

Obama and the power of social media and technology

This case was prepared by Victoria Chang under the supervision of Professor Jennifer Aaker as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. Contributors included Joe Rospars, Chris Hughes, Sam Graham-Felsen, Kate Albright-Hanna, Scott Goodstein, Steve Grove, Randi Zuckerberg, Chloe Sladden and Brittany Bohnet.

In early 2007, Barack Obama was a little-known senator running for president against Democratic nominee and household name, Hilary Clinton. But on November 4, 2008, Obama, 47, was the first African American to win the election against Republican candidate, John McCain, becoming the 44th president of the United States.

Obama won by nearly 200 electoral and 8.5 million popular votes. A major success factor was how Obama's campaign used social media and technology as an integral part of its strategy, to raise money, and, more importantly, to develop a groundswell of empowered volunteers who felt they could make a difference. Obama won by "... converting everyday people into engaged and empowered volunteers, donors and advocates through social networks, e-mail advocacy, text messaging and online video. The campaign's proclivity to online advocacy is a major reason for his victory"¹ (Exhibit 1).

Obama's campaign garnered 5 million supporters on social networks. By November 2008, Obama had approximately 2.5 million (some sources say 3.2 million²) Facebook supporters, outperforming McCain by nearly four times. Obama had over 115,000 follow-

ers on Twitter, more than 23 times those of McCain. Fifty million viewers spent 14 million hours watching campaign-related videos on YouTube, four times McCain's viewers.³ The campaign sent out 1 billion e-mails, including 10,000 unique messages targeted at specific segments of their 13-million member list. The campaign had garnered 3 million

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mobile and SMS subscribers. On Election Day alone, supporters received three texts (Exhibit 2).⁴

The campaign's social network, www.my.barackobama.com (MyBO), allowed individuals to connect to one another and activate themselves on behalf of the campaign. Two million profiles were created. Registered users and volunteers planned over 200,000 offline events, wrote 400,000 blog posts, and created 35,000 volunteer groups. Obama raised \$639 million from 3 million donors, mostly through the Internet.⁵ Volunteers on MyBO generated \$30 million on 70,000 personal fundraising pages.⁶ Donors made 6.5 million donations online, totaling more than \$500 million. Of those donations, 6 million were in increments of \$100 or less, the average being \$80. The average donor gave more than once. The campaign not only used these tools more effectively than other candidates to organize, communicate, and fundraise, but also leveraged them to support its grassroots strategy that tapped into the hearts of the voters. What resulted was both a victory for the Democrats and Obama, and the legacy of one of the most effective Internet marketing plans in history, where social media and technology enabled the individual to activate and participate in a movement.

The Beginning

Hiring Right

In January 2007, Obama hired 25-year-old Joe Rospars to work on the tools and systems that were not technology related. Rospars had started Blue State Digital⁷ while working on the Dean campaign: "It was frustrating to see people want to get involved, but not

be able to get involved," he said. The Obama campaign had just hired Kevin Malover, founding CIO of Orbitz, as CTO. Malover and his predecessor had already decided to use Blue State to build much of the technology backbone, in particular www.barackobama.com, supported by MyBO. Rospars went on leave from Blue State to work on the campaign's content, organizing, and fundraising.

The New Media Department "...was the first department to exist in the way that it did," according to head Rospars. It gave respect to new media and was responsible for everything related to the Internet beyond the technical areas. A separate shop run by the CTO handled the technology. Rospars had the same "rank" as the communications, field, finance and political directors. All of these directors reported up to the campaign manager, David Plouffe. Rospars felt that this integration of the department with the rest of the campaign was critical to the group's success: "All of our goals and metrics were derivative of the larger campaign goals. You could track everything we did back to dollars or more volunteers," he said.

Traditional campaigns typically focused on getting votes and money. The Obama team's grassroots efforts revolved around asking for a third element: time, which meant involvement and engagement.

