

Establishing a Strategic Online Presence: What Political Campaigns Can Learn From Nonprofit Online Organizing

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Like Columbus discovering a land already inhabited, political campaigns in 2004 stumbled upon a precious resource that has actually been utilized for the last decade: online activism. Now, as the 2006 cycle approaches, politicians are working to revive the enthusiasm that gripped the nation last year, when millions engaged in online activism, fund raising and communications.

Many of the techniques were tried, tested and perfected by nonprofit organizations. Those groups have been using the Internet to shape public policy for the better part of the last decade. Countless national nonprofits have lists of hundreds of thousands of dedicated online supporters and raise more than \$1 million dollars per year online. Because these supporters will call a legislator, write a letter to the editor, donate and volunteer at a moment's notice, they have become an integral piece of nonprofit organizations' issue campaigns.

While nonprofit organizations have longer term goals than political campaigns, they have developed online methods that are useful in the campaign world. When putting together your campaign's online strategy, consider the following lessons that nonprofits have learned from online planning, recruitment, list management and systems.

Develop a communications plan. Establish a mix of education, fund raising and other engaging activities for your list subscribers to undertake. When an organization is not in the middle of a legislative fight, we generally recommend that it communicate with the members of its list no less than twice a month. At least one e-mail should request that a supporter take action, which can constitute anything from writing a letter to the editor, sending a message to a legislator, making an online contribution, or attending a local event.

Recent history shows that online activists gradually become less responsive if they are repeatedly asked to sign online petitions or send messages to law-makers. Balance is key. Nonprofit organizations that fail to provide their members with creative ways to stay involved will often see a sharp decline in their e-mail open rates.

Also consider how the online activist and/or donor fits into your organization and figure out ways to "give back" to your online list members. The National Resources Defense Council's www.SaveBioGems.org provides supporters with points for taking action that can be later redeemed for screen-savers and other tokens of gratitude. Other strategies include thanking activists and donors for their involvement, recognizing them as important members of the organization, providing prompt follow-up information on an action they took, and integrating them into other aspects of the organization, such as field activities, press conferences and direct mail. Integrate online outreach into all aspects of the campaign.

To ensure a successful integration of the online program into other activities of the organization, nonprofit organizations have found that it pays to include their online director in strategic planning and regular management meetings. Moreover, as it is the online director's responsibility to communicate with the organization's online members, keeping him or her in the loop on new developments should ensure that those on your e-mail list will be informed, too.

Some key areas where nonprofits have benefited from integration include:

- **Direct mail**--E-mail messages and fund-raising appeals should have a similar look and feel, and should arrive simultaneously. One effective approach is to send a direct mail appeal with a specific deadline, followed by one more offline appeal that says, "You can still give if you give online."
- **Phone communication**--Follow up an online action with phone calls to supporters. Smoke-Free Ohio, for instance, called online supporters who had submitted a personal story and invited them to record a public service announcement for local radio stations, ultimately generating more than 100 new activists every day.
- **Field work**--Target e-mail campaigns at particular geographic areas where the campaign is in the field. NARAL Pro-Choice America's www.GiveUsRealChoices.org campaign provides a good example of how to target state policies by engaging online activists in offline petition gathering. The signatories of the petition are in turn converted into online activists.

Build a Web site that benefits the campaign. Make sure your online program priorities are reflected in your Web site's structure, content and appearance. Ask yourself: How can you optimize the appearance and functionality of the main page to encourage visitors to provide their contact information. How can you motivate site visitors to donate. How can you provide information in a way that our different audiences will find useful and will benefit the campaign. Remember to save a substantial percentage of your online program budget for projects other than Web site development. It is hard to imagine an online program that should not have at least 50 percent of the budget going to online marketing, outreach and e-mail communications. Sites alone will not drive donations and volunteerism.

Recruit supporters. Given that organizations expect their e-mail constituency to be the largest source of online donations and a significant volunteer resource, expanding their e-mail lists is a key priority.

Organic growth generates genuine support. Nonprofit organizations have discovered that simply buying e-mail lists (e.g. a voter file) does not necessarily translate into an online membership list of committed supporters and donors. It is therefore essential to not only seek out venues to drive traffic to your site but to design recruitment campaigns that inspire visitors to become activists and subscribers.

Use petition and messaging campaigns. The most effective recruitment drives are founded on issues, not just organizations. Analogously, a campaign should engage subsets of people on particular areas of interest. Use timely online petitions and messaging campaigns that ask activists to become involved with the organization via an issue important to them. MoveOn.org does a particularly good job of developing issue campaigns that use the momentum of current events to encourage activism.

Extend your reach with viral marketing. Each Web page--fund raising or activism--should have a "tell a friend" option that a visitor can use to send an email message about a specific issue or campaign to friends and family. After users take action on any issue, they should immediately be asked to tell others.

When this function is consistently implemented, we find that 25 percent of all e-activists will tell an average of four friends and family members about the campaign. The urgency of the issue affects the number of friends' responses, but the rate is frequently 30 percent.

Test, track and improve your tactics. All too often, campaigns fall into the trap of operating by instinct when they adopt an Internet strategy. It can be difficult to remember that campaign staff is not the target audience.

One of the most critical components for success is tracking and testing. To evaluate the effectiveness of the various strategies, many successful nonprofit organizations regularly track whether or not people are opening their mail, taking action, or telling their friends about the campaign on a regular basis. Reviewing the results and adjusting tactics can provide substantial increases in donations and recruitment rates.

We recommend conducting this type of review at least quarterly--possibly monthly--in the initial stages. Many of the online tools being marketed to electoral campaigns and nonprofit organizations now have built-in reporting and testing features that can dramatically simplify this type of analysis.