

Obama's Victory

An Old Approach is New Again

This Campaign May Have Used the Latest Technology, but it Still Relied on the Basics



BY KATHLEEN LAREY LEWTON, APR, FELLOW PRSA

In the first rounds of dissecting the success of Barack Obama's presidential campaign, the talk always seemed to turn to technology. The chatter was about fundraising and volunteer recruiting via the Web, texting and tweeting to reach voters, creating a presence on social networking sites such as Facebook and posting videos on YouTube and elsewhere.

But several hours after Obama's acceptance speech in Chicago's Grant Park on Nov. 4, CNN asked Obama's campaign team how they won the election. They all agreed on the same response. "It was our grassroots effort," said David Axelrod, Obama's chief campaign strategist.

Grassroots? Isn't that considered to be old-fashioned? What about all that technology stuff?

A NEW PRESIDENCY

In the last few months since that Election Night conversation, we've had time to look beyond the obvious and examine the campaign in its entirety. The picture that emerges is an admirable combination of the old and new.

Obama's campaign team deployed the latest communications technology as one key tactic. And yes, they also relied on classic grassroots outreach, which many campaigns have ignored in recent years, making this old approach new again.

But the fact that the campaign tactics were built from a classic strategic foundation was even more significant. Even though it's fun and hip for PR and marketing professionals to rhapsodize about the newest, coolest trends, Obama's team based their campaign on the four basics:

- Identify and know your audiences
- Nail down a message that is credible, relevant and resonant to these audiences, and then deliver that same message over and over again
- Employ a spokesperson capable of communicating the message and selling the product
- Deliver that message via a wide range of channels that map to your target audiences

This list reads like the basic lessons we learned doing our first big PR campaign. But for those of us who have been in public relations for a decade or three, it is gratifying to see that the basics are still the best foundation, and that they actually work.

Look at that boring old process of audience identification, and the process of knowing the audience, which is even more tedious. All of that research is rarely as sexy as talking about instant messages versus podcasts versus Twitter, but it gave Obama a competitive edge from the beginning. He understood that the newest voters would make a difference,

Another View

For an alternate perspective on the 2008 election, *The Strategist* spoke to **Merrie Spaeth**, who served as President Reagan's director of media relations and pioneered the use of satellite during his term in office. At Dallas-based Spaeth Communications, she coaches C-Suite residents on communication as a leadership skill.

What do you think was the most important story of Election 2008?

The change in the way the media operates. The "mainstream media" is gone, and the concept of media relations has changed dramatically. Journalism jobs plummeted. Papers like the *Los Angeles Times* and *Boston Globe* lost hundreds of jobs because their parent companies took on too much debt at the wrong time. *The Christian Science Monitor* abandoned print completely. Beat reporters disappeared, leaving the work to younger generalists. Worse, the media displayed a disgraceful bias for Sen. Obama. Even the *Washington Post's* ombudsperson, Deborah Howell, wrote a widely publicized column about the amount and type of coverage. The result will be that clients in the business community will have even less trust and respect for the media.

What are some takeaways from the election for PR professionals, particularly those who counsel CEOs?

PR professionals need to help CEOs get comfortable with frequent, simple, rehearsed but unscripted videos as an internal and external tool. The campaigns used the short YouTube-type video as a primary communication channel. This technique will [become] even more important for business exec-



utives. The listener/audience now wants to see and hear the speaker and decide for themselves what they think [about] what the speaker is saying.

Can Obama's successful campaign be duplicated for a more traditional PR client or product?

Don't hold the Obama campaign up for use with more traditional clients or products. He was a unique "package" who arrived at a unique moment. Do use the campaign to illustrate how the expectations of our audiences have changed. They want to be consulted and to contribute. They want a conversation, not a lecture. This fundamentally changes how companies communicate. Nonprofits began to learn this years ago. Traditional business has to follow suit.

Any early predictions on the PR tools and tactics for 2012?

Cell phones are the next frontier for communication channels, but the concept of communities will be far more useful as an organizing principle. While Twitter may be all the rage, it's chatter, not a real conversation. Technology will be a critical factor in terms of how to connect very narrowly focused communities, whether it's breast cancer survivors or graduates of a certain department from your university. Person-to-person influence will gain in importance, and we'll look to "people like us," as the Edelman Trust Barometer calls them. ■

Another View

For another take on the 2008 election, *The Strategist* spoke to **Philip Young**, president of the Philip M. Young Company, a consultancy based in Lincoln, Neb. He worked in the Reagan White House and has served as the executive director of the Nebraska Republican Party. He is a political consultant for Republican candidates and ballot issue campaigns.



What do you think was the most important story of Election 2008?

