

New Media and the 2008 Campaign Season: Valuable Lessons for Business About Being First, Fast, and Nimble

The strategies and tactics of the 2008 Presidential campaign signal a game change in marketing techniques that businesses must learn—or risk falling behind

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Much has been made about the historic nature of the 2008 Presidential campaign between a likely Democratic Party nominee who will be the first African-American or woman candidate and a likely Republican Party nominee who will be among the eldest candidates in U.S. history. Race, gender, and age diversity are things that forward-looking businesses know a great deal about—the campaigns could learn a lot from private sector organizations who have been dealing with these issues and striving to overcome workplace prejudices associated with them for many years.

At the same time, there is another precedent-setting feature of this year's campaigns from which businesses might equally well borrow a page from the public sector playbook: shaping messages and candidate “brands” by effectively leveraging a wide array of new media tools. So, while this may be the first time U.S. citizens elect a black man, a woman, or a 72-year-old first-term President, this may also be the first time millions of voters have learned essentially everything they know about that new leader via media options that didn't even exist—or hadn't been widely used—during the last Presidential race just four years ago.

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Continuous Innovation is Key

For nearly half a century, network television has played a significant role in Presidential politics (see sidebar). 24/7 cable network news has been around for more than 20 years; similarly, popularity of the Internet, as a news and social communications medium, began soaring more than a decade ago. However, both cable TV and Internet technologies have managed to play a larger-than-ever role in the 2007/2008 campaign cycle due to continuing production innovations. Cable, for example, has been the dominant venue for a record-setting number of primary season debates, and exploitation of the Internet's capability as a robust direct-marketing and fund-raising tool has never been more notable. In addition, cable networks enlivened debate exchanges by cleverly bringing viewers into the discussions via their websites, introducing the notion of direct interaction between audience and candidates. Then, as primary voting got underway in the winter months, employment of handheld-type devices with touch-screen graphics quantified and displayed election coverage results in a visually dynamic way. It seemed that the cable and Internet media had found ways to make the most of their unique capabilities to offer connectivity, e.g., visual appeal, immediacy, and a feeling of intimacy between "performer" and viewer.

So what does business stand to learn about employing some of these same techniques in their message and brand building? Party campaign managers have seized on two realities about new media that many businesses continue to inadequately address even today: 1) the competition for advertising "eyeballs" is moving increasingly to web-based programming on smaller, more mobile media, such as laptops, PDAs and cell phones; and 2) it, whatever it (message or brand) may be, is no longer just about the what—it's increasingly about the how. Whether raising money, putting across a key message, recycling a sound bite, or positioning a person or a company as a brand, the key is no longer just the type of technology being used; it's also very much about making the activity more interactive and social. Three developments, in particular, have produced this result as they have evolved:

- Social networking websites
- Video sharing websites
- Smaller, more portable communications tools

Companies that aren't examining how to take advantage of these developments and/or already implementing effective communications and PR efforts to make constructive use of them may find themselves falling behind an ever-arching upward curve.

Enter the MySpace/Facebook Phenomenon

Most of today's best-known social networking sites, including those of MySpace, Inc. ("MySpace") and Facebook, Inc. ("Facebook"), existed in 2004 and were used by some congressional campaigns in the 2006 mid-term elections. However, it was not until the current Presidential campaign cycle that these platforms became widely leveraged as part of a typical campaign's marketing toolkit.

Less than three years ago, MySpace was the number one social networking site, dominating the news. This new Internet means of social information sharing was a "companionable technology" application whose success ultimately resulted in its purchase by media giant News Corporation. The MySpace philosophy has always been different from that of Facebook. The latter started as a social networking site for college students and required a valid e-mail address and other user-related restrictions. MySpace, on the other hand, is more chaotic in nature. MySpace was founded on the same basic principle as a personal "home page," as its name descriptively implies. While today building a network and linking to other users is an important part of MySpace, the site is still mainly about having one's own little private piece of cyberspace—a notion popular since the mid-1990s. And while Facebook greatly limits and controls the look and feel of an individual's page, MySpace allows a great deal of individual "space" in setting the appearance and tone. The degree of customization possible under MySpace attracts more technically savvy and creative users, while Facebook is viewed as the superior medium for networking and community building, in part due to its "groups" capabilities¹.

