect audience for that type of media campaign.”

He admits it was effective, but adds one “would be hard pressed to find an exact scenario where you could apply those metrics again.”

Politifast

Whatever online platforms a candidate pursues, they must

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generate the content to apply to each medium. According to Luidhardt, that is likely the greatest challenge in a broad-based digital media campaign.

“It’s different than other media in the fact that it’s always on, and to do it right you need to deliver lots of quality content consistently during a campaign. All times of the day, all year round,” he says. “It increases the demand to be posting a lot of photos, videos, blog posts and the like. It’s a challenge for campaigns that don’t have a lot of staff.”

Above all, McCall and Faulkner believe it’s the speed and dynamism of campaign communicators that has been put to the test with new technology. Faulkner recollects a stark contrast with his first foray into campaign work in 1996.

“We used to actually be able to say things like, ‘The candidate’s out of pocket,’ ” he recalls. “You can’t get away with saying that anymore.”

RESOURCES: Chris Faulkner, Gridiron Communications, at www.gridironcommunications.com | Kurt Luidhardt, The Prosper Group, at www.prospergroupcorp.com | Jeff McCall, DePauw University, at www.depauw.edu