In early 2007, a series of young talented team leaders were hired. Chris Hughes, 25, a cofounder of Facebook, became director of internal organizing and one of the key players behind MyBO. In 2006, as midterm elections approached, Facebook had begun to allow political candidates to set up modified

The Crawl, Walk, Run Methodology for Social Media

Establish online credibility and trust through a stepped approach

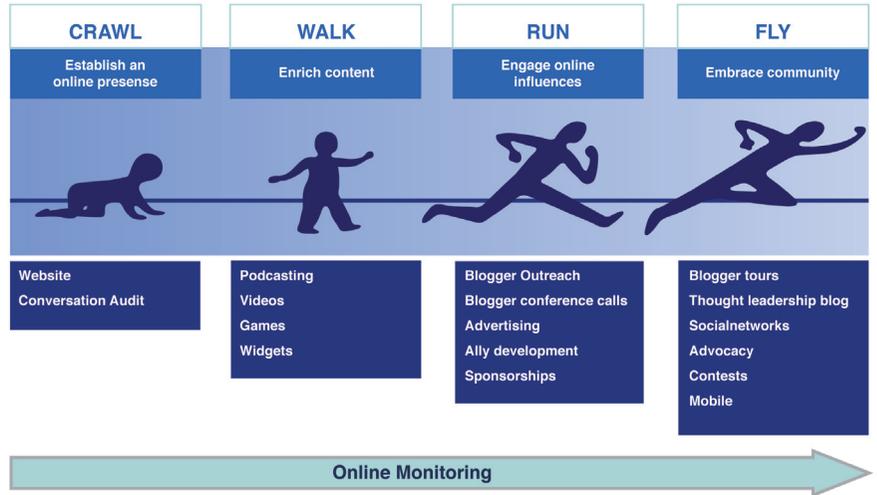


Exhibit 1

Source: Edelman Research, "The Social Pulpit," 2009, p. 10.

profiles.

Obama was not a candidate, but had wanted one. Hughes also supervised the text messaging and voter registration programs, and the structural issues around integrating with the field program.

Pre-Primary and Caucus

Empowering People

When Obama announced his candidacy in February 2007, the team launched its two sites. Rospars emphasized the "ethos that went into the tools...The relationship that Obama built with individual supporters and between them was the unique part. Our tools were sort of the glue for the relationships, but if you're not running a campaign where people understand that those relationships are central to winning, they don't care about tools on your website." The campaign understood that it needed to provide a variety of ways for people to be involved. On MyBO, registered users could create a profile, connect with others, create and find local offline events, raise funds and download tools. The more active a user, the more empowered s/he was. Traditional campaigns typically focused on getting

votes and money. The Obama team's grassroots efforts revolved around asking for a third element: time, which meant involvement and engagement. Rospars said: "We established the notion of running a bottom-up campaign strategy and the idea that we needed to build a national grassroots movement."

Going Where the People Are

Scott Goodstein, 33, joined in February 2007 as external online director. He focused on 15 social networks.⁹ Obama was the first presidential candidate to have profiles on AsianAve.com, MiGente.com, and BlackPlanet.com. Goodstein said: "These social networks are shopping malls that have millions of people already hanging out in them. So the question becomes, how to find the people that are going to be your advocates and have them talk about your message?" Even though they were an important part of the strategy, Rospars noted that they "... were never a driver of fundraising. They were really more about starting the relationships."

Micro Giving and Real Stories

By March 2007, the team had grown to 15. On developing a fundraising campaign Rospars

The content and video teams were key players in supporting the fundraising strategy. Showcasing the 75,000th donor on the blog, by e-mail and on the website, inspired a chain effect on others.

said: "When we did our first set of fundraising, our goal was the number of people we wanted giving, not the dollar amount." Sam Graham-Felsen, 25, joined the team as lead blogger, to focus on telling stories and blogging. He said: "Joe told me he wanted to tell the story of how the Obama campaign was bigger than just Obama; how it was a movement of ordinary people." Working closely with Graham-Felsen, Kate Albright-Hanna, 31, joined as director of video in April 2007. She and her team put many of the human stories on video.