As corporate use of Facebook groups mature and more research on the effectiveness of new media marketing is conducted, we expect the content to grow and become even more innovative. Increasingly, users are likely to join Facebook groups because of a desire to derive a benefit from the membership, rather than just as another descriptor of their already overflowing profiles. Corporate marketers would be wise to consider social networking media and related opportunities as part of their overall integrated marketing communications plans—for their own employees as well as their organizations as a whole.



YouTube—A Powerful Window on the World

As a public relations platform, the video sharing website from YouTube, Inc. (“YouTube”), purchased by Google in 2006, has also become a campaign debate platform, a medium for political discourse, and PR platform for campaigns themselves. In collaboration with CNN, for instance, YouTube hosted the Democratic Party’s July 2007 debate in Charleston SC and the Republican Party’s November 2007 debate in St. Petersburg FL. The access CNN provided was significant, with coverage of the Democratic debate yielding an estimated 2.6 million viewers, including the highest viewership in history for a debate among adults 18-34.² Additionally, Republican candidate Ron Paul created a YouTube channel that garnered more than 20,000 subscribers, while another Republican, Fred Thompson used the popular channel to denounce Michael Moore’s Sicko film.³ A Barack Obama speech, remade into a music video by the Black Eyed Peas rock group, was co-released on YouTube with over 2 million hits within its first five days of release⁴.

Yet the use of YouTube may also be a double-edged sword: as an unregulated medium, YouTube limits the control candidates can have over their own public images. Popular and embarrassing YouTube submissions in 2007 included Rudolph Giuliani “cross-dressing” and Hillary Clinton’s off-key rendition of the National Anthem. The fact that candidates are not bound to endorse messages provides a potential slander platform for slander, which that simply does not exist with a regulated medium, such as TV, mainstream print, and radio. A strength of YouTube is the medium’s drive for user flexibility and a willingness to relinquish control over use of messages and images. There’s a kind of built-in boldness and media courage associated with just the possibility of being subjected to this type of scrutiny. One indirect benefit is the ability to embed desired YouTube videos into web pages or to incorporate them as MySpace and Facebook page content.

Mobile Technology—An Area of Early Leadership for Business

Mobile technology is not new for political campaigns; for example, many groups over the past few years have leveraged text messaging functionality to great advantage, notifying interested parties of breaking news items and events. But mobile technology is one area in which corporate advertisers may be ahead of the political campaigns. A number of companies have enabled users to enter five digit “short code” on mobile devices to vote in polls, enter sweepstakes, download ringtones, and opt-in to distribution lists for product and service offerings. Not only are mobile ads highly efficient from a cost perspective, but many companies get dual benefits—receiving financial rewards from the cellular companies who provide the service. As mobile technology expands, with more people able to access a browser by phone, we expect mobile advertising campaigns to also grow in volume and customer reach.

What All This Means for Building and Protecting Brands

Candidates and corporations may be entering a new age where their brand is no longer their own—a time of collaborative, de-centralized brand management. It used to be that campaigns could create a candidate with a set of position papers and carefully wrought advertisements. That model has changed. Candidates and companies appear to have entered a more radical phase of marketing where brand—a guarded and highly valued asset—has now become part of the public domain. Consider the huge number of “average” citizens with access to a blog, Facebook page, or YouTube video, who now view themselves as rightful stakeholders in brands, whether that image property is a person like Barack Obama or a company like Apple.

New media have effectively ushered in the age of political and corporate brands as part of the popular culture, where they can be built-up, torn-down, dissected, analyzed and re-disseminated without the planning and vetting that goes into messages more formally devised for target audiences. The phrase “photoshop for democracy” has been used to describe the phenomenon. Photoshop is a popular graphics software program that allows users to impact an existing image with potential for significant change in effect. In this instance, the metaphor refers to a grassroots tool that is used both to champion and condemn candidates. The same can be true of company officials or a whole reputation.

