

The Tools and Tactics
of Online Political Advocacy

Online Politics 101

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Colin Delany
e.politics

www.epolitics.com

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1. Online Politics 101: Introduction to Online Politics

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Let's change the world! But how? Robot/kung fu army? Too expensive. Zombies? Too messy. Online politics? A wise choice: the internet gives ANYONE — candidates, advocacy organizations, corporate interests and everyday citizens alike — powerful tools to mold policy, influence elections and shift the direction of public discourse.

But where to start? Online advocacy evolves just as fast as any other part of the wired world — the technology changes and so do its users and their expectations. Techniques that worked brilliantly six months ago might yield eyeball-melting failure today.

That's where Online Politics 101 and epolitics.com come in. We'll look at every method of doing online advocacy we can think of and help figure out what's likely to work in a given situation. What should a candidate's site contain? What mistakes should it avoid? What are blogs good for? How about using MySpace, Twitter or YouTube as promotional or organizing tools? How do viral campaigns catch and how can we get wallets to open and fund our organization or campaign? In a sea of mass emails, what ways of reaching Congress actually work? Let's look at all of these questions and many others and see what answers we can turn up.

A Brief Word About Terms

I'm going to use the word "campaign" a lot, so let's all get in the same boat real quick. In this context, a "campaign" is any organized or directed attempt to influence politics or policy, from a lone blogger howling in the dark to a multi-gazillion-dollar public policy juggernaut.

Some campaigns are purely educational ("we're going to tell you where blue fizzies come from"), though most "educational" campaigns in the political sphere really have a hidden agenda ("blue fizzies come from some place you really don't like"). More often, campaigns are about advocacy ("you should oppose the spread of blue fizzies and make sure your elected officials do too"). Finally, a specialized kind of campaign is designed to elect a particular candidate ("Rep. Bilbo stands firmly against the blue fizzle lobby and deserves your vote").

The tactics we'll discuss below are relevant to all three kinds of campaigns, though not always equally.

Next: The Internet as a Political Tool

2. The Internet as a Political Tool

Let's think about the medium itself. What are the salient characteristics of the internet as a political communications tool?

1. Ease. Anyone with an internet connection can set up a website or launch an email campaign — the only significant barriers to entry are knowledge and time. Of course, the deeper your pockets, the more you can do, but the internet is unique among communications media in the extent to which it allows citizens to participate as the equals of major corporations and interest groups. Little guys can look and fight like big guys in the online world — and vice versa (just who IS behind that “grassroots” site you were reading yesterday?). As a *New Yorker* cartoon once put it, “On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog.”

2. Speed. An organization or activist can learn about a piece of legislation in the morning, get fact sheets and statements online by noon, generate thousands of emails to Congress by happy hour and have bloggers and mainstream journalists writing about it all day and the next night. And, of course, opponents can do the same.

3. Reach. Yes, as all those nice Nigerians who write me for help transferring money know, the internet does span the globe. This wide reach gives bloggers a tall soapbox, but more broadly, it lets all of us gather based on our interests. Which helps campaigns find us, and gather people based on what they care about rather than by where they live (aggregating supporters by interest rather than geographically). Just as Ebay finds that ecstatic Singaporean buyer for your signed photo of The Fonz, the internet connects campaigns with scattered supporters we'd never meet in the physical world.

4. Interconnection. Linking is the web's vital technology and its essential characteristic. True since the first web page flickered up on a copy of NCSA Mosaic, it's true today — the central brilliance of the latest generation of web tools (social networking sites, blogs, Flickr, YouTube and the rest of the so-called Web 2.0 technologies) is that they rely on people's interconnection of ideas for their strength. It's a classic example of the network effect: one fax machine is useless, two fax machines can hold a conversation, and 100 million of them make an indispensable business tool. On the web, the connections between ideas enhance the value of the individual pieces.

As we'll talk about next, the same idea holds true for the different parts of your own online advocacy: your website helps build your email list which creates an initial audience for your hilarious-but-serious video clip which sends traffic back to your site which builds your email list even further which helps you grow a donor base which helps fund the website and your social networking outreach. Just like a pyramid scheme, only distressingly legal.

Next: Five Simple Rules for Online Politics

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

3. Five Simple Rules for Online Politics

1. Think about the ends before you think about the means

I know it sounds obvious to say that you should think about where you're going before you decide how to get there, but I can't tell you how many times a client has come to me and said, "we want to hire you to build X," when a few minutes' reflection about the goals of their campaign shows that they really need Y and perhaps a dash of Z for flavor.

Maybe X is all they've ever heard of doing, or perhaps it's something their executive director's cousin is really keen on, or maybe another organization did and it looked cool. But is it what they really need?

BEFORE you start any communications project, online or off, ALWAYS stop to think about what your ultimate goal is and who your audience is — your goals and your audience should drive your tactics. Who are you trying to reach? What will you be asking them to do? Are there intermediate targets that need to be reached first? A campaign designed to motivate college students to vote will probably be structured very differently than a campaign designed to encourage senior citizens to put pressure on their state legislators about Medicaid long-term care coverage. Your online campaign, whether for advocacy or office, is much more likely to succeed if you've thought about these basic questions FIRST. Never be afraid to try something, but please please please THINK before you act.

2. Brilliance almost always takes second place to persistence

If you really want to succeed, be relentless — stab-in-the-dark campaigns drive me crazy. "We launched a website!" Woo hoo!!!! So did everyone else. "We sent out a press release!" Great, that was one of approximately five quadrillion press releases that went out that day. Most campaigns that succeed do so because they try many different tactics and never let up the pressure. With very rare exceptions, successful political campaigns hit their points over and over from as many different angles and in as many different venues as possible. I can't stress this point too much — if you want to fail, half-ass it. Your opponents will applaud you.

3. Integrate, integrate, integrate.

Integration: more than good social policy, more than the better half of calculus, it's also an absolutely vital strategy for communications campaigns. All of the pieces of your online campaign should work together, and they should also integrate with your offline advocacy.

Yes, sending emails to Congress might help influence policy, but they work a lot better if your lobbyist (or your volunteer advocate) walks in to the member's office and delivers the same messages personally and printed out on paper. And they'll get even more notice if they're accompanied by calls from crucial constituents (i.e., donors) and if the issue is mentioned in an op-ed column in the legislator's main district newspaper. Online advocacy should integrate with offline grassroots organizing should coordinate with press strategy should mesh with direct lobbying — they ALL work better when they're done together.

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Don't forget the details. Did that ad you ran in the *New York Times* mention your URL? If so, you'd better have something obvious on your site front page that ties into the ad or you're missing an opportunity to build on your offline advocacy.

If you pick up one idea from this website, let this be it — integrate or die.

4. Content is key

All of the promotion in the world won't do you a bit of good if you don't have anything compelling to say. I've built more websites (and posted more press releases and "fact" sheets) than I'd like to remember that were essentially puffery — they really didn't say a damn thing.

When you're starting a campaign, make sure that your content is going to be worth the effort — reward those poor suffering readers and activists with something substantive. I don't mean that all of your pieces should sound like a policy paper, but I do mean that you should have something to say or something to show. Otherwise, you'll be amazed at how fast your "email updates" will end up in the spam folder.

And may I put in a word for good writing? If you're trying to persuade people, please write like a human being rather than one of our friends and future masters, the robots. This is essential for bloggers of course, but it matters for anyone putting content up on the web. Over the years, besides grammatical errors that have brought me to tears of mingled sadness and laughter, I've seen sites that were so badly written that they were essentially incomprehensible. If people can't read what you write, you're not going to be persuading them of much.

5. Is selling an idea (or a candidate) like selling soap? Yep.

How much is does online politics have in common with selling products or services? The short answer: they're the same thing, or at least close enough that two can borrow each other's tactics. Pushing a candidate or a cause is dangerously close to selling consumer goods, a statement that's been true at least since the advent of democracy (if Joe McGinniss's *Selling of the President 1968* doesn't get the point across, look up my distinguished ancestor's campaign slogan, "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too").

Many of the techniques I describe either began in the commercial world or are equally applicable to selling ideas and selling you know, stuff, and many of the resources we'll talk about on e.politics originate in product marketing, not political advocacy.

One final note

Ignoring these rules will help your opponents spank you in public with your pants quite dramatically down, except when it won't — nothing is an absolute in this business. **Knowing when to break the rules is half the fun.**

Next: Choosing the Right Tools

4. Choosing the Right Tools

Okay, I'm sold — where do we start? What are the essential tools of online politics, and are they the same for every campaign? Most campaigns will end up balancing three primary weapons systems:

- **A central online hub**, usually a conventional website but sometimes (and particularly for citizen activists) a MySpace profile, YouTube channel or blog.
- **Some way to keep in touch with supporters**, usually via email list but also possibly using social networking software, RSS feed, Twitter or text messaging.
- **Some way to influence the online discussion in your space**, often meaning blogger relations but also including traditional media relations, social networking outreach, RSS, participation in back-channel email/IM discussions, the production of podcasts and video pieces, etc.

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(By the way, I'm indebted to Josh McConagha of the Democratic National Committee for that division: when asked on a panel in the winter of 2007-8 to name the three essential tools for online politics, he listed a website, email and blogger relations or some other way to influence the discussion. My list just expands on his.)

The exact mix of tools you use depends on the goals you're trying to reach and actual means you have available to reach them. If you're trying to organize high school and college students to speak out about human rights issues, you're likely to use Facebook and MySpace. If you're a think tank or policy-heavy nonprofit, or if you're just a good writer with something to say, a blog or family of blogs may be the right answer. If you're raising money for a candidate for office, you're likely to use email and possibly online meeting applications like MeetUp.com plus an online fundraising site to get supporters donating and recruiting others online and in the real world.

The chapters that follow will look at the major tools available to political communicators as of June of 2008, along with tactics for specific applications like fundraising and influencing legislation or the media.

Next: Websites

5. Online Advocacy Tools: Websites

Now, let's look at political advocacy tools, starting with: your website.

For most campaigns, a website will be your online focal point. It's your virtual storefront, pulpit, recruiting office, library and begging center all rolled into one. Very often, it's the first impression people will have of you — it's your public face. And sometimes, it's a goddamn embarrassment.

What should your website be? For starters, it should be **findable, navigable, relevant and current**. It should accurately reflect the kind of organization you are, or at least the kind of organization you would like to be perceived to be. For most campaigns, it's your most important online asset.

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A Note about Audience and Tone

When you're designing your site and writing the content, think carefully about your audience. A site that's designed to wave a red flag in front of a bull, for a fire-up-the-activists campaign for instance, should have a different tone than one that's aimed at journalists, Hill staff and or uncommitted voters. For the former, red-meat kill-the-evil-bastards language can be appropriate, but for the latter, you'll want to sound much more reasoned and reasonable.

For a while, I wasn't much of a fan of campaigns and organizations creating a plethora of niche sites, since it does tend to dilute the effects of your promotional work. But if you have the resources to spread the word about them, uniquely branded sites can help out in many circumstances. For instance, they allow you to use different branding, language and style when reaching different audience segments, and they can also help build a strong public identity for a short-term campaign.

A Note about Technology

One of the fun things about web technology is that it's always changing, and when we're lucky, it changes in a good direction. For years, we were promised that straightforward Content-Management Systems would make it easy to create and maintain websites, even for beginners, but the reality has frequently been disappointing (and expensive). We're now at the point, though, that campaigns and individual activists have a wide array of free or cheap site hosting options to consider, including open source and low-cost CMS's. Many individual activists find that blogs and social network profiles are more than enough, while a straightforward CMS can make a campaign or organization site into a live and editable communications tool for non-technical staff.

Now, let's look at what kind of a communications tool most political websites SHOULD be and figure out how to get there from here

Be Findable

This should be a no-brainer, but too often it's not — your site should be easy to find. First, let's look at addresses. Does your URL make sense? Let's say you're taking on those vicious enemies of all that is right and just, in a campaign called "Blue Fizzies Must Die." Is your URL "www.bfmd.org?" If so, you probably screwed up: people are much more likely to remember (and tell their friends about) a site called "www.bluefizziesmustdie.org."

