

**Campaign Strategy Newsletter 46 November 2008**  
**Learning From The Obama Campaign**

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What can campaigners learn from Obama's campaign strategy? Amongst the torrent of comment, one useful article to read is from the ever insightful Duane Raymond at FairSay.

See <http://fairsay.com/blog/obamas-win-and-the-power-of-networking> (I've pasted most of it below as it's so good, and added a few other points of my own).

Duane points out that it was not 'the internet wot dunnit' but networking. Given that almost every organisation trying to run campaigns seems convinced that it needs to "make better use of the internet", Raymond's piece is a helpful thing to put in front of managers who espouse this point of view but then don't resource networking. Theirs is the same thinking that used to say "we need more publicity" on the assumption that if you appeared in the media, you'd somehow generate results in terms of real change. But publishing, sending out 'messages' or even getting a lot of hits online has no more guarantee of a result that counts than featuring in the newspapers or on tv.

Duane Raymond writes:

*"... one point I think is key is that it was not the use of the Internet that helped make the campaign successful, it was the building and mobilisation of a network. While the Internet made this easier, faster and perhaps bigger than has been done before, if a better tool for networking came along for the next election then it would be wise to use it and not the Internet (although I don't think it will! for decades!). Why the Distinction ?*

*This distinction is important because if you think it was the Internet that made a big difference, then you could use the Internet without ever using networking. However if you think of campaigning as networking then you plan to use the right tool for the right task and the Internet will be part of that.*

*Networking is key because it is about not only establishing a relationship with supporters, but also about sustaining it, developing it, extending it and helping supporters do the same.*

*It was because of the Obama Campaign's networking that they were able to raise \$650 million USD and it was because of the networking that they didn't have to spend it on hiring 'local canvassers' as the McCain campaign did, but could instead spend it on offices, ads, staff, etc.*

*Obvious? To many of us, yes. But too many people I come across in campaigning organisations (outside those working full-time online) still don't get this point - so I thought it worth pointing out again."*

He adds:

*"So what did the Obama Campaign do in this area?:*

- 1. Focused on collecting email and/or contact details at every touch point*
- 2. Stored the data they collected in databases for easy segmenting and targeting*
- 3. Has a graduated scale of actions supporters could take from donating to organising*
- 4. Put the data and the tools to use it in the hands of the volunteer supporters (as well as staff) so they could use it locally to identify and recruit supporters and mobilise them on election day*

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5. *Asked for a small donation on every occasion - and had incentives to donate like matched donations for new donors and a message from an existing donor so it was a social experience*
6. *Used the Internet in timely ways to recruit, engage, mobilise, record data and deliver the tools to use the data. Ultimately this was about mobilising people face-to-face not online. The Internet only helped reach out to potential and existing supporters.*

*So while networking was not the only factor in the success of the Obama campaign (e.g. other factors were a public disenchanted with Republican leadership, the economic downturn, Obama as a great inspirer, McCain's choice of Palin as VP candidate), it underpinned all of his other activities by bring the people and money resources needed to win the campaign.*

#### *What Campaigning Organisations can Learn*

*Campaigning organisations can learn a lot from this and could likely do it better than the Obama campaign if they put their minds to it. They could do better because they:*

- *Have more specific issues*
- *Have existing passionate supporters*
- *Do not have a polarised opposition*
- *Do not dissolve the campaign once it has been won but instead re-focus it on related issues.*

*Some may grumble about the lack of budget, but the Obama Campaign started with little and grew to \$650 million USD in less than 2 years. The Atheist Campaign [<http://fairsay.com/blog/donating-is-a-campaigning-action>] in the UK raised £100,000 in 3 days - during a time of recession. I can only conclude from this that much more is possible of campaigning organisations are a bit bolder and have bigger visions. Even deeper may be the failure to focus on value / return instead of cost which is a cronic problem in most campaigning organisation....but that is another blog post :-)*

*So campaigning organisations should learn from this:*

1. *Integrated planning ensure all mediums can contribute to acheiving the same objectives according to their strengths*
2. *The real power is in the network of people.*
3. *The Internet can help networking by helping to:*
  - *Connect to people*
  - *Connect people with each others*
  - *Allow people to connect with the campaign*
4. *Ask campaigning supporters to donate and they will (with good timing, specific asks and/or good incentives)*
5. *Ask campaigning supporters to volunteer in specific ways and they will*
6. *Focus on what produces the best return, not what costs the most"*

#### **What Else Was Important For Campaigners To Note?**

What else is firstly that the use of the internet will have eroded the effect of mainstream media framing, and then the result has triggered a switch of frames by the media, and secondly, that this campaign had an instrumental objective which counted.