Therefore, corporate marketers and decision makers have started to take more notice of both the opportunities and threats associated with this form of new media brand repackaging. Just as 2004 Democratic candidate Howard Dean famously built his campaign via new media, tapping into the collective power of his Internet-connected constituency, the same social software was later used to tear down the Dean brand. Video of his “I have a scream” speech circulated the Internet rapidly and to great negative effect – today, in fact, it’s said⁵ to be the most memorable remnant of the Presidential hopeful’s quest. At the same time, there are many stories of eye-catching product promotions that grab nearly as many viewers for advertisers over the Internet as in TV commercial placements. And JibJab Media, Inc., an edgy Internet graphics firm, is an example of how new media techniques catch on and extend to formal advertising campaigns. The company made a splash during the 2004 Presidential campaign by serving up on its jibjab.com website popular Bush and Kerry animated satire videos. It now features ads for corporations such as Pepsi⁶ and other major advertisers who use the same animated format to create successful viral marketing campaigns.

New media presents both opportunity and peril—a cautionary warning that deserves immediate attention from all brand-conscious marketers. The simple fact is that decentralized brand-building requires collaboration between companies and consumers. The problem is that companies are not used to collaborating with consumers, at least not directly, on their marketing approaches and outcomes. Yet it may prove to be a beneficial, aspirational goal. A well-designed and orchestrated plan of shared creative activities can result in as-yet unrealized opportunities for increased customer intimacy and loyalty. If, on the other hand, companies stick their heads in the sand on these issues or poorly manage their collaboration efforts, brand terrorists just might hijack their image and message. Consider these recommendations gleaned from past experiences—both political and corporate:

7 New Media Factors for Businesses to Consider

- 1. Know how customers collect, create and collaborate.** Even carefully crafted commercials, news releases, and websites are fair game for consumers to share, dismiss, revise, and challenge using new technology tools. Get out in front of these issues by identifying and engaging new media influencers. Monitor key blogs, social networking sites, and chat rooms that may provide leads on individuals relevant to your brand or cause—advocates, neutrals, or hostiles. Track how ideas spread, evolve, and impact others. Then nurture advocates with useful information while taking action to move neutrals to a positive direction. You may also consider developing your own “revisionist” acts; creativity does count with customers and can win you points if done well.
- 2. For better or worse, YouTube is egalitarian.** No matter how much you spend on production, there’s no guarantee your YouTube ad will be any more popular than other videos that address your brand. Slick and professional are not the hallmark of most popular YouTube videos. Before using YouTube as your own planned advertising medium, consider if someone else is already doing a more effective and catchy job on your behalf.
- 3. Facebook provides many plausible functions for markets, none of which is clearly dominant yet.** Facebook recently announced that it strategically wants to be viewed as an application platform, not just a social networking site⁷. While all of the Presidential campaigns have created a basic Facebook presence—not all that different from creating a simple web page or MySpace site—some have built custom applications that further extend functionality and are likely to enhance networks and mobilize communities. Facebook has also rolled out advertising functionality that allows precision in the types of ads targeted to specific segments.
- 4. Not responding is no longer an option.** Attacks cannot be ignored. From 1988 Presidential hopeful Michael Dukakis’ response to “Willy Horton” ads to John Kerry’s delayed counter-attack from “Swift Boat” veterans in 2004, America’s political campaigns have demonstrated clearly what happens when the attacked parties are either slow to respond or fail to retaliate at all – the attacker wins the day. New media, such as social networking and blogs, have greatly expanded the sources of threats and the speed at which attacks spread via community communications or viral marketing.