Yes, the former is shorter, but the latter is much more memorable. Of course, if people are used to referring to you by an acronym (i.e., AARP), you're better off going with that. Also, do you have the .net and .com as well as the .org (if they're available)? It never hurts to have all three if you can — you'll lose readers if they enter the wrong one and can't find you, since not everyone will try another option.

Next, you'll want to spread the word far and wide, making sure that anyone looking for information about your topics can find you. Search engine visibility/optimization is just a part of the game; your own active self-promotion is vital.

Be Navigable

Okay, so people found you, but can they find what they're actually looking for once they reach your site? Readers get frustrated easily, and satisfaction is just a click away — a click away FROM your site. Good organization is key and so is clear labeling. Most importantly, you need to think about your site navigation from the point of view of the reader.

Organization (and corporate) sites frequently fall prey to org-chartitis — the tendency for navigation structures to be determined by institutional structures and institutional politics. Human Resources wants a button? They get a button, even if HR has NOTHING to do with purpose of the site. And that VP's pet project on corporate synergy? Button!

If your site structure looks like your organization tree, stop to think about someone coming to your site who's never heard of you before. Not only do they not care about the welcome message from your president (unless he or she is famous, hot, unusually charismatic or is a candidate for office), the information they're trying to find is probably buried somewhere deep in your press section, if it exists at all.

Site search and a site map can be helpful, but if your readers have to resort to them frequently, you've failed — a good navigational structure should render them superfluous except on extremely large and deep sites. Most campaign sites will end up with 6-12 categories and buttons: an issue or issues overview, an activism button, a donate button, a press section, a home button (a must), about us, and contact us (another must, even if your contact info is at the bottom of every page).

If you have a resource-rich site, you might also break out fact sheets and reports, video and audio clips, groovy games, etc. If you cover a lot of issues or want to make several points about your main issue, you could display a link to each in the navigation, but try to keep it from becoming too cluttered — solve your navigation problems elegantly.

And label those buttons clearly. Yes, if you're working on forestry issues, it can seem clever to call your resources section The Woodshed, but your readers don't want clever — they want to find what they're looking for. Make it easy on them and they're more likely to reward you by actually sticking around long enough to read something.

Also, keep a consistent look-and-feel to the navigation throughout the site. You may add section-specific navigation to pages deeper in the site, but keep the top-level buttons in the same place on every page. For instance, in the press section, you might have secondary links to press releases, press contact names and info, briefing materials and advisories about upcoming events, but make sure that the Home, About Us, Issues and Contact Us links are where they were on the rest of the site's pages.

The same idea holds true, incidentally, for your entire site — consistency is usually key to a good user experience. If you're building a personal online art project on the conceptual role of squids in the development of a distinctive western aesthetic, do whatever you want — believe me, on personal projects, I've built some exquisitely cryptic navigation structures. But a campaign or organization site shouldn't jerk readers around or play with their expectations — if your layout changes from page to page or section to section, you'd better have a good reason.

In the earlier days of the web, as large institutional (and corporate) sites grew up willy-nilly, it was common for different site sections to have wildly different layouts, and I have colleagues who are STILL struggling to bring different parts of sprawling sites into a ruthlessly consistent look-and-feel. Be right-minded from the beginning and you won't have to fight those battles.

Modern site management tools, such as database-driven content management systems, server-side includes and cascading style sheets, make it easy for headings and pull quotes in one site section to look like headings and pull quotes in all other site sections, so that readers can say right away when they hit a new page, "oh, that's a heading and that's a pull quote."

Your site front page will often be a special case, since it's usually where campaigns and organizations highlight their most recent doings. In addition to your normal navigation links, you might have blurbs about recent stories, zippy buttons linking to active campaigns, a photo of a featured activist or a featured issue ("Blue Fizzies Stink!"), titles of recent press releases and a list of reports and "fact" sheets.

Try to avoid a cluttered look, though — use color to divide content by type or date, for instance, and keep the number of look-at-me promo pieces to a respectable number. For inspiration, look at the front pages of major news organizations, because they're usually trying to display a huge amount of information in a small space. What works? What doesn't? If you get lost on a site, always try to figure out why, and use that experience to improve your own site.

One final note — link your logo to your home page. It's a simple thing, but users who get lost will often peck at the logo to see if it takes them back to the start. (Note: it's also a rule epolitics.com has long broken, and apparently for no good reason.)

Be Relevant (and Readable)

Getting back to the earlier point about content being key, if you're promoting your site as having resources about a given subject, you'd better have them and they'd better be useful. For instance, if you're running a candidate's site, be sure you have the kind of resources that potential voters and donors are looking for, including the candidate's positions on issues, his or her bio, instructions on how to register to vote (it never hurts), speeches or audio/video clips if you have them and easy and obvious opportunities to volunteer or to give money. It wouldn't hurt to show some of your opponents' positions in a compare-and-contrast format — voters often appreciate it and it gives you a chance to put your own oh-so-objective spin on what the other guy says ("Us Vs. Them: Why We're Right and They Suck").

If you have a lot of content to present (too much is better than not enough) and are afraid of firehosing readers with "facts," remember that the web makes it very easy to present information in layers. Think of your issues section as an onion, with different levels of detail defining the layers. The first layer could be a short, readable introduction to the most important points, with links to more detailed pieces about each point (the second layer). Those detailed pieces in turn link to more details and to primary sources if you have them (the polling data that your piece on public opinion is based on, for instance, or a spreadsheet of your opponent's campaign

contributions from well-known evildoers). Presenting information in layers lets your readers absorb it in amounts that THEY determine.

Also keep in mind that readers generally won't move through your site in a linear path — they're much more likely to jump around from topic to topic, and if they're coming from a search engine, they may drop directly into a page deep in your site. You can hate them with the power of a thousand blinding suns for skipping your immensely literate and engaging introduction, but that won't stop them from doing it. So, make sure your content is organized such that it's easy for readers to find their way around (cf. navigability). If a page is one in a series, make sure that it links to the previous and next pages and that there's an obvious link back to the main page about the topic. Cross-reference relevant articles! Never miss a chance to keep someone on your site for an extra few minutes — the longer they're there, the more likely they are to sign up or to give you money.

Be Current

Keeping sites up to date is a constant and usually thankless battle. Just when you think your content is current, some section just got stale. If you work for a large organization or campaign that's constantly producing words and pictures, to some extent you're in luck — you'll probably have a steady stream of press releases, reports and white papers to pad things out. Though of course, that's just more content to slip out of date when you're not looking.

Some tips:

- **Try to distinguish between time-sensitive and evergreen content.** Most political issues don't change THAT much from day to day, so try to keep your issue overviews as time-neutral as possible. When you have breaking news, keep it in a separate part of the page if you can, so that you don't have to constantly root through the deep issue descriptions to make changes. I'm a big fan of the blurb-and-overview approach to a top-level section page — a series of blurbs about recent events at the top, followed by rarely-changing essentials about the issue.
- Except in press releases and other time-stamped documents (letters to Capitol Hill, press advisories, action alerts), **avoid words like “tomorrow” and “yesterday” and “next week”** — these go out of date quickly (as in, tomorrow), so use absolute dates as much as possible.
- **As you post documents, try to keep notes about which pages talk about things that are expected to happen or could happen** (i.e., “a vote on the bill is expected next week”) and go back to update them as necessary. It drives me crazy when I'm going through my own sites and find something from last summer that was “expected to happen” — argh, I should have told readers what happened or at least killed off the page off when it was no longer in use. If you're really organized, make little alerts for yourself in your time-management program (Outlook, etc.). If you're like me, you remember haphazardly.
- **Put a date on documents.** You may be tempted to leave dates off (“if they can't see how old it is, they won't know it's out of date!”), but it's generally a bad idea — if readers can't see how old it is, they can't know IF it's out of date and won't know whether to trust it or not. I started doing this religiously on NET.org after a friend was poking through the site and got frustrated because she didn't know whether the information was current or not. A useful side benefit has been that it's easy to point out to the campaign staff when their content is grossly out of date (“hey guys, you realize that the last substantive thing you did was six months ago? Hmmm, THAT will look good to the executive director....”).

Final Thoughts About Your Site

We'll talk more later about specific tactics for integrating your site into your overall online campaign, but let's leave with this for now: as you build and develop your site over time, never lose sight of what it's FOR. Are you trying to build an activist list or activist network? Elect a candidate? Promote your organization or your own ideas? Influence press coverage? Help move a bill through Congress? Most likely, several of the above? Then your site should DO them, and not get bogged down by the superfluous.

Next: Building and Managing Email Lists

6. Online Advocacy Tools: Email Lists

If you're an online organizer, your activist list is often your most precious possession outside of your site — its members are your supporters, your regular readers and frequently your source of precious cash. You're likely to spend an enormous amount of effort building the list, and you SHOULD spend a lot of time thinking about how to maintain it. Traditionally, email has been the primary tool for keeping in touch with supporters, but as social networking websites become more prominent and email deliverability become more of a problem, email may find itself dethroned in the future. As of this writing, though, email is still by far the most widely used online supporter-contact tool.

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

[As an aside, back in 2000 I briefly flirted with a national campaign for a certain third-party candidate, but the dalliance ended for good when they lost a good chunk of their activist list to a server crash — I was already a little turned off by what seemed to be a dangerous level of disorganization, and I ran away in disgust when they didn't even have a backup copy of the one database they desperately needed to hold on to. Anyway...]

Let's look first at some basics about lists.

List-management software

You can run a small list through a normal email program (BCC your recipients, please, to protect their addresses), but it'll become a serious pain once you reach a certain size. Plenty of companies will be happy to help you with mass emails; at the very least, you'll want one that automates the subscription/unsubscription process and allows people to update their information without having to go through you (not that that will stop them from asking you, the needy bastards).

Be sure that YOU keep ownership of your names and email addresses, not your provider — a serious problem in working with Yahoo groups.

The next step up is to move to a system that also lets your list members send emails to their congressmembers or to other targets (governors, federal/state agencies, corporate CEOs) that you specify. These modules will match people to their elected officials by zip code and generally will let them edit a sample letter or even assemble a letter from suggested snippets of text that you provide. Many of them, particularly if they're designed for political candidates, will allow you to raise money as well. REALLY sophisticated systems plug social networking outreach, email and even text messaging together to reach supporters through whatever channels they prefer.

We'll discuss some secrets for effective email advocacy below, but for now keep in mind Two Golden Rules of email organizing: if you're contacting Congress or another representative body, you generally should only let people contact their own legislators through your system (rather than spamming all of Congress), and second that a personally written email is much more effective than a mass message (the value of an online action is often inversely related to how easy it is to take).

List Building

The big question for many organizations and campaigns — how do you build a list from nothing? The frequent answer — by ruthlessly promoting yourself and never missing an opportunity to get someone's email address. Most of the time, your main source of new list members is your website, and successful campaigns make every effort to convert casual visitors into active supporters.

EVERY page on your website should have a signup button at the very least, for instance, and it's even more effective for every page to have a little blank that visitors can fill out with their addresses and start the process right there (generally, the more steps you put between the invitation to join and the actual joining, the more people you're going to lose along the way).

Asking people to join is great, but if you have a full-scale legislative action module, it's even better to have an action alert posted — people are on a page because they're interested in the subject, so a standing alert (i.e., a link that impells them to "Tell Congress to Stamp Out Blue Fizzies" lets you catch them when they're in high dudgeon).

If your site covers a lot of subjects, try to have topic-specific actions for readers to take. If you don't want to be bombarding Congress with random emails (they get more than enough as it is), try posting a petition or some other alert that doesn't immediately send a message to a target — people will feel like they've done something, you'll get new names, and you won't be bothering that legislative staffer whose just a bit hacked off at being pestered by your messages. Shh, don't tell — even if you never do anything with the petition itself, you'll still have captured the names.

If you have staff or volunteers working with people in the real world (meatspace) rather than the virtual world, you can get them to gather names as well. Are you getting supporters' names and phone numbers at local events? If so, snag their emails and add them to your database.

