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Riding the web to the White House

Internet proved an invaluable tool in helping Barack Obama's campaign raise money, engage voters and get his message out

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Before the campaign, Obama was a long shot. A hypothetical Obama-McCain matchup, simulated in 2006, predicted a landslide for McCain (510 to 38 in the Electoral College, according to SurveyUSA). Two years later, Obama commented in his victory speech, "To my campaign manager David Plouffe, my chief strategist David Axelrod, and the best campaign team ever assembled in the history of politics, you made this happen." How did they do it?

Fundraising constituted a major battleground.

Harnessing the Internet for direct donations on campaign websites, Obama's campaign raised \$742 million by Nov. 24, 2008. This money came from large numbers of people each giving, on average, less than \$100.

Fundraising was so successful that, after the Democratic convention, the Obama campaign turned down \$84 million in U.S. public-sponsored funding in order to permit continued private fundraising. By contrast, the McCain campaign only raised \$346 million and accepted \$84 million from the federal government, in return for accepting restrictions on private fundraising after the Republican convention in August. Ironically, McCain, himself, had written the applicable campaign fundraising law (the 2002 McCain-Feingold bill). But Obama's campaign functioned better under these rules.

Another major battleground in this election consisted of use of new Internet media for efficacious low-cost mass communications. Both campaigns used e-mail, of course, but

Obama's campaign used it more extensively. Many voters, particularly Democrats, are still receiving at least weekly e-mails from Obama, Michelle, David Plouffe, or others from the new administration in continued outreach.

Obama's campaign, and private supporters, also posted YouTube videos, Facebook pages, a Flickr photostream, and even a presence in the virtual world Second Life.

These information sources enabled online discussion among communities of supporters in public and private blogs, as participants could retrieve high-quality media to supplement their views.

A year ago, an executive MBA class (taught by one of the authors) was new to seeing Obama on a YouTube video; by now, many of these same people have themselves downloaded U.S. election-related videos, even if it is just a Saturday Night Live spoof. Most of these Internet tools have been used in other elections - but rarely in such an extensive, co-ordinated fashion.

We are not claiming that the Internet and the new media were the only important battlegrounds.

The campaign executed on the traditional methods of face-to-face canvassing, personal selling, fundraising, media coverage, local successes, and advertising. Obama's organization of volunteers and professionals was extensive, with many offices in all U.S. states.

Obama and his representatives met with small groups in small towns in states such as Iowa and New Hampshire, and addressed stadium-filled audiences in Florida, Missouri, and other states. Individuals interested in learning about the candidate could read (or listen to a CD with the author, himself, reading) one of two memoirs -- either his early life in Hawaii, Indonesia, Chicago and visits to Kenya, or his subsequent experiences and views about politics, as a state and U.S. senator.

The media blitz culminated with a well-publicized, half-hour infomercial on three major networks and several cable networks costing about \$5 million, which the campaign referred to as Obama's "closing argument."

The campaign even prepared for eventualities that proved unnecessary. "On election day, I will be managing the largest law firm in the country, albeit for one day," said Charles Lichtman, who had more than 5,000 volunteer lawyers on call for Nov. 4 to safeguard voters' rights. The effort evidenced the multifaceted nature of organizing and planning in this campaign.

Although Obama's past work in Chicago as a "community organizer" was occasionally minimized or even derided by opponents during the campaign, these same community organizing skills appeared to be instrumental in creating a national campaign at the grassroots level.

Even the most competent tactical media management, however, relies on a core strategic message that resonates with voters. In marketing, we talk about the importance of setting the right "value proposition." This consists of identifying and emphasizing the essence of what is being offered to consumers.

Recognizing the frustrations of the U.S. electorate, Obama selected hope and change as central elements of his value proposition. These two themes apply well to both foreign and domestic policy, and given current troubled times, many people around the world crave both.

Obama's application of these themes afforded sufficient flexibility to permit a shift in emphasis from foreign policy at the beginning of the campaign to economic policy after the financial crisis emerged at the end of the campaign.

Obama's tag line, "Yes, we can," embodied the underlying theme of hope. Obama's message at a deeper level can be interpreted as "Yes, we can change." The theme of change was reinforced by the other tag line "Change we need." Commentators have noted how well the Obama campaign stayed "on message," and, as a case in point, Obama closed his victory speech with the same message used when he began the campaign -- even the same words: "This is our time -- to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth -- that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope, and where we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes We Can."

Overall, successful campaigns require both insightful positioning and effective implementation -- both strategy and tactics. In the recent U.S. election, Obama's campaign benefited from both. We believe that this campaign will be studied for many years.

So, would Obama have won without the Internet? While we can never really know, what we do know is that the campaign succeeded, even though it started without deep pockets and faced established and entrenched competitors. We expect that history will show that the Internet and new media helped democratize and decentralize communications in the last U.S. election.

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