The content and video teams were key players in supporting the fundraising strategy. Showcasing the 75,000th donor on the blog, by e-mail and on the website, inspired a chain effect on others. The campaign eventually had over 3 million donors, but, at the time, 75,000 seemed like a large number. Graham-Felsen said: "We found out the donor was an African-American computer programmer. He told us that he wasn't comfortable telling his daughter that she could be anything because he didn't think she could be president. But Obama made him feel like he could be honest when he told her she could be anything she wanted to be." The campaign focused on such powerful real stories of ordinary people, making them feel part of it. Steve Grove, head of YouTube politics said: "The campaign had uploaded over 1,800 videos, viewed over 110 million times. Tech President did a calculation that YouTube was worth \$47 million to the Obama campaign if they had bought TV dollars and

they didn't spend a penny on it."

E-mail and Texting

Stephen Geer joined in 2007, launching the e-mail program in May. The e-mail team had three goals: message, mobilization and money. In terms of mobilization, its three-word mantra was: respect, empower, and include.⁹ The campaign developed more than 7,000 customized e-mails tailored to individual prospects. The texting program was also launched in May, sending between 5 and 20 targeted messages per month. Supporters could text "HOPE" to subscribe.

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Integrating the Old with the New

Walk for Change was a national grassroots canvassing program. The other campaigns were not doing anything similar. Walk for Change held statewide canvasses in the early states where the campaign had staff (Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina), as well as in all other 47 non-staffed states. Supporters organized 1,000 events using the planning tool. Rospars said: "It was about building a broader movement and getting more people involved." The video team shot some of these events and aired them on YouTube. Rospars added: "It was one of the first big challenges of integrating the new way of organizing with the traditional, and using both to make each other better."

E-mail Matching Campaign

In mid-2007, the team invented grassroots matching. They sent out two e-mails: the first



asked prior donors to give again if the campaign could find a new donor to donate the same amount; in the second, non-donors were told that if they donated any amount, the campaign would find a match from someone who had already donated. "This was incredibly compelling," said Rospars. "We raised tens of millions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of people made connections with other grassroots supporters."

"Dinner with Barack"

"Dinner with Barack turned traditional fundraising upside down," said Rospars. Traditional fundraising dinners allowed donors of high dollar amounts to buy access. The Obama campaign did the opposite and



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January 2008, the department had grown to approximately 25 staff members. The team, like the entire campaign, had all eyes on winning Iowa. Hughes said: "Every staff meeting, David would ask, 'What did you do today to help us win in Iowa?'"¹¹ Obama won and Hughes said: "It was a real flashpoint for the campaign. We could see that our organization was strong and that the message was resonating."¹² When Obama came off a stage after speaking, the team e-mailed supporters.

When Obama lost in New Hampshire, the volunteer networks within MyBO "became critically important," according to Plouffe. "When we turned to the community, they were there. We were there to support the people, but that simply would not have been possible if we did not have a set of online tools that enabled us to do that."¹³ Rospars added: "We needed every leg we could stand on. The community turned out to be that leg."¹⁴ By June 2008, the team had 30 members. Obama won in Maryland and Virginia. Marcia Carlyn, co-administrator of the Loudoun County for Obama group, said: "We couldn't have done this without the MyBO site."¹⁵

On August 23, 2008, the team sent a text

selected four donors of any amount who had shared their stories to meet Obama in a dinner setting and discuss their issues. The events were broadcast on YouTube and the campaign's websites (Exhibit 3). "Interestingly, a lot of people read the stories of other donors and were inspired to give," said Rospars. "The stories put a human face on donors. Twenty-five thousand new people gave \$5, and we were able to provide a huge new list of people who'd made some level of commitment to fuel our organizers."

Creating Big Moments

In September 2007, the campaign was more than 20 percent down in the polls and the team was looking for ways to create "big

moments." A rally in New York was planned following the success of one in Texas during the first month of the campaign. Volunteers helped organize the rally. The team sent e-mails to supporters around the country. "We wanted everyone to take ownership of putting the rally together and feel responsible for its success," said Rospars.