I once worked with an organization that aimed to mobilize hunters for environmental advocacy, and they grew their list amazingly fast at gun shows and sportsmen's events by offering signers a chance to win a free elk hunt. Of course, since folks signed up out of something other than zeal for the cause, not many of them were inclined to actually DO anything the group asked them to do or even to read the emails, but at least the list got built.

Another trick to remember is that advocacy itself can build the list — when you send an email alert out to your list, assuming that your system makes forwarding easy, enough of your activists will usually send it to their friends, neighbors and pets that your list will grow. Most of time, you'll only see slight growth, but if you happen to catch a wave of public indignation you might see a massive spurt of signups — I heard a presentation in 2005 from a group that had gone from zero to over 100,000 names in just a few months (if I remember right) because of outrage over gay marriage (they were on the let-us-marry-dammit side).

Finally, if you need names and you have cash, you can buy them. If you're on the progressive (lefty) side of the spectrum, a company called Care2 does an excellent job of gathering names from their massive list of eager activists. Plenty of other consultants will be happy to work with you to build your list in exchange for large bags of cash. Always be sure that the names you buy are opt-in! (i.e., that people voluntarily agreed to be a part of your list). If you're planning a big buy, you might try getting a smaller sample first and testing to see how well those names work (i.e., sending an alert or two and testing the response rate).

List Management

List management and list building are fundamentally intertwined — using the list the right amount can build it, but using it too much or in the wrong ways can erode it. Some basic observations:

Balance your message frequency

Too many messages and you risk burning out your audience, too few and they won't remember who you are when you DO send. List exhaustion and list erosion are the twin enemies of email campaigns — exhaustion from too many messages, and erosion from email addresses going the way of the dinosaurs and Southern Democrats as your subscribers leave school, change jobs or just flat-out get sick of you. I've found that one message per week is pushing the limit. Between two and four per month is about right, though if you have rabid supporters you may be able to bug them more often.

Also bear in mind that most activists will burn out eventually, and that your list consequently is in a constant state of churn — jaded activists drop off, dewy-eyed newbies take their places. It's part of the natural chain of life.

Never forget that your subscribers are in it for what THEY want, not what YOU want

You may want them to open their wallets repeatedly and with the wild abandon of a biker thug reunited with crystal after a long drought, but they probably joined your list just to keep up with your issues. If you ask and ask and ask without keeping their needs in mind, this relationship can't last, you never buy me flowers and I'm leaving.

Keep a close eye on your statistics

Every time you send to your list, a certain number of people will unsubscribe. It's usually not personal (they may be cutting back on emails in general, though I'd double-up on the deodorant just in case) but they're lost to you nonetheless. If a certain kind of message tends to cause an unusual number of folks to bail, stop sending them! Or at least try to isolate what it is that's causing them to abandon you.

For instance, when I was running the National Environmental Trust's action list, I usually got about about a 1/5th of one percent (.2%) unsubscribe rate for an action message (i.e., "Tell Your Congressman — Pass Some Bill or Another"). For email-newsletter-like issue updates that don't contain a call to action, that number would double or even triple. Clearly, our list was into pestering elected officials and not so much into hearing what we'd been doing around the office, so I became sparing with the update emails and much more profligate with the action alerts.

List members can be needy

They'll often ignore your handy automated ways to take action, change their user profile or unsubscribe, and will instead demand that you take care of these processes for them, which will usually take you approximately ten times as much time as it would have taken them to click on the damn link. They can also be quite rude in the process, particularly if they've forgotten that they signed up and think you're some kind of spammer (this happens all the time).

Your job: suck it up and be nice to them — this IS politics, after all. If you're working for a candidate or an officeholder and they're constituents, certainly be nice, but do so even if they're

casual supporters of your cause or fellow travelers. Your job is to change minds, and a rude answer to a list member or to anyone else who writes you does your cause no good — and you never know who's about to slag you on a blog with thousands of readers. Remember your grandmother's advice: if you don't have anything nice to say, keep your mouth shut and do what you can to help smooth things over. At the very least, send a polite non-answer — you can quietly plot the recipient's demise on your own time.

One final thought about email lists

Are they doomed to diminishing returns? Spam blockers are our enemies, for one thing, since they have the potential to cripple email advocacy (the spambot at my old day job sometimes caught our OWN advocacy messages, reminiscent of the early B1 bombers jamming their own radar).

Longer term, younger folks don't seem to be using email as much as those of us over thirty (damn kids, get off my lawn). College students in particular live on MySpace, Facebook and Instant Messaging, with email apparently seeming about as hip as spats and starched collars. As they move into the professional world, will it change or will they? Also, the sheer volume of email limits the effectiveness of each individual list — I don't even KNOW how many lists I'm signed up for these days, but it's a lot, and I don't have time to read most of them.

Next: Blogs and Blogger Relations

7. Online Advocacy Tools: Blogs and Blogger Relations

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Blogs, one-time sweet darlings of the political internet world. I can still remember the first time I figured out what a blog WAS, back in the spring of 2003 (I was at South by Southwest, listening to a presentation and no doubt recovering from a hangover).

Okay, so what IS a blog? At one level, blogs are just websites that are easy to update — and simply because blogs are such convenient publishing tools, people use blogging software for all kinds of applications that don't involve sharing body parts or secrets with strangers. But the more common conception of a blog is a site that's frequently updated and that is the personal product of one or more authors. It can be a diary, an op-ed column, a corporate house organ, a community center, an outlet for art, photography, fiction or investigative journalism, a place of philosophical musing or a venue for shameless self-promotion (hello, e.politics!).

Most political blogs function as opinion columns, though some do feature what looks suspiciously like original journalism. The biggest, like Daily Kos or RedState.org, particularly if they have a variety of columnists and allow comments from readers, become the center of entire online communities. A common approach is for a blogger to discuss a story from the mainstream media or from another blog, with readers contributing their own opinions as comments.

Though they often lack access to sources and documents themselves, blogs can still be news sources even when they can't indulge in their own investigative journalism: they certainly can help promote a story that's getting lost in the shuffle or keep a fading story alive long after it's disappeared from cable news. And, acting in concert or in competition, they can also leverage the collective intelligence of widely scattered sources to discover truth faster than traditional journalists ever could.

Bloggers' opinions have certainly become a major part of the political discussion — an issue raised by Instapundit or Josh Marshall can reach tens or hundreds of thousands of politically active people in a day. Daily Kos and several other of the leading progressive blogs have also worked very hard to raise money for candidates whose opinions and approach they favor.

Working With Blogs

First, should campaigns start blogs? Most bloggers would say yes — they would argue that anyone trying to influence politics should participate in what they see as the collective conversation about politics. But of course they'd say that, since if they didn't think that blogs mattered, why would they have one?

My answer would be a qualified "yes" — a blog can be a useful tool for just about any kind of political campaign. For one thing, because of the tools that have grown up to allow bloggers to communicate with each other (trackbacks and rss, for example), a blog allows you to respond quickly and effectively to bloggers in their own sphere and using their methods, both to promote your ideas and to answer criticism.

And here's the qualification to my "yes" — you definitely CAN become part of the conversation...assuming you have something to say. A blog that's obvious hackery or clearly an afterthought isn't going to do much good and may do a lot of harm, particularly if it's so bad that

people make fun of you (the blogosphere can be a tough playground). Politicians and political candidates should be particularly careful, since few will have time to write their own blogs, just as few write their own speeches. A good candidate blog can help connect with voters, but a bad one will make you look phony. An out-of-date one just looks bad. Advocacy blogs seem to work best for organizations that have either a very strong policy side (and hence a good stream of content) or a particularly strong voice or personality.

Interestingly, many corporations and corporate trade associations have used blogs successfully — they're very sensitive to how their brand is perceived by customers and by opinion leaders, and they see blogs as a way to respond to criticism quickly. Also, to the extent that blogs can help put a personal face on a corporation or industry, they can help build an emotional connection with customers.

Working with Bloggers — Blogger-Relations Programs

Whether or not you start a blog, you can certainly work with bloggers to promote your ideas or your candidate. The basic rule: treat bloggers as journalists because they ARE journalists — they just happen to have a particularly cheap printing press. A good blog relations program is a whole lot like a good press relations program. Let's look at the basic levels.

RSS/Twitter

First, you should have an RSS feed for your site if at all possible (we'll cover the specifics of RSS later). Many bloggers use RSS feed aggregating software or web pages to keep track of articles from many sources from a single place, and having your own feed lets them add your content as well. As of this writing, many bloggers are also using the social network/micro-blogging site Twitter, and you may also want to consider promoting your stories via Twitter posts (Twitter may also be useful for blogger outreach, discussed below).

Issue monitoring

You should definitely be using blog search tools such as Technorati to keep an eye on your issues and to look out for any mentions of your group, candidate or campaign. I run a Technorati search on several URLs every day or two to see where my sites are popping up. It's far better to catch an emerging rumble of approval or disapproval THIS way than when those blog stories have led to New York Times coverage and a call from your funders. Google (email) Alerts can be a great way of finding stories in blogs (and publications) you don't normally follow.

Blogads

If you're promoting an issue or candidate, consider advertising on blogs. Blogads are usually quite inexpensive for the number of people they allow you to reach (though prices on popular blogs have gone up significantly in the past couple of years), and they're putting you before a targeted audience: activists on a red-meat wave-the-bloody-flag political blog, pacifists on a peace-oriented site, enviros on a green energy blog, and so on. Candidates have used blogads for fundraising, advocacy groups to build their email lists, authors and publishers to promote books, and campaigns of all stripes to publicize their positions and to help launch viral campaigns.

Sites like Blogads.com list potential advertising targets by their readership and by cost; you'll usually pay by the week. Pick your blogs carefully and try to balance the breadth versus the

selectivity of their audiences: a popular political site may have more readers, but a site that focuses on your topic may have readers more primed to respond to your ad.

Design is critical for a successful blog ad. The visual part of your ad should catch the eye and give enough information to intrigue a reader but without dulling his or her appetite for more. Don't just adapt your print piece! You're speaking to a different audience in a different medium, and design for the size and placement of the ads.

If you can, have several versions ready — you can usually change an ad's content at any point in the run, and you'll find that your results are better if you rotate your visuals. You can even run several variants at once and see which garners the best response. Also, pay close attention to your text, since you can embed links to several sites or pages and expand on the message in your visual component. For inspiration, the Blogads site has a list of good ads on different topics.

Once your ad run begins, watch its statistics throughout the weeks of your buy. As with most advertising, blog ads give you some benefit just from exposure, but you'll probably be most interested in the number of clicks your ad gets. If you're advertising on several sites, compare the amounts you're paying per click on the different sites — you may find that a relatively cheap site is giving you the best results.

Blogger Relations

Another way to work with bloggers is to contact them directly to promote your issues, just as your press team works with the reporters who cover your beat at major newspapers and the TV networks. Like most writers, bloggers are hungry for fresh topics, particularly if they're among the first (or absolutely the first) to write about them, and a good number will be eager to hear from you.

To contact blogs, you'll need to find them first. Technorati's a good place to start, but I've found Google to be even more effective (and epolitics.com has even more resources). Start by googling your topic or topics along with the word "blog" and begin reading sites and keeping notes. Not every blog will have contact info, but grab email addresses where you can. I've found that a big spreadsheet can be very useful for keeping track of sites and for breaking them down by the topics they tend to cover. Be glad you got that intern for the summer.

Once you build your list, you can start pitching stories. You'll want to reach the most influential blogs first (more bang for your buck), so use Technorati or some other tool to rank the sites you're tracking by the number of other blogs that link to them (ranking them by authority).

Some cautionary notes: before you contact a blog, make sure you've read enough posts to know that the author actually might be open to your story — he or she's going to ignore off-topic pitches and may think you're an idiot for making them. Craft your messages carefully, since you want each email to be a personal contact and not a form letter. ANY time you contact a blogger, write professionally and keep in mind that your message may end up in front of his or her entire audience verbatim.

Also, ALWAYS let bloggers know that you're with a group or campaign. You may get away with hiding your affiliation for a while, but if you're found out, your credibility and that of your campaign will be shot — and often skinned alive in public. Paying bloggers to post stories is completely out of bounds.

