

## **Campaign aides**

*Catharine P. Taylor*

The selling of the president — the online version

In the history books, the presidential campaign of 2004 may be known as the one in which the Internet came of age — as fundraiser, scandal-breaker and vote stimulator.

But as a place to put online advertising dollars, it was, according to most observers, decidedly flat. In an informal survey of swing-state newspaper sites during the closing weeks of the campaign, people were more likely to see an ad for the local car dealer than they were an ad giving them information about either President Bush or Sen. Kerry. As for predictions that total campaign spending online would reach \$20 million or more during 2004, they look to be way off, with prognosticators such as Nielsen/NetRatings (like Adweek, a unit of VNU) putting the final figure at approximately \$7 million.

People who've been active in political campaigning express little surprise at the low figure. "Campaigns are slow-moving animals, so it requires a fair amount of research for someone to say it's worth trying something new," explains Brian Reich, director, Boston operations of Mindshare Interactive Campaigns, a Washington-based online marketing consultancy (and no relation to WPP Group's MindShare).

The story of the online efforts of both the Bush and Kerry campaigns is really the tale of two Internets — the one that uses e-mail as an inexpensive, highly targeted way to disseminate information to believers, and the one that employs online advertising, which requires good creative, targeting and execution to pull it off. To expect political campaigns to excel "in all three areas is probably unreasonable," says Jeff Lanctot, vp/media at aQuantive's Avenue A Razorfish.

While the former method helped raise millions of dollars, got out the vote, and sometimes swayed public opinion, the latter showed moments of potential but was far overshadowed by other online activity around the election. "The Internet is a part of a campaign, but it's not one of those key strategic things they're going to put a lot of money into," says Marc Ryan, senior director of analysis, Nielsen/NetRatings.

Using e-mail, both campaigns engaged registrants to the party and campaign Web sites in a steady stream of dialogue that also showed how the two campaigns differed in their goals for using the Internet. Someone who registered for e-mail lists on johnkerry.com and DNC.org on Oct. 12 would have received 23 e-mails by Election Day, from people including Joe Lockhart, Bill Clinton and, of course, Sen. Kerry. While voters would have seen some e-mails surrounding the presidential debates or specific news stories — such as the missing weapons at Al Qaeda — the vast majority were focused on raising money. And to that extent the campaign was a huge success, giving Kerry "almost parity with George Bush's \$200 million" war chest, according to Mathew Gross, a marketing and political consultant who was one of the architects of Howard Dean's groundbreaking Internet campaign. (Final numbers for each of the campaigns were well in excess of \$200 million, and a source close to the Kerry campaign says its online efforts alone raised \$80 million.)

Someone who registered for the Bush-Cheney campaign and at RNC.org beginning Oct. 12 would have received more than a dozen e-mails from people such as Rudy Giuliani, Barbara and Jenna Bush, and the President. But the strategic difference could not be more stark. With the exception of one e-mail to donate to the Republicans' General Election Legal and Compliance Account in the event of a contested election, none of the e-mails asked for money, and the majority were focused on get-out-the-vote efforts. The campaign wanted to "empower our grassroots supporters," says Chuck DeFeo, e-campaign manager of Bush-Cheney '04. Not that Internet fundraising was ignored by the GOP. DeFeo notes that the Bush effort had 1.3 million individual contributors — the most, he said, that has ever been recorded in American politics.

E-mail was also used by both parties to disseminate 30-second spots and other video, often encouraging those who received them to pass them along to a specific number of friends. On Oct. 29, the Bush campaign issued a video introduced by Barbara and Jenna Bush that aimed to show a lighter side of the President and encourage people to vote. DeFeo said the video was watched by 200,000 people during the next few days (not counting viral viewership). The Kerry campaign issued a two-minute video the day before the election that focused on the candidate's values. Kerry campaign officials either could not be reached or did not return calls for comment about how they ran their online initiatives.

