
How Obama used social networking tools to win



In his bid to help Barack Obama become the 44th President of the United States, Scott Goodstein spearheaded the use of new social networking and mobile media platforms, harnessing technological innovations to expand the audience base for the Obama campaign.

Since joining the Obama campaign in February 2007, Goodstein, who is the External Online Director for *Obama For America*, has helped attract nearly two million supporters on MySpace, about 6.5 million supporters on Facebook, and 1.7 million supporters on Twitter. This strategy of using social networking tools worked well, enabling the Obama campaign to outmanoeuvre Hillary Clinton’s campaign, which was enjoying the support of the institutional base of the Democratic Party.

Speaking recently at BroadcastAsia 2009 in Singapore, a digital multimedia and entertainment industry conference, Goodstein said the campaign put Obama and his famous slogan, *Change You Can Believe In*, “front and centre”.

“(His elect



ion success) wouldn't have happened if we didn't have the right message and the right messenger," Goodstein acknowledges.

"Barack Obama's message resonated clearly, so people were excited, they were talking about us on Facebook, they were talking about us on MySpace,

they were texting their friends about us.”

The credit for the success of the media campaign in galvanising the American electorate to vote for the country’s first African-American president is shared by a small group of media and technologically-savvy aides, which counts Goodstein among them.

Changing media consumption patterns

On his part, Goodstein exploited significant changes in media consumption habits in US to the campaign’s advantage. For instance, television viewership has been in decline for years, while the attention span of viewers became ever shorter, and the newspaper industry was in a precarious state as consumers flocked to the internet for news and information.

To capture hearts and minds, Goodstein oversaw the development of the Obama campaign’s social networking platforms, including niche social networks that catered to different ethnic groups, and targeting popular mainstream platforms such as Google, Facebook, Hulu.com, Twitter and YouTube.

Goodstein also created a mobile communications strategy, called Obama Mobile, which included text messaging, downloads, interactive voice response communication, a WAP mobile web site, as well as iPhone applications.

He also used new social networking platforms, which were not available when he joined the campaign.

“Hulu’s obviously growing. We were one of the first campaigns to advertise on Hulu. So we’re now talking about doing advertising and interacting with a medium that didn’t even exist when we were hired on the campaign,” says Goodstein, who also had to persuade his colleagues about the value of tapping Twitter.

“During the campaign, I had to convince folks that it (Twitter) was not just another funny name ... that it actually had some value, we can actually push out real-time broadcasts.”

“So we used Twitter a lot for our live feeds (and) connected Twitter to Barack Obama doing something ... Turn on your TV now, watch this, check out what Barack is doing right now.”

Ever evolving

Underlying Obama’s success in generating tremendous grassroots support is his understanding of the need for an evolving communications strategy and a willingness to experiment with new communications tools. Goodstein pointed out that President John F Kennedy made the jump to television, while President Ronald Reagan was feted as the “great communicator”, in part for harnessing the power of television to communicate his messages.

This was why Obama began using YouTube for daily broadcasts, while his media aides sought to ‘evolve’ the campaign’s website.

“Why were people coming to our website? What information did they want? How could we be more consumer-friendly? All these questions we needed to answer,” says Goodstein.

“How do we make sure that when we set up a social network, that it is truly an embassy of our actual campaign?”

Goodstein also says the campaign managers realised that their social networks on platforms such as MySpace and Facebook should be able to provide information and respond to their supporters who wanted their queries answered, “as if they were sitting down and writing an old-fashioned snail mail letter to the campaign.”

Three main factors

In helping Obama’s successful run for the presidency, three main factors were instrumental in the effectiveness of the campaign’s social networking and mobile communications strategy, says Goodstein. One, using deadlines to test new ideas; two, allowing consumers to engage and validate; and lastly, moving with the market place.

Goodstein says he tested new ideas on improving his communication strategy as the campaign moved from one primary election to another. Such ideas include using interactive voice response, using 1800-numbers to help

people find polling locations, the use of text messaging and reminding people to vote early.

Goodstein recalls the time when popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey went to South Carolina to help attract people to the campaign's rallies. The challenge then was how to get new volunteers.

"Could we bring in 10 or 15 per cent more net new volunteers, net new money by asking them to take additional activists? ... What would they want as a follow-up to that event? How could we engage them in a unique way? How do we engage them over a period of time?"

The campaign, says Goodstein, achieved a lot by allowing people "to engage and validate".

Street artist Shepard Fairey, who was asked by the campaign to draw a picture of Obama, became famous for his now iconic red, white and blue poster of a pensive Obama looking up.

On his own initiative, hip hop artist Will.i.am from the Black Eyed Peas created a music video called Yes We Can which was inspired by Obama's speech to supporters after losing the New Hampshire primary.

Goodstein says Fairey and Will.i.am's contributions were more valuable than the donation of money alone.

"What they gave us ... was way more valuable. They gave us something that they as artists and musicians were able to craft - take our brand message and bring their artistic interpretation to it."

"We could either ignore that thing that was going on in the internet, or we could engage in it, put it up and ask other people tell us their stories," he says.

"Do they make songs, do they make videos? Do they make T-shirts? How can they get involved in the campaign? Maybe we'll highlight some of those, maybe we start highlighting additional videos about the organisation and how they can get involved."

Lastly, Goodstein says the campaign was also able to "move with the market place". The iPhone, he says, was not in existence when he joined the campaign. But recognising the immense popularity of the device, he decided to create an iPhone application that could provide supporters access to the

campaign's news and videos.

The application also served as a mapping device to show the location of local campaign offices to new volunteers, which resulted in people showing up at the offices with iPhones in their hands.

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