

Underdog Taps YouTube to Make Election Close

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Was Steve Novick the first major YouTube political candidate? O.K., he didn't quite win the Democratic Senate nomination in Oregon, and there was more to his unusual campaign than YouTube — in fact, most things about it were unusual, starting with the candidate.

Mr. Novick lost the May 20 primary by three percentage points, but political pros say that for the first time in a statewide race, YouTube had the crucial multiplier effect, turning an under-financed campaign into a serious contender. His ads received far more attention on the Internet than through his few television spots, offering a new template for insurgent candidates.

"YouTube plus netroots equals Steve Novick," said Jennifer E. Duffy, managing editor of the Cook Political Report. (Netroots fuses the words Internet and grassroots to describe a style of political activism.) "YouTube is the only way he got any traction."

Not that this will be easy to duplicate. It worked because of a candidate, a strategy and a set of ads that were all clever, oddball and appealing.

Mr. Novick, 45, a wisecracking former government lawyer, stands 4-foot-9, his looks are something short of matinee-idol and he has a hook for a left hand. The Democratic establishment preferred a better-known candidate, Jeff Merkley, speaker of the Oregon House, who won the primary and will face the Republican incumbent, Gordon Smith.

Mr. Novick, who had never run for office, had little name recognition or money. "I said, 'I'm a short guy with a metal hand, I don't look like other candidates — let's use that,' " he said.

His campaign put out a press release in pirate-speak, and his campaign buttons showed a hook and a Web address, votehook.com. His slogans included "the candidate with the tough left hook" and "politics as unusual."

His media consultant, Steve Eichenbaum, made a set of quirky ads drawing attention to the candidate's height and his hook, and they were broadcast in January, long before the campaign heated up.

That ad purchase cost just \$60,000, said Jake Weigler, a Novick strategist, but the campaign posted the ads on its site and on YouTube. "We wanted to get a viral movement behind it," he said.

The most popular ad shows Mr. Novick chatting in a bar with a man who is trying to open a beer. Mr. Novick, talking all the while, grabs the bottle, casually pops the cap with his hook and returns it to his startled companion.

Bloggers and talk show hosts praised the ads and linked to them. The beer ad alone collected more than 150,000 hits on YouTube. The most popular Merkley ad was seen on YouTube about 3,600 times.

The mainstream media started covering Mr. Novick. He rose steadily in the polls and ultimately raised more than \$1 million — a respectable sum, though far short of Mr. Merkley's.

"We don't know how many people who saw the ads were Oregon voters, as opposed to people in Norway," Mr. Weigler said. "But the impact on YouTube was substantially larger than people seeing them on their TV screens, and that was something new."

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