Once you get coverage, you'll want to keep track of it, both to help fine-tune your blog-relations project and to justify its existence to higher-ups. Again, Technorati and a spreadsheet can be useful tools. As you work with bloggers, you'll begin to build the kind of journalist-source relationships that good P.R. people treasure. Note that a serious blog-relations project can take an enormous amount of time, as you've probably already guessed.

Reaching the Top Political Blogs

If you're working with an issue or electoral campaign, wouldn't it be a good idea to get in front of the audience of the top national political blogs, sites like DailyKos or RedState? As a communications person for a political nonprofit put it to me once, "it's like trying to get a story in the *New York Times*." What she meant was, very high payoff, but it requires a lot of work and the chance of success is relatively low.

Journalists, Congressmembers and national political figures do often pay a great deal of attention to what's discussed on the most popular blogs, but placing or influencing a story on one of these sites is extremely difficult. Some political communications companies on both sides do specialize in outreach to the authors and audiences of the big-name political bloggers, but this exercise is not for the empty of pocket. Some groups have seen success by working up the food chain on the largest sites, contacting DailyKos "diarists" and other lesser-known writers and hoping that the resulting story gets "promoted" to the site front page.

Niche Political Blogs

A growing consideration in blogger outreach is the continuing strength of niche blogs, often (in the political world) tied to particular cities, states or regions. Niche political and/or issue blogs have often turned out to be fruitful ground for political candidates and issue campaigns alike — their audiences may be small, but they're by-definition HIGHLY targeted. And stories in niche political sites may climb the communications food chain and get much wider distribution.

Next: Social Networking Sites

8. Online Advocacy Tools: Social Networks

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Social networking sites can be a good way of reaching a new audience, although they're no substitute for an actual website for most campaigns. Many political organizations and citizen activists have used them to great effect, however, and the major 2008 political campaigns have not been shy about social networking outreach. But first, what is a social networking site? They're websites on which people and organizations set up profile pages with basic information about themselves and then link to other people's pages — it's that simple. Readers can browse profiles by searching by keyword or by following links from one person to another, and they can also leave comments behind as they go.

Getting "friends" is as easy as going to a profile and requesting a link. You can also use social networking profiles as a mass communications tool by sending a message to all of your friends at once, or through setting up "groups" on some sites. MySpace and Facebook are the social networking sites most widely used in the U.S., with MySpace (originally a place to promote bands) starting out the more popular but with Facebook gaining steadily.

Setting up a MySpace page or a Facebook profile only takes a few minutes, and many advocacy organizations (and corporations) are using them. Social networking sites' audiences still tend to be younger, so they're particularly handy tools if you're trying to reach high school/college students and recent graduates (though some newer social networking sites focus on more adult adults and senior citizens). MySpace pages also automatically include a blogging function, so they can be an easy way to get into blogging if you're not ready to set up a standalone site.

Facebook offers a number of potentially powerful features for online advocates: for instance, it's opened its system to allow outside programmers to create "Applications" for the site. Some advocacy groups have created their own Apps, while others are using ones created by vendors that plug into member-management systems. Also, individual Facebook users can create "Causes," while groups can create "Fan Pages."

Often, your MySpace page or other social networking profile will be simple "brochureware" — little more than an online business card and a chance to get your name in front of potential supporters. To get more out of it, try adding links to your individual campaigns (if you're an advocacy group) or to more information about each of your issues. Always include a link to join your email list, a donate button wouldn't hurt, either. Many MySpace sites are garish and assault readers with sound and flashing graphics (hello, late-90s Tripod and Geocities sites), so you'll probably want to use pictures or other graphics to illustrate your links, but be sparing — having a "clean" site will actually help you stand out.

A few other things to keep in mind:

- **MySpace and Facebook users are a diverse bunch and many people use the sites for dating and self-promotion.** You may end up with some "friends" with an exhibitionist streak, so try to decide in advance how to handle friend requests from less-conventional parts of your audience. This consideration is probably more important for a candidate than for other types of campaigns — just imagine how your opposition might use that "friend" of yours who loves her some bikini shots.
- Friend lists tend to build exponentially (the more people who see you, the more people who are going to link to you), so **try to build a healthy list right away.** If you have an

email list or newsletter, mention your MySpace/Facebook page to your readers when you launch it and invite them to become friends. Also, look for organizations that work on related issues and request friend links, since being shown on their site will put you in front of a friendly audience right away.

- **Use social networking sites to promote your action alerts!** Send a mass message out to all of your friends and also post notice of it on your site. Readers are more likely to sign up for your list if you present them with a specific action to take. Encourage them to spread the word, through direct messages to friends, Facebook status messages, profile photos, etc.
- **Ask your friends to post your alert on their sites.** If they really care about your issue, they're often eager to help out. Plus, it gives THEM some interesting (you hope) content for their site.
- **Political campaigns in particular should use badges, buttons, widgets and other content snippets that supporters can place on their own sites.** Let THEM promote YOU even when they're not actively adding more to their profiles. Have a clear download section on your profile page and on your main website.
- As with every other website, **don't let your content slip out of date.** If you're afraid that you're not going to have time to keep your profile updated, stick with evergreen content.
- Finally, don't just assign some random intern or junior staffer to create and run a social networking profile because "they're young and know about these things." **A MySpace site is just as much a part of your campaign's public front as your main website is, and it must be on message.** Make sure that it meshes with your overall communications strategy.

Building Social Networks on Your Own Site

Several vendors are now offering to help organizations set up MySpace-like functions on their own sites. I haven't worked with any of them yet, but it's a tactic that definitely shows promise. For a lesson from the 2008 presidential primaries, Barack Obama's social network was terrifically successful, gaining hundreds of thousands of members and sparking plenty of real-world behavior, but John McCain's original 2007 soc net failed completely. Organizations thinking about creating their own social networks will want to consider carefully the scale they'll need to reach in order to succeed – without enough members, soc nets fade fast.

The Future of Social Networking

As of this writing, the future of online social networks as political tools is uncertain. Though we've seen plenty of attention paid to soc nets in the 2008 primaries, their ability to spark concrete action in the real world and for a wide variety of campaigns is still uncertain. As a fundraising tool, they've largely failed so far, with most Facebook Causes raising a few dollars at most, and even the successful campaigns raising far less money than a well-tended email list would yield from the same number of members.

Really successful social networking-based campaigns generally seem to work with the strengths of the medium rather than treating it as just another broadcast tool – organizers work with Facebook and MySpace friends one-on-one and at length, fostering deep commitments and relatively small but strong groups. Successful social networking outreach often seems to hinge on the kind of super-activists discussed in the chapter on Political Databases, with each forming the hub of their own web of individual activists.

Some campaigns also use Facebook and MySpace essentially as email-replacement tools, particularly when working with younger audiences, but I suspect that email and social-network messaging will merge to a great extent down the road -- ultimately, integrated campaign communications systems won't necessarily need to distinguish between the two.

Finally, some zealous true believers argue that electronic social networks will eventually be as ubiquitous as air, with each of us embedded in them from waking until sleep. We'll see; in that case, they'll replace most personal online communications. And we'll need to rewrite this book again.

Next: Social Media

9. Online Advocacy Tools: Social Media

Social media is a broader concept than social networking, though people often put them together — it refers generally to content that is created by random internet users rather than by a central person or group. YouTube and Wikipedia are great examples, as are blogs that allow comments. Besides blogs, how can political campaigns use social media?

Carefully, as MoveOn.org discovered during the 2004 presidential campaign. If you'll recall, early in 2004 the group encouraged its members to create anti-Bush ads that it would then evaluate for actual use on television. Hundreds of ads were submitted and placed online, but one used historical footage to associate the Bush administration with Hitler and the Nazi party. Oops — that one ad gave MoveOn.org's enemies fodder for days of attacks on the organization. An ad that never ran got plenty of media coverage and took attention away from the issues on which the group wanted to focus voters.

Any time you open the floodgates to user-generated content, you take the same risk, so good gatekeeping is essential. That being said, allowing your members or readers to generate content has some real strengths as a tactic. For one thing, it allows you to capture the brainpower of far more people than you could reasonably hire — you can leverage the collective intelligence of a chunk of the internet. For another, it's potentially a terrific tool for community building, which we'll discuss in more detail in the section on building and keeping an audience.

As an example of both aspects, in the summer of 2006 the Ned Lamont campaign in Connecticut made great use of user-created video. For instance, Lamont supporters shot clips of opponent Joe Lieberman's campaign appearances and uploaded them to the Lamont site. Minor gaffes that would have passed unnoticed in the past could thus be preserved for all to enjoy, and those behind the cameras could feel that they were an essential part of the campaign. Lamont supporters also amused themselves and their comrades endlessly by cleverly editing Lieberman footage into their own online ads and "documentary" clips.

Besides video, a campaign could solicit slogans from supporters, ask them to contribute their own personal stories or essays to an online presentation, provide them with photos to embellish with captions and speech bubbles, or ask them to vote or comment on ads, speeches and position papers, just to name a few uses. Any of these tactics can motivate your supporters and get them to help push your campaign over the top.

Social Media, Whether You Like It or Not

One more thing about social media that campaigns need to keep in mind: it's out there whether you want it to be or not. For instance, look at our experience in the 2008 primaries. Barack Obama benefited from the "Yes We Can" and "Obamagirl" videos, which were created by citizens without any coordination from the campaign, but he was hurt by videos of his former pastor which were posted to YouTube. All the major campaigns had Facebook Groups for and against them; all had blogs building them up and cutting them down. In a social world, campaigns need to pay attention to a vast new array of content producers whom they never had to worry about before, since some college kid (or some grandma) can produce a viral email or a powerful video piece that can drown out the message the campaign is actually trying to get across. Whether campaigns actively use social media tools or not, they're being used on them. Fun times, if you ask me.

Next: Video and Animation

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

10. Online Advocacy Tools: Video and Animation

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Though online video has really broken out big in the last couple of years, campaigns and random citizens have been using short video clips (live-action or animated) to promote their ideas and pummel their enemies for years. But broadband's easy availability and the recent explosion of video posting sites like YouTube makes it much more effective than before — users no longer hesitate to click on video links like they might have a few years ago, and you're not going to lack for easy places to post your content as an outreach tool.

Of course, the huge expansion of online video makes it hard to break through the clutter: the next "Yes We Can" is competing with millions of YouTube clips created by both amateurs and professionals. Besides the new generation of home video enthusiasts, music labels are promoting bands, broadcast networks are hyping their shows, and P.R. firms from all over the world are pushing "clever" promotional video clips in hopes of viral takeoff.

Why Use Video?

Campaigns have found that video can be a powerful tool in part because it helps create more of an emotional connection with a subject — having someone TELL you about a political issue is usually more compelling than reading about it. Also, good video can take complex issues and make them immediately understandable, in that picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words way. One consideration, though, is that video is often quite time-consuming. Posting an unedited clip is relatively easy, but anything that needs editing can quickly turn into a huge project. I've heard video producers estimate 30-40 hours of work to produce a 3-minute clip, if it needs to be scripted, shot and edited.

The Basics

So, now that we've decided to use video (or animation), how do we do it? First, campaigns can host clips on their own websites, blogs, MySpace sites, etc., to vividly illustrate their ideas, to show their candidates in a godlike light, to highlight opponents' misdeeds and overall perfidy, etc. This tactic is really a no-brainer, and you're only limited by your ability to create content — plenty of people are doing amazing things with \$200 video cameras, and hosting is cheap unless you're getting gigabytes of data accessed weekly. Good video (and Flash animation) can make your case in a dramatic and immediate way and is often the centerpiece of viral campaigns. One particular advantage of using video hosting sites is that you can usually "embed" the video in your own page: paste in a snippet of code, and your readers can watch the video directly on your site without having to open the video clip as a separate document.

One note — if possible, "watermark" your pieces so that your URL displays within the picture as they play. This way, if someone copies the file and distributes it independently of your site, viewers will still have a way to find you. Also, besides linking to issue-specific clips in the appropriate places on your site, you'll probably want to create a central page that collects all of your video (and/or audio) in one place.