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**A Switch of Frames**

The use of internet networking was probably important in getting Obama elected because it enabled the campaign to speak directly to and with its supporters, and them with one another, creating a communications reality independent of the "mainstream media".

It is fairly obvious even from abroad that the US media has tended to be biased to the 'right' but in 2007 an excellent report *Why A Conservative America Is a Myth* [1] showed just how significant this is. Using independent sources, that report showed on trend after trend [2] that America had become progressively more 'progressive' or 'left leaning' from the 1980s to the 2000s, and overall leant to the 'left'. The media however had systematically denied this, even interpreting Democratic electoral successes as evidence that America was an inherently, profoundly 'conservative' country. Such denial is of course a great example of 'framing', in which evidence contrary to the frame is denied, ignored, filtered out or reinterpreted to support the frame [3].

To quote from that report:

*"On election night 2006, Fox News Washington managing editor Brit Hume acknowledged that Democrats were winning, but stressed that "from what we could see from all the polling and everything else, it remains a conservative country." He did not say what "polling and everything else" he was referring to. Glenn Beck of CNN Headline News agreed, stating the following day that despite the Democratic victory, "the majority of Americans seem in favor of classically Republican points of view."*

*But it was not just conservatives; in fact, they were simply repeating what they had heard mainstream journalists say for some time. "This is basically not a liberal country," said John Harris, then of The Washington Post and now of The Politico, in May 2005. "It's a conservative country." Previewing the Democrats' prospects for victory three weeks before the 2006 election, CNN senior political correspondent Candy Crowley asserted that Democrats have been "on the losing side of the values debate, the defense debate and, oh yes, the guns debate." (Crowley presented no evidence that Democrats had been "on the losing side" of any of these debates.)*

*After the election, journalists found their explanation for the Democratic victory: they ran conservative candidates. "These Democrats that were elected last night are conservative Democrats," said CBS' Bob Schieffer the next day. "The Democrats' victory was built on the back of more centrist candidates seizing Republican-leaning districts," wrote The Washington Post. The New York Times anticipated the election with the headline, "In Key House Races, Democrats Run to the Right."*

This "cat is dog" reiteration and the interpretation "if it has succeeded the cat must have become a dog", will have had an effect similar to the persistent media framing of climate change as a 'debate' or 'controversy' discussed in the article *Sustaining Disbelief* [4] at this website:

ie It will have both deterred some from voting Democrat (as it appeared hopeless) and deterred some from voting at all. It will also have inhibited 'progressive' policy and actions outside of elections by lending media weight to challengers and sowing doubt in the minds of potential converts. While it will have a bigger impact on some than others, because of the psychological tendency to behave as we are told we behave, and the desire to 'fit in', if our communications environment constantly tells us something is true, it will have an influence on our view of reality and thus our behaviour.

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Obama's victory was, by non-US standards, achieved by a small swing in voting. Previous Democratic challengers had come very close but this time the result - a Democratic President - was simply too decisive for the frame to be sustained. The host of factors associated with the fact that Obama was not white, and the cultural earthquake that shook Republicans after Wall Street crashed, were powerful additional and emotional ingredients suggesting that this was a 'new world'. Even Fox News has, as commentators have noted [5], tried to swing behind the 'new mood' and 'abandoned' its right wing audience.