- 5. Brand terrorism may be right around the corner.** For many businesses it is not a matter of whether, but a matter of when, with regard to someone kidnapping your message. Consider your vulnerabilities now. Re-think and update your crisis management plan quarterly. Identify the required participants and how they will be contacted in an emergency. Be sure to incorporate a plan for how to leverage partners and affiliates in your response. Think “Swift Boating” on steroids. Regardless of attack source, that is, new media or old methods, new media needs to be at least one major part of the response, because more and more that’s how you will effectively reach audiences to make your case.
- 6. Your media plan may need shredding.** Visualize any number of your “worst nightmare scenarios” about what can go wrong in your company (e.g., watching an online video of your passengers helplessly stranded on a tarmac in a far-flung and dangerous locale, your CEO accused by a whistleblower of corporate fraud, thousands of pounds of your food product in a recall). Create a hypothetical media plan that features an appropriate blend of traditional and new media to deal with an issue of this type and then build in flexibility so you can scrap it and shift resources completely, if needed. Remember that brand-damaging information moves faster than good news every time.
- 7. Your organizational structure may be an impediment.** Consider a radical change in perspective about your organizational structure. For example, replace a monolithic marketing organization with smaller units to enhance market-sensing capabilities and nurture instincts. Bake in the ability to act and react faster. Re-define the notion of “smart hires” based on the new structure, and build teams that balance mature experience with youthful new-media instincts in order to achieve depth and significantly improve results in a business and media world that demands more, better, faster, and more nimble.

Presidential campaigns have often been harbingers of changes in the use of up-and-coming media options to shape images and communicate messages. As exposure to Campaign 2008 continues to presage new media trends in marketing, corporate decision makers may want to focus on how they can leverage these new ways of addressing news—good and bad—in private enterprise. Prevention of brand terrorism or any type of loss of control over image and messaging will require thoughtful due diligence, well-conceived strategies, and well-timed and effective tactics. But in the end, a strong proactive approach to the possibilities of new media, a sustained program of credible corporate responsibility, and transparency in all possible public dealings might be the most effective antidote. In short, collaborate with your consumers and other key stakeholders now, before they join the media bandwagon of someone or some group who intends to collaborate on your brand without you.



Media Technologies: 50 Years of Shaping—Good and Bad— Images, Content, and Audience Impressions

In the first ever televised presidential debate in 1960 between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John Kennedy, there was a distinct division of opinion about who won, depending on how audience members accessed the event. Specifically, among those who listened in by radio, Nixon won. For those who watched the contest on TV, Kennedy was the victor.⁸ The emergence of television as a powerful image medium from this watershed event marked a turning point for political campaigning and eventually for positioning of any key influential individual. Going forward, any public figure, whether a U.S. President or corporate CEO, would need to exist in a world where one's visual image and onscreen performance would have at least as much impact, if not more, than the content substance of a message.

Today, nearly 50 years later, that realization about the influence of technology has been extended far beyond TV to a wide range of new media – the web, mobile technologies, and in particular social networking web sites.

Use of the Internet in Campaigns

The year 1996 marked the first general and substantive use of the Internet in a presidential campaign. In these early uses, candidate sites were largely static and little more than the digitization of existing print brochures. By 2000, web technologies were more mature and campaign sites became interactive and two-way. Voters could contribute money online, post information, collaborate with other supporters, and sign up for notifications of events or new stories of interest to them.

It was 2004, though, that marked the first breakthrough period. In part due to changes in campaign financing laws, such as McCain-Feingold, third-party organizations (including 529's) came to fore. Not only did 2004 mark further advances in the use of advanced web techniques by campaigns, but so did the much expanded role of web sites of "influencer" organizations. These sites were positioned to be more aggressive in the use of new web techniques and incubators for strategies to mobilize specific voting segments. Presidential candidate Howard Dean raised over \$15 million in online contributions in the third quarter of 2003 alone⁹ in large part due to the influence and support of affiliate web sites.

It was, in fact, the Dean campaign that most exploited and elevated use of new media and the Internet. Dean generated a large and devoted following via his own web site and other friendly sites and newsgroups. He used the deanforamerica.com site to generate a record \$1 million in campaign funds by late May 2003, a first in US presidential elections.¹⁰ Dean used his site to organize an army of nationwide door-to-door volunteers who would distribute flyers and host meetings with other prospective supporters.¹¹ Dean also used his site to launch a successful voter turnover drive in Iowa, organizing a letter-writing campaign to uncommitted voters which won him the Iowa primary.¹²

By the 2006 congressional election cycle, the Internet was an established tool with capabilities that had broad impact, both positive and negative. Congressional candidates experimented with posting of MySpace pages and mimicked Dean's Internet fundraising model. The internet also became a larger threat for those caught in gaffes as demonstrated by the decline of George Allen's campaign for Senator from Virginia when a videotape of him uttering what appeared to be a racial slur was posted to YouTube.¹³

The continued adoption of Internet use, in particular social networking initiatives, has continued apace in the 2008 presidential campaign. The question now is whether the Internet will become simply an extension of traditional political tactics – another channel like TV, radio, rallies, and print – or drive further transformation in creating a true, two-way conversation in campaigning that has never before been possible with earlier media forms.