Reaching Out

Next, campaigns can use video as an outreach tool by posting clips on Google video, YouTube or their competitors, hoping to capture new supporters as they come across them. Most sites will allow you to create a “channel” that gathers all of your videos in one place and may allow you to link back to your main site or your action center. Again, watermarking is a good idea.

Posting videos is the beginning of the battle, but if you really want them to be seen, you’ll need to spread the word using all of your normal promotional mechanisms. Link to them from your main website and social network profiles, promote them to your email list, and make sure that it’s as easy as possible for viewers to forward your link to others (a feature generally built into video-sharing sites). Also, keep in mind that YouTube and other video-sharing sites usually display a handful of popular or noteworthy clips on their front page and on category pages, and your viewership can spike if you can build enough traffic on your own to start being featured. Pay close attention to copyright! Some sites will reserve the right to use your content for their own purposes.

Social Media

Finally, as discussed in more detail in the chapter on Social Media, campaigns use video as an organizing and motivating tool by letting their supporters create and edit video content and upload it directly to the campaign site.

Next: Advertising

11. Online Advocacy Tools: Advertising

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

If I had to pick a most-neglected aspect of internet politics, it would be online advertising. In particular, electoral campaigns spend relatively little money advertising to web audiences, particularly compared to the huge amounts they raise online. While it's typical for commercial marketing campaigns to spend 15% or 20% of their budgets online, for political campaigns the comparable range would be 3% to 5%. This seems particularly strange considering the targetability of online advertising (the 'net naturally breaks down into demographic and interest-based niches) as well as its trackability.

The internet's main rivals as communications channels (general-audience broadcast advertising, phonebanking/robocalls and direct mail) are all gradually losing effectiveness as a result of a variety of factors including increased competition for viewer attention, cable channel proliferation, cell phone ubiquity, and overall junk-mail resistance. Despite these trends, most campaign professionals are happy to raise money over the 'net but are rarely willing to recycle much of it back into online advertising. That situation may change (as of this writing, several of the 2008 presidential campaigns have spent a substantial amount advertising online), but for now a combination of factors seem to be slowing down the acceptance of online advertising in the campaign world.

First, online advertising is often hard to do, particularly if you're going beyond basic Google Ads and Blogads. Running display ads (static banners or more complex Flash/video/interactive pieces) is much more difficult than it should be, in part because different publications can have vastly different standards (I can remember one time doing three different versions each of four online ads, one set for the NY Times site, one set for Washington Post properties and one at standard 468x60 banner size for National Journal) and in part because ads can't be ordered from a single central broker. Television and print ads, by contrast, are done in standard formats and sizes and ad agencies can usually purchase space in many outlets at once.

And therein lies the second part of the problem — professional campaign consultants in the U.S. have generally taken a cut of their clients' TV spending as a commission for placing their ads, and the industry hasn't worked out a similarly profitable business model for online political advertising. Pressure is coming, though — the '08 campaigns have broken down a lot of barriers, and consultants are also being pushed more often into lump-sum channel-neutral contracts that don't discriminate as much against the 'net.

Basic Types of Online Advertising

Regardless of whether they're used to elect a candidate or promote an issue, online ads today break down into three basic categories.

Display Ads

Display ads are the descendents of the banner ads that sprang up everywhere during the first dot-com boom, but the family has now expanded to include sophisticated video pieces, Flash animations, database interactions and "floating" pop-overs. Display ads are also in no way new to political advocacy, since I can remember the original incarnation of epolitics.com making money (through a political ad network) from Lockheed-Martin ads for the F-22 during a defense funding fight in the late '90s. As mentioned above, display ads often have to be tailored to the particular requirements of a given website or publisher, particularly if they include higher-end features.

Also depending on the publisher, display ads can be targeted at particular site users, particularly on sites like web portals and social networks (Facebook, MySpace) as well as newspapers and others that collect financial, demographic and usage data on their readers. An advertiser on Washington Post web properties, for instance, can aim ads at employees of particular federal agencies, showing them only to readers coming from the selected .gov domain(s). Of course, advertisers can target by interest as well as by demographics, running ads only on special-interest sites or on special-interest sections of mass-audience and news sites.

We should note right away the obvious application of databases to the question of online targeting, something covered in more detail in the chapter on political databases. Also note that some forms of offline political communications also benefit from similar kinds of targeting, since the explosion of cable channels naturally encourages targeting by interest — also note that "cable" channels delivered by actual cable rather than by satellite are also often geotargetable by zip code or neighborhood. Radio also breaks down by region and by demographic, and direct mail is a well-known haven for database nerds who dream of slicing and dicing consumer data (more in the chapter on Political Databases).

Contextual (Google) Ads

Another common online advertising channel deploys text ads on web pages based on the content of those pages. Google Ads are the classic example, with ads being served based on each unique search query, but Google now also sells text ads on thousands of sites across the web, and similar ad networks have sprung up as well. Contextual ads have proven to be very effective for both commercial and political advertisers, with easy and obvious targeting based on a variety of factors including keyword and reader location. Most also feature easy testing of alternative ad message/keyword combinations and the ability to change ads and ad runs mid-stream. Nonprofits can apply for Google Grants to receive free Google Ads, which a number of groups have used to build their supporter and donor lists.

To get the most out of contextual ads, testing and tracking are usually vital. Since ads on a particular page are arranged and emphasized based on the amount each advertiser has "bid" to purchase those keywords, a campaign may be able to reach more people for the same amount of money by advertising on more-specific queries. For instance, advertising on the word "outdoors" is likely to be expensive, since lots of different retailers, outfitters and advocacy groups will be competing for it. Advertising on "alternative fuel biodiesel," on the other hand, will probably be much cheaper, and its superior targeting may also yield better results per-ad-viewed.

Two other considerations about Google and other contextually targeted ad systems: first, if you target well, they'll reach people at the moment when they're potentially interested in your subject, since they're either searching for it or they're on a page that's somehow related. Second, Google ads have a secondary branding effect, since they put your message in front of web searchers and readers regardless of whether they actually click on them. Some research has even shown that it's beneficial to have a Google Ad show up on a page that also has your site in the organic Google search results — if a page contains both your ad and your link in the Google search results, more people click on your link, as if the ad somehow delivered extra visibility or credibility.

Blog Ads

A final ad channel particularly commonly used in the political world involves specialized advertising on blogs, either through the Blogads.com site or through another blog advertising

network. These ads are naturally targeted based on each blog's particular niche, and ads on specialized sites such as local or regional political blogs frequently reach very influential audiences at a low relative cost. For more, see the chapter on Blogs and Blogger Relations.

Targeted vs. Blanket Advertising

We've talked a lot about targeting online advertising, but why not simply push out lots of ads to popular but non-targeted and non-political sites? Absolutely, why not? Some campaigns and consultants have gotten quite good results from bulk appeals on mainstream consumer and media sites. Shotgunning cheap ads out into the ether often fails, though — ads inexpensive enough to buy and deliver in massive amounts are also more likely to be bland enough to get lost in the online clutter.

Landing Pages

One final consideration — the ad itself is only the first part of the battle, since once someone clicks on your link, what happens next? Ideally, they'd jump to a highly targeted landing page that is conceptually and/or visually linked to the particular ad that they clicked on, and that also clearly steers them in the direction you want. For instance, political campaigns frequently push people to volunteer sign-up or donations pages, while advocacy groups will often promote email-your-Congressmember campaigns and similar political actions. In the 2008 cycle, we've seen landing pages deliver video messages, help people find their polling places, promote house parties and even encourage donations to outside causes like disaster-relief.

Next: SMS Text Messaging/Cellphones

12. Online Advocacy Tools: SMS Text Messaging/Cellphones

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Cell phone text messages are the final political tool we'll consider. If you've spent the last year or two building up your thumb strength and agility while keeping up with which bars have good drink specials (as I write the original version of this article, I was looking at a friend's message from the previous night that said, and I kid you not, "CcCome to bedinbl" — Jen had maybe been at a barstool a little too long...), you already know that text messages are an efficient way to get a brief burst of text in front of a lot of people at once.

Their limitation lies in the brief part — text messages are too short to include much persuasion, so they're best used in triggering an action that you've preplanned. Particularly outside the U.S. (creative cell phone uses have lagged in the States), organizers have used mass text messages to alert people to the location for a rally or demonstration and give authorities little time to counter them. You might use them for similar purposes or to spark an immediate cell call to a campaign target, for instance a Congressman or corporate CEO.

You'll need to have educated your activists beforehand through other means, probably via email, but the text message can generate an immediate action when you need it. The trick will be getting the right target phone number to the right activist, but that's why you hired a top-notch vendor (hint).

Probably the most immediate use of text messaging in the U.S. will be for election-day Get-Out-The-Vote efforts, though you can also use them as a two-way tool by soliciting information from supporters through polls and such. But the really interesting uses of mobile technologies are probably still a couple of years away, and savvy campaigns are gathering supporters' cell numbers now for applications that haven't yet been dreamed up.

Note also one particularly interesting use of cell phones for fundraising in the 2008 election cycle: the John Edwards campaign contacted list members via text, urged them to call a number and listen to a recorded message, then connected them to operators to take donations right away. The results were said to be good, though the campaign did not repeat the attempt that I know of.

Next: Political Databases

13. Online Advocacy Tools: Political Databases

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Political databases generally don't get a whole lot of attention in the press or in public, but they underlie much of the technology of modern politics. Email advocacy and fundraising systems are really just specialized examples of CRM (customer/constituent/contact management) software, while blogs and website content management systems are database-driven, as are online ad serving systems. Robocalls, phone banks and direct mail depend on databases of voter registration and consumer behavior, and database experts frequently spend large amounts of time sorting their lists and testing different messages and asks.

CRM Systems

CRM systems help organizations and campaigns communicate with large numbers of supporters to encourage online advocacy, fundraising and real-world behavior. Some CRMs focus on email advocacy, others on fundraising, others on newsletter delivery or project management. Sophisticated political systems may incorporate social networking outreach features, regulatory reporting features (for campaign contributions or lobbying expenses) and media- and lobby-contact management. You usually pay for what you get, though several lower-cost, higher-feature systems are becoming available. One development for 2008 — the major political parties and the presidential campaigns are investing heavily in database-driven systems to increase the efficiency of block-canvassing and other local volunteer activities. Watch for database-driven systems to become increasingly important in organizing real-world political action, helping to turn online energy into offline activity.

Identifying Super-Activists

Most activism-related CRM systems will allow list members to be sorted by their behavior — the number of actions they take, the amount and frequency with which they donate, etc. Identifying your super-activists can let you create special programs intended for them alone and which frequently reward them with access or recognition. Cultivating super-activists (or super-volunteers or super-donors) is time-consuming, but particularly for campaigns or groups with large lists, it can really pay off over the long haul. Organizing effectively on online social networks such as MySpace and Facebook frequently also relies on the work of super-activists; for more, see the chapter on Social Networking.

Microtargeting

One database-related topic occasionally mentioned in the press is microtargeting, which almost always seems to have both a gee-whiz air and a slight whiff of evil about it. At a basic level, microtargeting involves the tailoring of communications based on the particular characteristics of the potential recipient — sending different messages to different people based on who they are or what their interests are.

Microtargeting enthusiasts sometimes talk about the sophisticated merging of voter files and consumer databases, for instance to target voters by cross-referencing their magazine subscriptions and the kind of car they own to identify a particular group that's open to a selected message (for instance, direct mail people sometimes boast of sending different mailings to each address on a given block). But, the actual benefits of such fine-grained targeting seem to

fall off pretty quickly — most electoral campaigns are happy enough with voter addresses and past political affiliation, with a bonus for lists of union members, past political donors, volunteers for past political campaigns, etc. Note that if you're running for elected office in the U.S., the national parties are developing (and in some cases fielding) systems to put voter information in the hands of their candidates at all levels.

A number of vendors and polling firms also offer what seem to be quite sophisticated microtargeting-based voter/donor outreach, but I've also heard experienced direct mail database people say that the by far the best predictor of a person's propensity to give money to a campaign is his or her past history of donating — people who've donated before are more likely to donate again. In that case it doesn't take a whole lot of sorting to determine if you have your hands on the right data. So, consider microtargeting if it seems like a good fit, but make sure you're paying for information that's actually useful.