The old adage that the media operates by the dictum "first simplify then exaggerate" is certainly true of most of the news media, and we might expand this to "first simplify then exaggerate and deny evidence to the contrary". This is why the media is often the most conservative voice in social debates, and then presents change, when it finally recognizes it, as a dramatic tipping point or threshold which it has just uncovered. This of course helps create drama and sell newspapers and increase tv ratings and means that the mainstream media is very poor at creating awareness of gradual changes, and a dangerously poor educator of the public about reality. The media's conceit that it has its finger on the pulse of public reality is one of the great obstacles to campaigning and often endangers our planet, health, rights and well-being.

Obviously in this case, the way Obama's team used the internet finally outweighed the impact of contrary factors such as this media denial of 'progressive values', and he got elected. The underlying reality though was a gradual change, both in predominant cultural attitudes and in the availability and efficacy of the web not a sudden convulsion of American attitudes.

Those of us who are concerned about issues such as climate change then, 'got lucky'. Emissions will be down and we may, if we are lucky and clever, see a much faster restructuring of industry and consumption thanks to recession: a simple if painful silver lining effect. And we got not just a Democrat as US President but one who will now be presented by the media - using "first simplify then exaggerate and deny evidence to the contrary", as symbolising, driving and facilitating a new reality in which many truths of the pre-Obama GWB era are thrown out in favour of their opposites. As in J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* in which characters in wizard paintings can slip between frames, the media will have smoothly shed the simple truths of the frame America-is-conservative and settled into the frame America-is-progressive. No time then to slow up on campaigns but time to make hay and hope the sun keeps shining.

### The Action Mechanism

Back to Duane Raymond's post at his blog. The other thing he did not say about Obama's internet networking strategy, but which we might note, is the obvious fact that there was an election. In other words, the Obama internet-networking strategy was significant because it could lead to a result that mattered in the real world. Too often, too many cyber-campaign strategies let themselves down because they do not lead to an instrumental result, and simply achieve awareness or alignment. See the basics of campaign strategy '12 basic guidelines: Right components... right order' at [http://www.campaignstrategy.org/cr12\\_4.html](http://www.campaignstrategy.org/cr12_4.html) for the sequence awareness> alignment> engagement> action.

In electoral politics the system supplies you with the objective and the action-mechanism: the election itself. In most social campaigning, where on health, environment, human rights or other issues, there is

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no such pre-formed target and you need to do your issue mapping and test and create a critical path to find the sequence of actions that can get to the desired result. As discussed in the post *A Time For Strategy* [6], the enthusiasm for addressing individuals has led some campaigns to become all outreach and no strategy. However clever your online campaign may be, it has to lead to real world change to be of any use. Or as Winston Churchill put it: *"However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."*

Finally - see <http://change.gov/>

### **Campaigning Your Way Out Of Recession**

Those who are looking at ways to use investment in renewables to create a 'centre of confidence' (see Newsletter #44) may be interested in a new book from Earthscan - *Sustainable Investing: The Art of Long-Term Performance* by Cary Krosinsky and Nick Robins. The blurb says *"Over US\$5 trillion of Sustainable Investing funds available to combat climate change, develop renewable energy technologies, and relaunch the global economy"*. <http://www.earthscan.co.uk/?tabid=4833>

Reuters also reports an energy audit company claiming expansion: *"We are probably the only business in the world that's expanding," said Colin Genge, president of Retrotec, a company that manufactures products for home energy audits in Everson, Washington. Genge has seen his company's business double in the last year as energy prices soared, and said he expects to see additional growth if Obama's plan is implemented."* [7]

[1] Campaign for America's Future, Eric Lotke, Robert Gerson and Media Matters for America, Paul Waldman, Andrew Seifter <http://mediamatters.org/progmaj/report>

[2] see report at [1] but these included size and role of government, environment, role of women, gay rights,

[3] see [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org) and examples in these newsletters  
[http://www.campaignstrategy.org/newsletter\\_index.html](http://www.campaignstrategy.org/newsletter_index.html)

[4] [www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/sustaining\\_disbelief.pdf](http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/sustaining_disbelief.pdf)

[5] <http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/106234/>

[6] [http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/time\\_for\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/time_for_strategy.pdf)

[7] <http://www.planetark.com/avantgo/dailynewsstory.cfm?newsid=51021>

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