OPINION

The Internet as a Get Out the Vote Tool

BY ROGER ALAN STONE

The lesson from Howard Dean's failed bid for the Democratic presidential nomination was that the Internet could raise money, but it couldn't produce votes. Now, with new tools, some of which did not exist six months ago, the Internet will produce votes.

In Colorado a state Senate candidate now taps into a nationwide database of 26 million e-mail addresses appended to voter file records and pulls out the 5,228 Democrats and 5,952 Independents in his district. The candidate surveys these voters and sends targeted messages based on their responses. Testing the messages by the rate at which a recipient opens the message, the candidate blasts out the best message to the rest of the list.

Once the window for voting by mail opens, the candidate will send Democratic voters e-mail encouraging them to request an absentee ballot. From a personalized e-mail, voters click through to a Colorado Absentee Ballot Request Form – with all of their data filled in exactly as it appears in the voter file. Not only is the campaign locking in votes, it can see who has downloaded and printed off the forms, in real-time.

Sue Burnside, a consultant specializing in field programs who works on this race in Colorado and others around the country, sees this as a revolutionary tool.

"Today voters under 40 have replaced their mailbox with their e-mail inbox," Burnside said. "You need to take advantage of every opportunity to get a voter's attention, especially in a close race."

A consortium of self-proclaimed peace groups, including Council for a Livable World, 20/20 Vision, and Physicians for Social Responsibility, take

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their cumulative membership list of more than 400,000 and match it against the voter file to determine the voter registration status of their members, getting a 52.9 percent match. The consortium finds a surprising number of members who are not registered to vote, often because of a recent move. Those members then receive e-mail with a click-through link that takes them to a pre-filled voter registration form and envelope addressed to their local registrar.

Members registered to vote receive e-mails for a vote-by-mail program.

"Knowing which members aren't registered is useful, but finding out who is most electorally active is invaluable for finding who we can get more involved with peace issues," said Tom Colina, 20/20 Vision's executive director.

How is This Possible?

The universe of voters and the universe of people online have largely

merged. The 144 million adults (age 18 or over) that Nielsen-NetRatings found go online each month is of similar composition to the nation's 150 million registered voters. The Online Publishers Association found the digital divide between parties has disappeared: Internet users are 31 percent Democrats and 31 percent Republicans. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that Internet users tend to be "highly informed and heavily weighted toward what campaigns describe as swing voters." Moreover, the Internet is able to reach this year's principal swing demographics – suburbanites and Hispanics – because more than half of Internet users are suburbanites and nearly one in 10 are Hispanics, according to the Pew study.

The tools used to reach Internet users by the commercial world are now used for politics. This year will set a record in political spending but Proctor & Gamble, General Motors, General Electric and the other big commercial advertisers spend much more on promoting their products – and they now spend up to 10 percent of their budgets online.

The commercial realm will likely utilize new technologies and applications first. Yahoo! developed some of the technology used to view political ads online first to view movie trailers.

Ease and Personalization

Another lesson campaigns can take from the world of commerce is the power of personalization and pre-filled technology. *Amazon.com* pioneered this with a site that welcomes you by name, knows your preferences, and makes checkout a breeze by using pre-filled

Roger Alan Stone is president of @dvocacy, Inc. a Washington, D.C. political Internet firm that supports Democratic and liberal causes.

purchase forms. Response rates drop with each step someone has to take on the Internet. On Internet surveys, each question after the fifth one reduces response rates by 15 to 20 percent.

Having e-mail personalized and addressing the voter by name also boosts response rates. Think of the difference between yelling, "Hey you," and calling someone by name. But the biggest boost is in the ease of proper state forms pre-filled, so all a voter need do is press print and put the form in a pre-printable envelope.

Friend to Friend: The Online Precinct Captain

Somewhere on a kitchen table in Iowa is at least one of the precinct lists that one of my Dukakis precinct captains promised to return to me after they had done their calls. Using paper lists and getting feedback about what volunteers have done (or haven't done) is the bane of the field organizer's existence. And with this year being the year of field operations – everything old is new again – that age-old problem is back. But now there is an Internet solution.

Will This Change the World?

As powerful as these tools are, traditional campaigning will not go away. In ancient Athens, they went door-to-door to get votes, and archeologists have dug up pre-filled ballots on pieces of pottery – the first slate cards. When George Washington first ran for the legislature he had house parties. So nothing goes away in politics. In the closely divided electorate of 2004, the winners will be the ones who add new techniques to the old. The neighbor talking over the fence is still the best way to persuade an undecided, but now the fence can be a computer screen and the message an e-mail.

Victory will ultimately go the campaign that best uses all the techniques available to it. Given the relatively low cost of e-mail and the Internet, the question becomes can you afford not to? C&E