Making Your Case with Data

Speaking of useful data, another way you can employ it politically is to enlist it directly in your cause. Advocacy groups in particular have latched on to the idea using of data as an online persuasive tool through custom web applications, Google Maps and other mashups, interactive Flash presentations and online video. Essentially, it involves using software to turn information into pictures in a way that's interesting to viewers, and presenting data well can turn a very dry policy topic into something live and compelling. Most data presentations should be planned very carefully, since they are often significant software projects. See the chapter on Media Relations for a discussion of the use of data to influence journalists and policymakers.

Next: RSS

14. Online Advocacy Tools: RSS

RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Syndication) is an easy way to keep your readers abreast of updates to your site content. At their simplest and most common, RSS feeds send subscribers the title and a brief blurb about each new article or post on a given site or blog, along with a link to the post. Users can subscribe directly to feeds from sites they read regularly, though feed aggregators such as Feedster and MyYahoo also collect feeds in searchable form.

Over the last couple of years, most major media outlets have implemented RSS to allow their readers to keep up with site changes as they happen. RSS feeds are built into most blogging software and are so common in the blogosphere that they are becoming critical to a site's credibility among bloggers as an information source.

Though the name “feed” implies that RSS is something that you send out to subscribers, your RSS feed is really just a simple XML file that lives on your site and that you either update by hand or is generated automatically by your site's content management system. When people subscribe to a feed, they've really just set up their RSS-reading program or site to automatically request the feed's XML file at a regular interval and display the contents.

For political campaigns, RSS should be a no-brainer. It's extremely easy to set up and to maintain, and it's a great way for you to keep in regular contact with your more tech-savvy readers. Also, as RSS aggregators become more common, many people are reading the contents of RSS feeds without even knowing it, since the news pages they're browsing are collecting and displaying the contents of feeds from many sites.

If you do podcasts, RSS feeds alert subscribers and aggregators every time you post a new installation (the “cast” part of the word “podcast” derives in part from the way RSS lets you mimic the “content push” model of traditional broadcast media).

A couple of quick things to keep in mind:

- Particularly if you update your RSS feed by hand, always run it through a feed validating site after you change it. Tiny flaws can crash your whole feed.
- Also when you make an update, use a pinging service to alert feed aggregators of the change
- In the same way you submit your site to search engines and directories, submit your feed to feed aggregator sites — you can find them via a Google search.

Next: Spreading the Word/Building an Audience

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

15. Online Tactics: Spreading the Word and Building an Audience

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

What good is a campaign if no one knows about it? Inadequate promotion is a painfully common problem in the online world — rarely can you hide your light under a bushel and expect your site to shine. Let's look first at the basics of getting attention, then we'll look at how to keep those readers once you get them.

Be A Resource

The first step in self-promotion is to be worth promoting: content that is both broad and deep is vital to attracting readers from every source — rich content tends to yield more search engine traffic, more links from other sites and more repeat visits from people who have found you. I've beaten this into the ground before, but you're more likely to get readers if your site is relevant, easy to navigate and regularly updated.

Have you heard of the concept of the Long Tail? Introduced by Chris Anderson of *Wired*, the Long Tail is the idea that in a sea of sites, a handful get massively more traffic than all the others, but those also-rans get much more traffic as a whole than the big few (the Long Tail is the loooooong list of sites trailing off from the leaders on a chart of overall traffic).

True internally for Amazon and other retailers, who make more money in total from books that sell two or three copies a day than from bestsellers, it's also true for broader resources on the internet. The online audience naturally fragments in a small number of very popular topics and a much, much larger number of niche topics.

Why does this matter to you? One of the most important things a site can do is to be significant within a given segment in the tail. Be a valuable resource, make yourself easy to find, and people interested in your topic will find you.

The Basics of Self-Promotion

Okay, poof, we're a valuable resource, so let's start telling the world. First, submit your site to Google, Yahoo, MSN and the also-ran search engines. They'll probably find you anyway in the long run, but why not make it easy on them? [Note: we'll talk about getting good search engine placement below.]

Don't stop with one round of submissions. When you add a new content section ("Why Blue Fizzies Hate America"), make sure that you submit the section's front page to Google — it'll show up much sooner that way. The other search engines seem to update more slowly, so I'm not sure how much it helps to let Yahoo or MSN know about a particular content section, but if you have the time, it can't hurt.

Next, how visible are you beyond the search engines? Are you mentioned on the relevant pages on the web that cover your topic? Not link farms or link-spammers (sites that link to massive numbers of other sites in an attempt to spoof search engines), but actual substantive sites about your subject. If not, it's time to go through the tedious and time-consuming task of tracking them down and letting them know about you. It's as simple and as annoying, once you've done it about a hundred times, as finding the email of the site editor and sending a short and polite note to let him or her know about your great new set of resources about the Blue Fizzie Menace.

Not everyone will answer you (many, many sites are no longer kept up, and some actively-maintained sites are run by big fat jerks), but if your content is worthwhile, you should gradually build up links. Links obviously help your traffic directly, and as we'll discuss in the section on search engine optimization, they'll help you with visibility in search results as well. Don't forget reference sites — are you listed in the Open Directory and in any relevant Wikipedia articles?

Are you leveraging your other resources? Never, ever, ever let a piece of paper leave your office without a URL on it SOMEWHERE. Not a business card, not a newspaper ad, not a "fact" sheet, not a direct mail piece, nothing (unless you're trying to maintain plausible deniability, and that's naughty). This is sometimes a tough one to beat into your colleagues' heads, but every communication is a chance to promote your online presence. If you're spending money and/or time to promote your ideas in the offline world, don't miss the opportunity to give people a chance to go online to learn more about them.

Getting More Aggressive

Okay, we're done with the passive stuff — let's start bugging people. Press releases are a classic way to get the word out, but make sure you always have your URL in them. Besides going directly to journalists, press releases that go out through a distribution source like P.R. Newswire or PRWeb also show up in Google News, Yahoo News and other content aggregating sites. The proliferation of online journalism (blogs and newsletters) creates a huge demand for content, and you never know where your story will show up. When I was running Political Information.com (no longer active, and now preserved by a museum!), our press releases generated some attention in traditional news outlets but got great coverage in niche newsletters.

You can also reach out directly to journalists and pitch stories, but you'll generally want to work with a press or P.R. expert so that you don't make the kind of mistakes that alienate reporters. Again, you'll probably have better luck with niche publications than with newspaper or broadcast journalists. Don't forget podcasts and regular online video shows! They're likely to reach an audience that's passionately interested.

A classic way to reach a new audience is to position yourself as an expert (hello, e.politics!) and pitch stories to sites that cover your subject (hello, next step in my self-promotion process!). Newspaper op-eds and how-to or opinion pieces in online magazines put your campaign's name in front of an audience that other people have spent THEIR time building. Make sure you get a link!

Special Tactics for Bloggers

Building an audience for your blog deserves a special section. Blogs can benefit from most of the tactics described above, but they also have access to tools that other sites can't use as well.

Blogs are part of an online political discussion, and a good way to build your audience is to participate in that conversation. Linking to other sites and other discussions can build your traffic — trackbacks let you comment on posts on other blogs so that your content can reach that blog's author. Also, bloggers are usually passionate about being read, and they'll generally pay attention to the sites that are linking to them (which they can also find by searching for links to their URL on Technorati. It sounds simple, but it also seems to be what works. With e.politics, I'll be trying it out — I'll let you know about the results. [Note: pretty damn good so far!])

Building an Audience/Keeping Traffic

One of the biggest problems with site marketing is that even when you can convince people to come to your site, most readers rarely come back. Increasing your retention rate is an obvious way to get your page hit count up.

Sites encourage return visits in two basic ways: by enticing people to return and by periodically smacking them in the face with words and pictures.

Show that you have updated content

If your content is old and doesn't look as though it's regularly updated, why would a casual reader come back? Make it obvious that your site IS regularly updated — put a What's New section on your front page (and perhaps in the navigation on every page), use dates on pages, and highlight recent content as much as possible. For more on keeping sites up to date, see the chapter on websites.

Use columns and regularly-appearing features

Regular columns or features can hook readers — that's why newspapers generally run op-ed columnists on predictable days. Your site might have a weekly feature on the ridiculous things your enemies are up to (Wednesday Wackos) or on a particular topic area (Tech Tuesdays, a la the Kojo Nnamde show).

Use Email

As I discussed in the section on building and maintaining email lists, make it easy for people to sign up for updates. If you're building an activist list, you'll be doing this as a matter of course, but even issue sites and blogs can have an email list for telling readers about new articles. See the email list section for details, tactics and caveats.

Use RSS

RSS is another no-brainer, since subscribers to your feed will see links to new articles as they're posted. It's also essential for promoting podcasts.

Build community

Building an online community can be a good way to turn casual visitors into passionate fans and supporters. Your email list is community at a basic level, since people do tend to identify with sites that send them information frequently (bitter as I am, I have a soft spot for several sites that have been sending me newsletters for years, even though I rarely read them) or for campaigns under whose auspices they've sent email or faxes to Congress or other decision-makers.

The next step, and a natural one for blogs, is to get readers involved in the process of creating content for the site by leaving comments on pages. On some blogs, the comments have become more valuable than the original articles.

Big media outlets are definitely realizing the value of comments, and community-building is a major reason that the Washington Post and other major media sites have rolled out comment

features for most or all of news stories, and some have even implemented social network-style features for readers.

Taking it farther, campaigns can encourage readers and supporters to create content such as images or videos. See the chapter on social media for more.

Next: Search Engine Optimization

16. Online Tactics: Search Engine Optimization

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Getting found on search engines is usually vital if you want to have any kind of online prominence, and search engine optimization (SEO) is one of the Holy Grails of online marketing (marketing is what we're doing here: we're selling ideas, right?). So, how do we get Google, Yahoo and MSN to notice us?

First, some introductory points:

- A lot of the information you'll hear about search engine optimization is out of date. Particularly, you'll still be told that you need to have keywords in your site's meta tags (which are in the html heading and provide information about your site), when they really don't make much difference now. People abused meta keyword tags so much in the past (i.e., by putting the word "sex" in them about 500 times per page) that search engines generally now ignore them.
- When we're talking about search engine optimization, we're not talking about spoofing search engines with bad information or otherwise trying to distort the search engine results — people often try to do that, but the search companies constantly change their algorithms to counter new tactics. Their business depends on good search results and they work hard to thwart attempts to fool them. Don't bother — if you really abuse the system, they can make sure that your site is somewhere around search result page number 100,000. You can generally get good enough results just by knowing HOW search engines rank pages and setting your site up accordingly and planning your marketing strategy accordingly.
- Search engine optimization is a long-term process, and the sooner you get started, the better.
- I'm going to focus on Google, because it's the most popular and most responsive search engine, but the same strategies will generally yield good results for Yahoo and MSN (the other two most popular search sites) and the also-rans. You'll probably see changes in your Google rank first; I've found that the other two lag by a month or two.

How Do Search Engines Work?

To understand how to optimize your pages, it helps if you understand how search engines actually work. When you search on Google, the company's system calculates which sites are most relevant for your search within a fraction of a second, based on the contents of the page and on how authoritative a source your site seems to be. How do they determine these things?

Let's begin by looking at how does a search engine finds your site and analyzes it for inclusion in the engine's search index. Each search engine uses programs called "spiders" to acquire pages for inclusion. People speak of spiders crawling the web for pages, but they really never leave their host computer — to do their job, they work by requesting a web page, reading it, finding the links embedded in the page, and then requesting those linked-to pages, reading them, following links, and on and on. In theory, Google and other search engines should be able to find any page on the web that's linked-to, though in practice it's best if you let them know that your page exists by submitting it directly.

Once Google has your site pages in its index, how does it know which ones to serve up in response to a given query?