There is one thing about presidential marketing in 2004 that's impossible to quantify: the lingering effect of how the Dean campaign for the Democratic nomination inspired the online efforts of both parties. But especially when one considers the effectiveness with which e-mail raised funds for the Kerry campaign, it's safe to say the entire 2004 race would have had a different landscape without it. It was the Dean team that led the charge of using the Internet not only for fundraising but also for grassroots appeal.

Meetup, the Dean-inspired initiative that encouraged people to organize locally under the "Democracy for America" slogan, is still percolating along, with 605 groups and more than 6,500 events being held worldwide, according to the Meetup Web site. "I think the legacy of Howard Dean and [campaign manager] Joe Trippi was profound," says Greg Witter, a Seattle-based political consultant who worked on Wesley Clark's bid for the Democratic nomination.

While the campaigns made headlines with the effects of some of their online efforts, there was precious little innovation when it came to the more targeted, planning-intensive world of executing full-fledged online ad campaigns. It's possible to attribute that in part to the different goals that are customarily apportioned to e-mail marketing and online advertising. If e-mail marketing is most effective among people who have a real interest in a product — in this case, a presidential candidate — then online advertising's role usually tends toward persuasion.

Gross recalls one ad from the 2000 election that really drove home the possibility for online marketing to persuade — a Bush campaign calculator that allowed users to find out how much money they would save by voting for him. "I can't think of a single ad [in 2004] that reached that sort of level," he says.

As to when persuasion will actually be a pervasive element of online presidential campaigning, Lanctot says it may be a way off. "I think [the Internet] is very well-suited to persuading voters," he says. "However, it takes a thoughtful, long-term strategy to do so."

Targeting often lacked sophistication as well, as data from both campaigns provided by Nielsen/NetRatings demonstrates. During the final month of the campaign, the GOP focused on a handful of sites, buying the most impressions during the week of Oct. 24 on Yahoo!, with 38 million impressions. Other reach sites, however, such as Microsoft's MSN, weren't represented.

The Republicans also bought conservative sites such as Nationalreview.com and RushLimbaugh.com. As opposed to the highly targeted world of campaign TV, where voters outside of swing states rarely view a presidential campaign ad, the Bush campaign saw the Internet as a way to "go beyond the battleground states," says DeFeo.

The Democrats, meanwhile, took a scattershot approach, buying on more than 200 sites — one can assume through an ad network — but not exactly where you'd expect. For example, during the week of Oct. 10, the party bought no impressions on Cleveland.com in the crucial swing state of Ohio, while at the same time it bought 175,000 impressions on the Dallas Morning News site, even though Texas was never in play for the Democrats. Also on the buy list were tiny, off-the-beaten-path sites such as Recipezaar, Findagrave and BegSource.

One marketing executive who had contact with the Kerry campaign says he was shocked at its lack of sophistication about online advertising and decried the fact that campaign executives were unwilling to spend money on testing new online efforts. He says he found it particularly confusing that given the success of Kerry's e-mail initiatives, the campaign didn't see the validity of online advertising to raise funds as well.

There were, however, moments of promise. DeFeo notes a successful buy in which the campaign streamed a video of Laura Bush talking about the President's educational policies, an initiative that ran on parenting sites.

But the reasons for some strange online buys might not just be lack of sophistication; the campaigns also confronted a tight market for prime inventory. As one Democrat close to the Kerry campaign says, "Given that money was tight for much of the campaign, and the effectiveness and low cost of e-mail and viral-marketing tools dwarfed that of explicit ad buys ... it was easy to err on the side of caution and limit buys to limited areas." By the time the campaign decided to increase online spending, this executive continues, "much of the prime inventory had already been secured by Bush-Cheney and the RNC."

"There's not a lot of professionalism" in political direct marketing, says Richard Viguerie, a conservative who is credited with pioneering political direct mail in the 1960s. And unfortunately, he says, the constant turnover in political campaigning doesn't help.

And there's always the marketing capital political campaigns put into TV. "There's a psychology that ... the election is an event [that] is happening on television," says Gross.

As to whether that continues, stay tuned.

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