Leading that drive today are social networking functionality and applications, which enable third-party developers to create content that fits within a standard Facebook or MySpace interface, providing users with a one-stop shop for information. The Barack Obama Facebook application (<http://apps.facebook.com/obama/>), for example, aggregates content in a variety of ways: recent videos and speeches are available in close proximity to recent press articles, links are provided to other users' via the Facebook network (which can be both geographic or related to someone's background such as where they work or went to school), and opportunities are presented for viewers to donate.

All of the presidential campaigns have used MySpace. However, its chaotic nature has sometimes provided undesirable distractions. Due to the absence of tough identity verification techniques, some users, not directly affiliated with campaigns, have created MySpace sites "on behalf" of their candidates. A MySpace site created for Barack Obama by Joe Anthony¹⁴, <http://www.myspace.com/barackobama>, contributed significantly to early buzz about the candidate going back to 2006. When Obama formally entered the race, however, conflict ensued between the Obama campaign and Joe Anthony over site ownership, creating bad press for the candidate. What started as a net positive for Obama turned into, at best, a minor negative as supporters of the original space reacted unfavorably to the campaign's desired control of "their" site.¹⁵

While Facebook was originally designed as a way to meet and stay in touch with friends, users can now add others to their list of "friends." Among these friends are candidates running for office, who have profiles just like any other user. In addition to demographic data, a candidate's profile will also have a contact phone number for connecting users to a campaign hotline. There's also usually an opt-in application that collects the user's personal information and uses that information passively to provide them later on with campaign updates.

All of this promotes a very efficient means of sharing of information, which has come to be referred to as a viral marketing technique. Political information on Facebook is designed to be highly interactive, and the application interface is designed to allow users to spend large blocks of time browsing for information, while gaining a sense of connection with others doing the same. Real-time polls gather valuable voting preferences and offer the opportunity for users to write a few lines explaining choices. This, in turn, facilitates further dialogue among respondents. Moreover, all user discussions on Facebook are advertised as having a chance also to appear on ABC News, creating an extra measure of message productivity for those who participate.

A Primer for Corporations

Though Facebook did not emerge as a significant option in the marketing toolkit of political campaigns until the 2008 election cycle, the smaller elections of 2006 were marked by the creation of Facebook "groups" that identified user preferences for specific candidates and political issues. Groups were used primarily as a means of self-expression rather than to communicate information; while some were straightforward ("Students for McCain"), others had more pithy titles ("Friends Don't Let Friends Vote Republican").

Increasingly today, businesses are following in the steps of political campaigns. Many corporations now have posted, sponsored groups on Facebook that are developmentally similar to the original political groups. A filter for "sponsored groups" (meaning those with corporate affiliations) yields more than 220 entries in the winter of 2008.

Content-wise, these groups are often simply discussion boards where users can be found comparing products and sharing tips. Some groups offer guided tours of products and links to make purchases online. However, only a handful of groups offer content that is truly useful and unique to that site, such as job postings.

These potent and efficient technological breakthroughs provide a useful crucible for both political campaigns and corporations as they plan and manage new marketing and branding strategies. It is imperative for any individual or organization that wants to be perceived as leading-edge to have a significant presence on and affiliation with these new resources. One way or the other, the media today will find interesting ideas and institutions, so it's probably wise to exert as much proactive control up-front as possible.



Top 10 "Sponsored" Facebook Groups	Thousands of Members
Apple Students	432
PINK Victoria's Secret	348
Ticketmaster Live	165
NBA	116
The Battle for the UK's Favourite University	92
I'm Making a Difference	70
Aerie by American Eagle	51
Take a Step Against Cervical Cancer	45
Chase +1	45
Southwest Airlines	43
Source: http://www.facebook.com/srch.php	

Endnotes

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