2008 Caucuses and Primaries

The Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary drew attention because they often gave a candidate momentum to win the party nomination. Winning Iowa would prove that Obama had mainstream popularity.¹⁰ By

to 1 million subscribers announcing that Senator Joe Biden would be Obama's running mate. Nielsen Mobile called it the largest mobile marketing event in the U.S. to date.¹⁶

Two Breakthrough Tools

Neighbor-to-Neighbor was launched in September 2008 and allowed logged-in users on MyBO to see a list of undecided voters who needed to be called or reached by going door-to-door. Volunteers were matched with undecided voters, had access to a script, customized flyer, and easy interfaces to report back. Volunteers used the tool to make 8 million calls.¹⁷

Instead of going door-to-door to register voters, the Vote for Change voter-registration site registered a million people online. It also showed logged-in users which of their friends in battleground states were not registered and encouraged them to talk to them and help get them registered.

By December 2008 the team had peaked at approximately 100 people. Rospars said: "We were running 25 different battleground state programs, the national program, the constituency programs, the rapid response, fundraising, and organizing aspects of everything. Every single person was working up to 20 hours a day, making a huge difference."

Linking Online and Offline

During the four days prior to the election, the team worked on several things. If a supporter had given a zip code or other information, and visited the websites right before the election, the front pages listed an offline event near them. Rospars added: "This was the moment of truly linking the offline and online universes ... we had this direct shortcut that said, 'get off the website and go do this specific thing at a specific place and time.'"

Making sure voters knew the location of their polling places was an important focus. Anyone who had given an e-mail address received a reminder to vote along with the polling address and hours. Another tool allowed a voter to look up his/her polling place. Moreover, in battleground states, the website would list five people who had the same polling place and encouraged the supporter to call or knock on their doors

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Steve Grove from YouTube.

and "take them with you... That was part of our strategy of never letting people feel like there was not something else that they could do to help," said Rospars. The e-mail team followed up on Election Day, sending a list of five likely voters in a supporter's neighborhood with encouragement to help them get out to vote, and emphasizing a supporter's "sense of ownership."¹⁸ On Election Day, Twitter was used to post toll-free numbers and texting strings for finding polling locations, as well as volunteer opportunities. After Obama won, the million people who had been receiving text updates and announcements received one final message: "All of this happened because of you. Thanks, Barack."¹⁹

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The Legacy

Obama changed the way elections were run and would be run in the future. He and his team showed the power of social media and technology and more importantly, that individuals could make a difference if given the right tools and encouragement. They showed that technology was not just a "tool in the arsenal, but a transformative force," according to Jascha Franklin-Hodge of Blue State Digital. "The campaign understood the power of the Internet to get people engaged in the process on a scale never done before."²⁰

Steve Grove from YouTube summarized: "There's a tendency to think of new media as a secret sauce that suddenly unlocks this viral potential and there's truth to that. But... they had a very talented candidate who was a great communicator and a campaign that matched and mirrored very well with the Internet: openness, inclusiveness, self-organizing, grassroots. If they hadn't had that philosophy, they wouldn't have gone anywhere."

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Notes

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E-mail	13 million people on the e-mail list Who received 7,000 variations of more than 1 billion e-mails ⁴
Donors	3 million online donors Who contributed 65.5 millions times ⁵
Social Networks	5 million "friends" on more than 15 social networking sites 3 million friends on Facebook alone ⁶
Web site	8.5 million monthly visitors to MyBarackObama.com (at peak) ⁷ 2 million profiles with 400,000 log posts 35,000 volunteer groups that held 200,000 offline events 70,000 fundraising hubs that raised \$30 million ⁸
Video	Nearly 2,000 official YouTube videos Watched more than 80 million times, with 135,000 subscribers 442,000 user-generated videos on YouTube ⁹
Mobile	3 million people signed up for the text messaging program Each received 5 to 20 messages per month ¹⁰
Phone calls	3 million personal phone calls placed in the last four days of the campaign ¹¹

Source: Edelman Research, "The Social Pulpit," 2009, p. 4.

Obama vs. McCain				
2x	4x	5x	10x	365 electoral votes
Web site traffic	YouTube viewers	Facebook friends	Online staff	66.8 million popular votes

Exhibit 2

Source: Edelman Research, "The Social Pulpit," 2009, p. 2.

Exhibit 3

Source: my.barackobama.com/page/content/dinner.