



California Voter Guide

Communicating with
California's Voters since 1986

Campaign Internet 101: Building a Winning Online Strategy

Very few political campaigns in 2010 will decide to completely ignore the internet, but this wasn't always the way things were. It really took the 2008 election and, particularly, the Obama phenomena to really almost force awareness to a new level.

In spite of this new awareness, many campaigns are hesitant to dive fully into online campaigning, instead taking incremental steps such as launching a website and setting up Facebook and Twitter accounts. Look, there are plenty of good reasons not to dive head-first; **the internet is risky** since its track record is much shorter than more proven mediums, **it's also a little confusing** and cluttered with mysterious technologies with funny names, **and it's disruptive** to otherwise tightly scripted and highly controlled campaigns.

But we argue that campaigns are even more at risk if they simply rely on a few symbolic gestures to the internet. Campaigns are also at risk if they chase after the latest online fad with no real strategy or, as some are tempted to do, attempt to adopt the Obama online strategy as their own. While there isn't a one-size-fits-all online template, there are a few key frameworks we've developed with which campaigns can create a tailored online strategy that works.

Working with our clients over the past six years, we've developed the Digital Media Campaign Framework for building a focused online campaign while engaging all of the **appropriate** online mediums. We highlight appropriate in the last sentence because not every tool is right for every campaign. This point is especially important for campaigns that blindly follow the latest online craze (most recently, for example, Twitter) with no real organizing principles or strategy from which to make the right decisions.

Our Digital Media Campaign Framework consists of three types of technologies which together form the essential building blocks of a campaign's online strategy:

1. **Reaching** – With nearly universal adoption by medium-high propensity voters (yes, this includes older voters), the internet is now a highly reliable tool for voter contact and supporter recruitment (closing in on TV and phones which are increasingly losing ground). In general, targeting can be done on very specific demographic criteria at a much lower cost than traditional media. A wide range of options exist for reaching voters/supporters in a more targeted way than broadcast media can offer, including: online display ads, social media ads, search ads, purchased/rented email lists to name just a few.



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2. **Engaging** – Contacting voters and potential supporters is just the first step. The second, and perhaps most critical, step is engaging potential supporters to build trust, loyalty and eventually drive them to action (donate, recruit others, vote, etc.). Engagement is ultimately about communication...bi-directional communication, that is. The internet provides the unique opportunity to not only speak but also listen to supporters and, ultimately, learn from these interactions (learning is covered in step 3). A set of tools are emerging to help campaigns deal with this type of bi-directional communication, particularly on social media where “trending topics” from the collective conversation of a campaign’s followers can be monitored and mined. In addition to social media, tools for engagement include the campaign website, grassroots emails and web videos.
3. **Learning** – While communicating is important, communicating the right message is essential. More than any other medium, the internet provides a deep set of direct observation data upon which various messaging approaches can be tested. That’s where “learning” technologies come in. To start, often the most overlooked part of the online campaign is the campaign database. This is where all sorts of rich information about campaign supporters, volunteers and donors can be collected and analyzed. Additionally, metrics on website traffic, email performance and online ads are readily available and will collectively tell a story if only captured and analyzed correctly. An analysis across these mediums that applies a consistent message-based approach will quickly begin to demonstrate which messages are working and which should be scrapped.

Campaigns must utilize all three types of technologies in combination if they are to be successful. There are a vast number of tools from which to choose. But, owing to limited resources, campaigns must make good decisions about which of these tools they will actually use. Our Tool Choice Matrix is another strategic framework which allows our clients to select only the tools that are the right fit for them.

Working with our clients at the outset of a campaign (and periodically throughout the campaign) we conduct a tool assessment using the Tool Choice Matrix. This matrix consists of two dimensions (Value and Maturity) to create four categories or quadrants of tools (described in the list below):

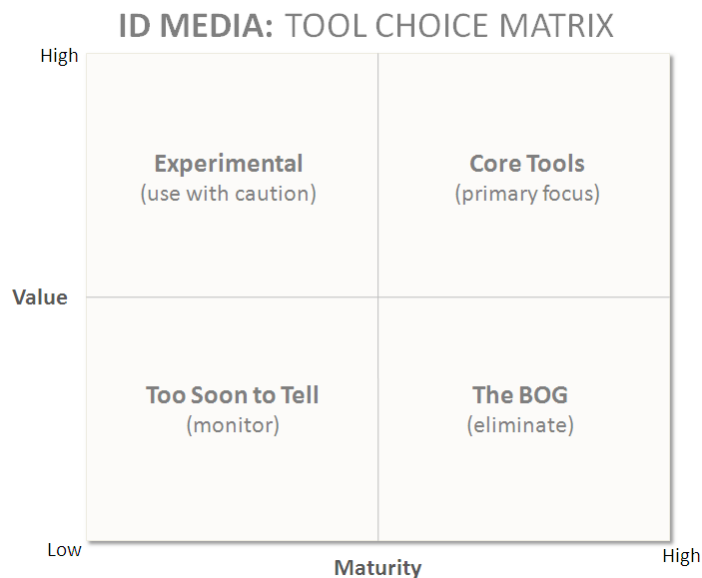
1. **The BOG** – Tools that were once valuable but have since matured and declined in value fall into this category. These tools should be eliminated as they are a drain on resources.
2. **Too Soon to Tell** – New technologies that have yet to prove their value generally fall into this category. These could move into any one of the other three quadrants, so we should keep an eye on these technologies as they do eventually mature.



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- 3. **Experimental** – Relatively new technologies that have demonstrated their value early fall into this quadrant. While they have value, they are also new and could be unpredictable or have unintended consequences. Our suggestion is to selectively use these tools with caution.
- 4. **Core Tools** – Highly mature and highly valuable tools form the basis of online communications. They should occupy 75-80% of the online campaign's resources and overall focus.



After identifying the right tools, the online campaign can kick into full swing. The real power of the online medium is harnessed when all of the online tools are working together in elegant configurations. For instance, online ads are promoting the latest web video which builds awareness and drives new visitors back to the site through which the might join the campaign's Facebook group and recruit some of their own friends along the way. This final element for online success relies on experience and professional judgment. This is why campaigns which are successful online hire and *empower* experienced political internet experts, a rare but growing breed, who deeply understands the medium through years of online campaigning experience.

In the final analysis, finding success online isn't easy; it takes a combination of the right tools, strategies and team members. But not embracing the internet will increasingly become a recipe for failure. It may take a cycle or two more of upsets, but if the history of other major mediums (radio, TV) is any predictor, the eventual mission-critical importance of the internet is inevitable.



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