From a political standpoint, it was probably the meltdown of the Republican side of our political process. From a professional point of view, the most important story out of the election of 2008 was the use of technology in campaigns. Having cell phone numbers to be able to text, raising money through the Internet, sharing campaign ideas — coordination and actual politicking using telecommunications was one of the watershed events of this cycle. Any future presidential campaign will have to emulate what the Obama campaign did, and that means Republicans playing catch-up for the next two years. Part of Obama's advantage was that his supporters were younger and arguably more technology-savvy than the McCain supporters. That must change for Republicans to regain an advantage.

What are some takeaways from the election for PR professionals, particularly those who counsel CEOs?

Introducing unknowns to the public

without educating the public first can be risky. McCain's Palin choice showed this. On the Obama side, the application of instant response messaging is something the private sector is looking at emulating in the future. The real challenge comes in developing the contact lists of cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses for large databases of contacts. Whether it's marketing or crisis management, the phone in a person's pocket is going to be a pivotal contact point in gathering and disseminating information in the immediate future.

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The challenge is finding a situation as universal as a campaign to use the tools Obama used. Logistically, virtually every adult could vote. Realistically, few companies or entities are going to have a universal audience like that. I could see where some utilities, such as electric companies, could have an audience broad enough to make large mass communications attempts worthwhile and effective. But in the retail or service industries, unless you have a reliable, accurate and up-to-date database of customers or a universe of people who you know care about what it is you want to tell them, you could be wasting time and effort. But if you have that database, [then] the real-time communication methods of texting and e-mail could be beneficial.

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The cell phone database as far as text messaging, as well as Internet-based campaign communications and networking tools, are going to be the standard. It's hard to tell what the cutting-edge technology will be four years from now. But any political side will have to stay on top of new technologies and be ready to apply those to campaign strategies and tactics. ■

and he knew what they'd respond to. His campaign was steeped in knowledge of how to reach and appeal to all of the ethnic audiences who, when aggregated, comprise the majority of U. S. voters.

From research, the Obama team gained an almost visceral understanding of working-class Americans' concerns. Long before the major downturn last fall, Obama's pollsters knew that the economy was already affecting this important demographic and that they were uncertain about the future. The team tuned into the fact that many voters were tired of negative campaigning (note the audience reaction meters on CNN during the debates, where the graph plunged downward whenever any candidate was out of line).

The Obama team knew that what had worked for Clinton in 1992 or 1996, or Bush in 2000 or 2004 wasn't a guarantee for success in 2008. In today's world, everything is constantly changing, and new technology is always developing. So they built their campaign on the here and now — relying on solid, ongoing, continuously updated research to make sure that they stayed in touch with voters.

Delivering and targeting the communications

All of this research led to the basic tenet of winning the election: deliver a solid message that is credible, relevant and resonant, created to appeal to American voters. The message wasn't tailored to a creative director's vision or the campaign team's beliefs. It was a message that spoke directly to the voters' concerns, their gut feeling that things weren't going right in their lives and in their country, and something had to change.

And then the campaign team delivered that message to perfection. In an

Obama's First 100 Days:

The *New York Times* White House Correspondents Weigh in on the Beginning of a New Presidency

BY AMY JACQUES

Now that President Barack Obama has officially been sworn into office, White House watchers will begin to carefully analyze his every move. On Jan. 11, as part of *The New York Times*' eighth annual Arts & Leisure Weekend, the team of *Times* reporters assigned to cover the White House shared predictions of what to expect during Obama's first 100 days in office. Richard L. Berke, assistant managing editor for the *Times*, interviewed correspondents Peter Baker, Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Jeff Zeleny in the Times Center auditorium in Midtown Manhattan.

"We know a lot about Obama, but mostly about how he can operate a campaign," Stolberg says. "A smooth-running operation where everyone was working together, devoted to him as a candidate. [But he] will now be residing over a cabinet with big egos and people with a lot of arguments."

Many of the things that Obama said on the campaign trail can now be moved aside, Baker adds, because the environment and economy have changed so drastically.

An important question to ponder is, How interactive will this president be, and how much dissent will he allow his reporters? Zeleny notes that Obama is an avid reader and always wants all of the information available to make a decision. "Obama is a very quick study," he says.

Zeleny wonders if this desire for information will create a problem of overload — that Obama may not be able to sift through everything. Or, conversely, maybe he will want memos that are short and to the point. The new president is pragmatic, a "fairly quick decision-maker" and wants to hear all views from all sides, Baker adds.

Obama is also good at keeping things quiet and under wraps, observes Zeleny. And another thing that the Obama organization knows how to do is step back and allow the moment to take care of itself. For now, though, he is focused on the economy. "There is nothing he could do to sign an executive order to make the economy better," Zeleny says. "If he could, he would."

Zeleny also says that many Washington insiders will likely be dusting off their high-top sneakers to get ready to play basketball — Obama's favorite sport. "Sports really can be a metaphor for the personality of the president," Stolberg adds. "If you think about it, basketball is a team sport." She says that in her experience, Obama only let his closest peers and advisers play with him, not reporters.