First, Google looks at page content. Does the a page contain the words you searched for? Are they a significant part of the page (i.e., are they mentioned repeatedly)? If you're using a multi-word query (i.e, "die disco slowly"), how close together are the search terms on the page? Are they part of the same sentence or phrase or are they scattered? Do they show up in the page title, the filename and in page headings?

Second, Google looks at the authoritativeness of the site on which the page resides. How many other sites link to it? How authoritative are THOSE sites? Google sees links on the internet as "votes" for a site and its content and figures that the more links exist to a given site, the more authoritative that site is. And links from sites that are themselves considered authoritative count more. Google also looks at the specifics of the text of link — what keywords are clickable in links to a particular page? What words surround the link text?

Of course, this description is over-simple — the details of Google's search algorithm are a closely-held secret and the algorithm itself changes constantly. But it's close enough that we can benefit from it: if you want to boost your site's search engine presence, you'll need to look at the quality of your content (AGAIN with the content!), the way it's presented and how many quality sites link to you.

Optimizing Pages

To optimize pages, start with the words. Think about your topic and what search terms people might use when they're looking for information about it, and try to work them into the text as much as possible. Don't sacrifice readability — keyword-laden text doesn't need to sound weird — but do keep search terms in mind as you're writing or editing. If possible, keep your pages fairly short, since the percentage of the page text devoted to a particular keyword seems to matter — if a word shows up five times on a short page, it'll tend to do better than if it shows up five times on a long page. Again, don't sacrifice readability, since a bunch of one-paragraph pages are going to drive readers crazy.

Second, pay attention to the page elements. As much as possible, use "semantic coding" — Google pays attention to the classic html header tags (h1, h2, h3), using them as a guide to your page content. So, you'll benefit from using header tags for your page divisions (headings and subheads) rather than an arbitrarily defined `` tag — use `<h2>` or `<h3>` rather than ``, and make sure that your likely keywords show up in the headings (which they should do anyway, if the headings are any guide to the content). Don't neglect ALT tags for images — they're another chance to work in your key concepts.

Finally, Google gives a disproportionate amount of weight to the page title — not the title in the body of the page, but the html title in the page heading (which shows up in the little bar at the very top of the browser window). I've tested this one myself — on the NET site, because of a quirk in the site construction process, our global warming pages were originally titled "NET.org >> Warming," but after reading about the importance of titles, I changed them to "NET.org >> Global Warming" and resubmitted them to Google. A couple of weeks later, our main climate change page jumped from around position 220 in the results for the search phrase "global warming" to around position 75. Impressive change! (And we've improved on it since.)

In addition to the page title, pay attention to your filenames — for a climate change page, "global_warming.html" is better than "warming" and certainly better than "gl_w.html."

Becoming Authoritative

Now that your pages are optimized, it's time to make others respect our authority — we need links. Assuming that your content is worth reading, other sites will often be happy to link to it if they know about it. So, as we discussed in the section on spreading the word, it's time to track down resource sites about your topic(s) and ask them to link to you. Avoid link-spammers! Don't get on sites that exist solely to exchange links with random sites in the hope of building Google traffic — the search engines tend to punish those sites, and showing up on them can actually hurt you. Focus on substantive sites that contain good resources about your subject.

Google provides a good guide, since sites that rank highly for your keywords will generally be authoritative by definition. Besides looking at where a page shows up in the search results, you can find a site's approximate page rank directly using the Google toolbar or any of several websites. So, hunt down the site editors' email addresses and start contacting them. You'll be competing with the link-spammers (they send out zillions of spam messages asking sites to exchange links with them), so make sure that your message looks like it comes from a human being.

Be polite! Occasionally, site owners will act like jerks when you contact them, but even then, you'll almost always attract more flies with sugar than with vinegar. Make it easy for them — clearly identify the page on their site on which your link belongs (usually on a Links or Resources page) and suggest text for the link. If sites don't have a Links section and clearly don't link out often, you may well want to leave them alone, unless they have a specific article page on which your content might be referenced.

Your general outreach will also usually contribute to link-building. Blog outreach in particular can help, and search engine optimization is another good reason to focus your outreach on the most popular blogs in your subject area. Press releases and articles that you write for other sites are another search engine optimization tool. Since releases that go out through P.R. Newswire and PRWeb show up on Google News, Yahoo News and other content aggregating sites, try to keep your keywords in mind as you write headlines, and make sure that your press releases always have a URL in them. If you contribute articles or columns to another site or to an newsletter, try to get a link to your site in the content or the attribution.

Finally, as you begin to build up links to your content, make sure that search engines see them. Particularly if you show up on authoritative sites, submit the pages that link to you to Google so that the benefits show up in the search index as fast as possible.

Limitations

These tactics can make a big difference in how high your site shows up in search results, but there will always be limits. Sites that have been around for years and have many, many links to them will be tough opponents, as will traditional news sites and (often) government sites. Particularly on controversial topics, pages from the BBC, CNN, the New York Times and other sites with millions of readers and tens of thousands of links will almost always dominate the top results.

SEO Vendors

Some vendors will sell you specialized search engine optimization services. I haven't used them, though I've been to plenty of presentations by "experts," and I can't really comment on how

effective they are. I suspect that you'll get 90% of the benefits they deliver simply by following the rules above.

Hosing Your Enemies

Well, okay, there's not much you can do to hurt your opponents' search engine placement, but you can certainly avoid helping them. If you link to an opposing site, for instance to discredit it ("Look How Bad My Opponent Sucks"), add a "nofollow" attribute to your link tag. It'll keep Google from counting your link as a "vote" for the site.

Next: Influencing Decision-Makers

17. Online Tactics: Influencing Congress and Other Decision-Makers

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

A major part of online advocacy involves direct attempts to influence decision-makers such as congressmembers, governors, the President, state legislators and corporate boards and CEOs. I'm going to focus on Congress, but many of these tactics apply to other decision-maker campaigns as well.

As when you're dealing with reporters, often your most important role is to have a website that's a good information resource. Hill staff are often going to start out on Google when they're researching an issue, like the rest of us, so having relevant content that's widely linked-to is vital. Content, once again, is key.

Next, when Hill staffers do arrive at your site, make sure that they can find what they're looking for. General navigability is a good start, but may also usually want to have a special section of the site carved out for them.

One of your common tasks is usually going to be supporting your government relations team (or your citizen advocates and volunteers) by collecting documents that they want Hill staff to see and presenting them on a central page about an issue. You'll usually have a short intro and a clearly-identified list of links of the documents, which might include press releases, video clips, congressional testimony, letters to Congress from supportive corporate CEOs or grassroots citizens groups, reports, factsheets, etc.

When you're preparing information for the Hill, bear in mind that staffers often have very little time to go over the details. Presenting information in layers, with a one-sentence summary followed by an overview page and links to more information, is vital. I discuss this in more detail in the section on effective websites. For factsheets, bullets help, as does bolding key concepts.

Also, unless you're specifically keeping your issue pages low-profile, make sure that they're referenced on your site front page. A staffer may remember that he or she got information from you recently but not have access to the specific URL of your news release or your issue page. Don't make them hunt for it — they'll go elsewhere.

Mass emails

For years, advocacy campaigns have been bombarding Congress with mass emails from supporters. Unfortunately, all the evidence points to the fact that they don't work very well — Hill offices largely ignore them and will often treat thousands of identical messages as essentially a single message (when I worked in the Texas Capitol 15 years ago, we were already treating xeroxed mass mailings the same way).

According to research by the Congressional Management Foundation part of the problem is the simple volume of email: in 2004 alone, congressional offices received almost 200 million messages. Besides the sheer volume of email, however, many staffers doubt the legitimacy of mass messages and think that organizations send them out without consulting the supposed signers (though no one in the business I've talked with has ever HEARD of a group doing that). Some offices have grown so tired of mass emails that they've enabled "logic puzzles" to restrict email to individual messages from individual constituents sent through the members' own web pages.

Outside of Congress, email campaigns can be more effective. State legislatures, governors' offices and state and federal agencies are less used to being hit with communications from thousands of people at once and seem more responsive. At NET, I saw agencies back away from rule changes when they received a few thousand public comments and realized that people are actually watching their actions. Of course, we've all seen other agencies receive MILLIONS of comments and ignore them utterly.

Corporations are also likely to be more sensitive to mass emails, since they generally guard their brand integrity carefully.

With these constraints in mind, how can we get the most out of email campaigns?

- **Only allow activists to send to their own elected officials.** Don't spam Congress! Messages from outside a senator's state or a representative's district will be ignored, and you'll simply be helping to poison the well for everyone.
- **Keep your messages short and focused.** This applies both to your messages to your own list members asking them to take action and to the messages they'll send to the campaign target. In your message to your list members, pay close attention to the subject line — you're trying to sell your activists on the action.
- **Tie your message to a specific piece of legislation or agency rule.** Staff will usually sort them by bill number or rule docket number and you'll want to make it easy on them — otherwise, your message may fall through the cracks. Try to put the bill/rule number and name in the subject line. For agency rules, the *Federal Register* posting will often give the exact subject line required. General emails ("Support The Environment") may well disappear into a black hole.
- **Encourage your activists to edit messages.** Congressional staff claim in surveys to take individual messages from constituents more seriously than obvious mass messages, so make sure that the text in your message is editable. Some groups have even built online applications that let people assemble their own messages from pre-written snippets. Don't expect too much, though: according to folks at my old vendor GetActive (now Convio) fewer than 10% of the messages sent through their system get edited, since it's so much easier for activists to send the pre-written ones.
- **Try supplementing or replacing email actions with phone calls.** Again, according to Congressional Management Foundation research and plenty of anecdotal evidence, phone calls from constituents get more attention. Either ask activists only to call or call in addition to sending an email, but be sure to include their congressman's name in the message — don't create more work for the congressional switchboard operators.
- **Replace emails with faxes.** With a big campaign, this will get expensive fast, however.
- **Print the messages out and bring them in by hand.** Instead of sending immediately, or in addition to sending immediately, store the messages in a database, do a mail-merge and print them out. Then, sort by member and bring them to the Hill. Obviously, this is a huge amount of work and is only practical if you're trying to reach a handful of legislators, such as the members of a particular committee. Whipping out a stack of constituent letters in a meeting with staff can help raise awareness of an issue, though. Be sure to include the constituent's name and address in each printed message.

Next: Working with the Media

18. Online Tactics: Working with the Media

The first thing to remember about working with the news media is that reporters are bombarded with information and that the good ones consequently quickly develop a sensitive bullshit meter. When you're working with journalists, dial back the rhetoric and focus on the facts of your issue.

The main exception is when you're providing a statement to a reporter from which he or she will mine quotes. In that case, being over-the-top may help land you in the story. But even then, always try to back your language up with facts, usually in a "For More Information" section at the end of the statement. Everything you send to reporters should have your site's URL!

As when you're dealing with Congressional staff and other decision-makers, often your most-important role is to have a website that's a good information resource. Reporters are going to start out on Google, like the rest of us, so having relevant content that's widely linked-to is vital. Content, once again, is key.

Next, when reporters do arrive at your site, make sure that they can find what they're looking for. General navigability is a good start, but you'll also usually want to have a special section of the site carved out for journalists. In that section, you'll generally have:

- press releases and statements, often divided by topic
- information about your issues, or at least clear links to your issues, factsheets and reports
- contact information for your organization's press team
- a sign-up form for your press email list

Now that we've taken care of random stumblers-by, let's get more aggressive. When you're contacting reporters, you generally don't want to send email attachments — they may be away from the office and reading mail over a Treo or Blackberry or even a dial-up connection in a hotel room, and big attachments will bug the hell out of them.

Consequently, one of your common tasks is usually going to be supporting your press team by collecting documents that they want reporters to see and presenting them on a central page about an issue. You'll usually have a short intro and a clearly-identified list of links of the documents (which might include press releases, video clips, congressional testimony, letters to Congress from supportive corporate CEOs or grassroots citizens groups, reports, factsheets, etc).

When you're preparing issue pages like this one, unless you're specifically keeping them low-profile, make sure that they're referenced on your site front page. A reporter may remember that he or she got information from you recently but not have access to the specific URL of your news release or your issue page.

One other tactic we had great success with at my previous job was podcasting issue briefings. When we held a conference call or even a stand-up press event, if possible we'd record the audio and post it online as an mp3. This way, reporters who couldn't make the initial event could still listen in, and we got several press hits from podcasts that we'd have missed if the audio hadn't

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

been available. And, of course, regular citizens can listen in, too, which has led to blog hits in the past.

Long-term reporter education

Beyond supporting normal press outreach, you can also create special sites or special online presentations for long-term press education. They may be straightforward presentations of information or they may be snazzy video extravaganzas, but their goal is usually to influence the way reporters approach an issue rather than to score immediate press hits.

Before I started at National Environmental Trust (now Pew Environment Group), they launched Luntzspeak.com, an excellent little site centered around a strategy memo by Republican pollster/messaging guy Frank Luntz. In the memo, Luntz suggested language that Republicans could use to improve their image on environmental issues without changing their actual policies, and the Luntzspeak site highlighted politicians' use of his tactics for reporters. The goal: to make them skeptical of such language in the future.

Another good educational tool is to present abstract data in a way that's easy to grasp. As an example, again, before I started as an employee, NET's partner Clear The Air developed an online power plant pollution locator as a Flash application. The locator site shows major power plants across the country and lets you zoom in on each one to see how many tons of pollutants it produces. It also compares the effects of different plant clean-up plans. Besides putting it on the web, Clear The Air also providing its field organizers with CD copies that they could bring directly to reporters and demonstrate.

Next: Viral Campaigns

19. Online Tactics: Viral Campaigns

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Mmmmmm, mental viruses. Let's create a video clip, an animation or even an email appeal that's so compelling that people forward it around the world and do our promotional work for us. It's basically traditional word-of-mouth leveraged across the internet, and who wouldn't want to create The Thing That Everyone Is Talking About?

Of course, launching a successful viral campaign involves much more than just dreaming up a clever video, and for every viral campaign that claws its way to the surface of the public mind, dozens or hundreds of others sink leaving scarcely a ripple. What can you do to give your campaign the best chance of succeeding?

Let's think first about the mechanics of the content. You'll probably have two basic parts — the viral content itself and the email and/or the ads that promote it. If your content is an email alert (note: VERY rare is the email appeal that achieves viral takeoff), the message itself could be the viral content, but usually you'll be linking to a site.

You could send a video as an attachment, but that would be self-defeating — you want people to come to your site so you can catch 'em in a big net. Also, attachments annoy a lot of people and may be deleted as a virus risk. So, plan to have your promotional piece link to a site or page that contains your viral content.

What characteristics can help viral campaigns succeed?

Be relevant to your audience

Who are you trying to reach? What would fire them up? Remember that you're going to be asking people to "vote" for your viral content by sending it to people in front of whom they want to look good — they're trying to boost THEIR status/coolness quotient by attaching their name/reputation to YOUR content. Be sure that what you're promoting is something that people are going to want to associate themselves with. YOU are not your audience — play to their tastes, not yours.

If at all possible, be funny!

Much of your potential audience consists of people stuck in offices during the workday and desperate for distraction. Give 'em something to make 'em laugh and you might make 'em yours. Humor's tough, though — you have to have an idea that's inherently funny and also well-presented (how many good jokes have died through bad telling?). Keep your pieces short — a couple of minutes is usually getting too long — and well-timed. Test, test, test! And not just on people around the office who've already been converted to your issue — try it on friends and ask for honest criticism.

Try to tie your piece to something topical

For instance, you could reference a holiday or some event that's in the news. Of course, if you're not careful, you'll be one of 500 Halloween-themed campaigns out at the same time.

Offer an immediate payoff

You only have a few seconds to catch someone's attention, so don't waste it. Try to grab viewers' attention immediately with a strong visual (or audio) lead-in, even if your piece really builds to a crescendo later.

Offer an immediate way for your audience to act, and use it to capture names and emails

You may just want people to see the piece as an educational tool, but more likely you're also using it to build your email list or to generate an action ("Write the Bilbo Gear and Sprockets company and demand that they no longer use parts made from itinerant llamas"). Make the action obvious and easy — if people can't see it or have to jump through a bunch of hoops to take it, you just lost them.

Make your content easy to forward

Include a "send this email to a friend" link on the page and even in the viral email itself (it can't hurt). Ask readers to send to a specific number of people (i.e., "tell five friends about this spectacular video") — for some reason, having a specific number seems to work better.

Promote it ruthlessly

Yes, some viral party invitations and such have spread around the world after being sent by the host to only three friends, but a big fire is much more likely to start from a bunch of little fires than from a single spark. Obviously, sending to your email list is a good start (and everyone in your office should be helping by sending to their friends and colleagues), but also consider media outreach — several PR firms specialize in "helping" your viral campaign get on local news shows and into print outlets. Also, think about blogads, blogger outreach and advertising (or free placement, if you can swing it) in newsletters that go to your potential audience.

Special Considerations for YouTube/Online Video Campaigns

YouTube and other video-sharing sites have come to be one of the main routes for spreading content virally. Sometimes campaigns are consciously trying to tap into the YouTube audience, while at other times they may also just be using the site for free hosting and relying on their own promotion to drive traffic. Most viral campaigns aim for some combination.

If you're trying to induce content on YouTube or another video site to spread virally, try to take advantage of the extra traffic that "featured" videos generally receive — if you can steer a burst of traffic to your video piece, you might be able to get it promoted up a level and exposed to a new audience, who then can spread it if they like it and bump it even higher. Consider using your email list, online social networking outreach and blog outreach as well as social news sites like Digg or Stumbleupon to get the word out. Classic viral spread is like an avalanche — one piece dislodges another, which dislodges another, which...

Finally, a cautionary note

I hate to say it, but don't expect too much. You may have a terrific piece, but it may fail completely for reasons that won't even be clear. And even if it does take off and ends up in front of millions of eyeballs, that doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to get a lot of email addresses or raise a ton of dough.

Next: Raising Money

20. Online Tactics: Fundraising

The internet really came of age as a fundraising tool in 2004 — the success of the Dean campaign and of groups like MoveOn.org startled most political professionals and observers, and other campaigns were quick to put new emphasis on the web and email lists as way to raise money from supporters.

Of course, many did little but ask and ask and ask, and as I discussed in the section on list-building and list maintenance, that's a quick way to burn out casual supporters and hard-core activists alike. What are some techniques to shake the most money out of those credit cards and Paypal accounts without poisoning the well for future requests?

For more about this topic, including links to related articles, see the live version of this chapter online at epolitics.com

Building relationships

As I talked about in the section on site promotion and audience-building, creating a sense of community and an emotional connection can be vital in the process of turning casual readers into dedicated supporters. If people feel a real attachment to your cause or candidate, they're much more likely to want to help you out financially. Your goal is to build that connection and then use it in amounts carefully regulated to turn as few people off as possible.

You'll reach your activists mainly through email, so think through your messaging strategy carefully. Some points to keep in mind:

- **Carefully regulate your message frequency**, which I discuss in some detail in the section on list management.
- **Don't just ask for money.** If the only messages your supporters receive from you are fundraising attempts, you're likely to lose them pretty quickly. Make sure that you're sending them things THEY want, whether it's issue updates, pretty pictures of animals, or chances to pester their elected officials, and not just an endless string of requests for money.
- **Whenever possible, tie a fundraising request to a specific action.** Are you raising money to build schools in Africa? Talk about a particular community that would benefit and set a target. The DNC emails over the past year or so have been very good about tying donations to specific state-party-building activities, and I can attest to their effectiveness (i.e., I've thrown them a few bucks).
- **Plan for list exhaustion, and keep building your list.** You're constantly going to lose list members — no matter how good your issue, it's going to happen. Build your list through every method you can.

Maximizing returns from your website

Besides raising funds through your existing supporters, you'll want to maximize the money that you generate from casual visitors to your website (i.e., people who aren't already receiving your emails). Putting a Donate button on every page is a no-brainer, but here are a few simple things you can do to get more out of it. They should also cross over to help you get more from your email outreach.

- **Just as with emails, tie your ask to specifics about an issue.** Try using different fundraising language on pages about different subjects. Get as detailed as you can about what the money will go for, assuming of course that it's going for something that sounds good in print...and not just to administrative costs.
- **Keep the number of steps in the donation process to a minimum.** Web users are very sensitive to the details of sign-up processes — with every step, you'll lose a few. Make it easy, for their benefit and yours.
- **Suggest specific amounts for donations.** According to a friend who's been in the fundraising racket for years, suggesting amounts tends to make people more likely to give and to give more. A series of suggested donations with little checkboxes will do fine, as long as you leave one field blank for donations of other sizes. Don't be afraid of large amounts! (As long as you also list smaller ones.)
- **Pay close attention when you're comparing vendors.** Look at how much you'll pay in a base amount per month for their system as well as the percentage they'll take of every transaction. Run sample numbers for different vendors to get the best idea of which will work for you. And always test their systems for ease of use.

The Explosion of Online Fundraising

One fascinating development in the world of online fundraising has been its explosion during the 2008 primary election season, with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton both raising tens of millions of dollars per month. Online fundraising has yielded several advantages, first by helping to build networks of small donors to whom a campaign can return again and again. Also, money raised online is available to the campaign immediately, while mailed checks can take days to arrive and be processed. Finally, online fundraising cuts the administrative costs of fundraising tremendously, both because checks no longer have to be entered and deposited and because donor information is immediately available for sorting into Federal Elections Commission and other regulatory reports.

And online fundraising isn't just a game for presidential campaigns: sites like ActBlue on the left and Slatecard on the right are extending internet fundraising to candidates at all levels, while nonprofit advocacy groups have access to a broad array of tools to build supporter lists and plumb them for cash.

Next: About e.politics and your author, Colin Delany

About e.politics

Lots of websites talk about politics — talk and talk and talk — but only a few discuss anything other than a particular point of view. Very few discuss online advocacy and online politics broadly and as a craft, focusing on what methods work and when, and without selling a particular product or consultancy.

What follows is an attempt to fill that gap with a solid introduction to the world of doing politics and advocacy online. I'm not interested in glittering generalities about the potential of digital networks in the political sphere but rather in the nuts and bolts of actually using the web, email and related technologies to try to change the world.

e.politics can't cover everything you might use, and it certainly can't cover all options in the kind of depth they deserve, but I hope it WILL give you an overview of the tools and methods that can help you spread your ideas around the world and mobilize other people to help. Along the way, you might just figure out how to get elected or start a movement. How you use the information is up to you.

As you experiment, I hope you'll come back and let everyone else know how it went — much of the value of this site is going to come from your comments on articles.

Who's Behind This Thing?

The great thing about running a website is that you get to appoint yourself an expert. So, poof! I'm an expert.

But I do have a little experience working in the political world in general and in online politics in particular. After an early-'90s stint in the Texas Capitol (a place where politics is generally considered a contact sport), in 1995 I helped to start the original e.politics, which was an email-based legislative and regulatory alert service that unfortunately never quite worked as advertised. In 1999, I helped to start politicalinformation.com, a targeted search engine for politics and policy (now preserved by an online museum!), and served as its editor, public face and chief business development/P.R. guy.

After both companies went the way of all well-intentioned but inadequately capitalized ideas, I worked for several years as a graphic designer and communications consultant, helping a wide variety of advocacy groups build an online presence. From 2003 to 2007, I worked full-time at the National Environmental Trust as their online communications manager. In that role and while working with clients, I've tried everything I could to help spread the word about our issues and mobilize supporters. Along the way, I gave most of the methods described on e.politics a shot. Particularly the cheap ones.



Your Host,
Colin Delany

Some caveats: I've never run a political candidate's campaign and I don't have much direct experience with local political organizing, so for this site, I've had to supplement my own experience with that of others who know more than I do. Also, with ANY of these methods, Your Mileage May Vary — give them a try, but none is a panacea.

A final note about my own politics: as you can guess from my client list, I'm a lefty, though hardly an orthodox one. My own political opinions may creep into e.politics occasionally, but the site is really about how people are using the internet for politics, not about which side I wish would win.

Colin Delany
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cpd@epolitics.com