Zeleny calls Obama "a very private person," saying, "What you see is what you get with him — he's smart and thoughtful and we will see how he will be able to use those charms to win people over. The Obama campaign, and now the White House, is good at keeping a closed message.

"They talk about being transparent, but really that means more of putting him on YouTube for addresses — so you'll see more of him," Zeleny adds. "We'll be able to ask him that many more questions. But [Obama's team] know[s] how to get their message across through the Internet and that network of supporters." ■

Please visit *Tactics* and *The Strategist* Online at www.prsa.org for the full article.

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article posted on AdAge.com on Nov. 5, positioning guru Al Ries noted that every politician was talking about change, but Obama "repeated the 'change' message over and over and over again so that potential voters identified Mr. Obama with the concept. In other words, he owns the 'change' idea in voters' minds."

Ries also said that in today's cluttered communications environment, "it

takes endless repetition to achieve this effect," and that most companies, let alone candidates, don't have the patience or the vision to do it right. "They jerk from one message to another, hoping for a magic bullet," he said. By staying on message, Obama appeared decisive, calm and commanding.

This is what made Obama a successful spokesperson for his own brand. Although PR people sometimes tend to

rush past finding the right spokesperson in our fascination with new tactics to deliver a message, that spokesperson plays a critical role in whether or not the message is received or believed. Paul Argenti, an academic expert on corporate communications and professor at Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business, told *PR Week* that body language and tone of voice account for more than 90 percent of what is commu-

A NEW PRESIDENCY

nicated to an audience. He also states that “Obama’s steady and calm approach throughout the campaign” was an important part of his success.

From grassroots approach to high-tech tactics

In a powerful portrait of the campaign, journalist Matt Bai described Obama’s visit to a town hall rally in the local high school gymnasium in rural Lebanon, Va. “The program opened with the validators,” he wrote in *The New York Times Magazine* on Oct. 19. These were respected local residents who would “stand up and say that Obama is a guy you can trust,” including Ralph Stanley, the legendary bluegrass musician who lives in the area, Cecil Roberts, the president of the mineworkers’ union and Rick Boucher, the congressman who represents that district, according to Bai.

Because Obama was validated by these respected local leaders, he was well-received in Lebanon and spent time answering questions about things that the people in that region cared about.

Afterward, Boucher said that Obama’s visit was extremely important, and that “the grapevine is the single most powerful form of communication in my district. All those people in that gymnasium — I’ll bet every one of them went out and told 10 people, ‘Hey, he was terrific.’”

The validators, the personal appeal, the grapevine — this is classic grassroots strategy and as low-tech as you can get.

And while situations like this unfolded in communities across the country, the campaign was also going beyond the grassroots approach, using every Internet and social media tactic available, as Chris Bechtel from iPressroom noted in *PR Week*. He pointed out that the campaign not only used the Internet to deliver messages, reach voters, recruit volunteers and put them to work (all at their workstations), but it also helped raise millions of dollars that the campaign used for more communications. “The power of the Web gave the Obama campaign a significant edge in traditional mainstream TV advertising, and that’s a fundamental shift,” Bechtel wrote.

Executing the message

Meanwhile, it’s intriguing to contrast how Obama executed the basics of communications with the disastrous first attempt to pass the \$700 billion bailout plan this past Sept. 29. Though the White House advisers had an economic plan, there was not a communications plan to tell it and sell it. This was a problem for Washington, where the politics of governance is as much about marketing as anything else, *The New York Times* stated on Oct. 1.

The government focused exclusively on senators and rep-

resentatives while disseminating its message, forgetting to address the other key audience — voters — who, in turn, bombarded their representatives with calls, e-mails and faxes to encourage them to vote against the bill. Though it was eventually passed, that first “no” vote slowed the bill’s approval process and created confusion that still exists, impacting consumer confidence and trust that the government is trying to do the right thing.

The former administration may have officially called the bill the Troubled Asset Relief Program, but for nearly everyone else it was known as the bailout. The phrase “bailout” is not one that inspires positive feelings, and when paired with “Wall Street,” it was a tagline designed for disaster.

“The hurdle is overcoming the word ‘bailout,’” R. Bruce Josten, executive vice president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, told the *Times*. “It has continued to be used by members of Congress. You see it in the press today all over the place. This is not a bailout; this is the Treasury buying toxic assets that they will dispose of over a period of time and resell.”

But once the message was chosen, even if by default, who did government officials have prepared to deliver that message? Who could be a comforting spokesperson capable of explaining byzantine economic processes in ways that the average American could both understand and realize that it affected him or her?

Looking to the future

At the time of this writing, the economy continues to struggle, which is the Obama team’s first order of business. On New Year’s Eve, Peter Nicholas of the *Los Angeles Times* announced that the Obama team would be launching “an aggressive PR campaign to pass the massive new stimulus package,” which he said is needed to “revive the slumping economy and put the nation on course.”

David Axelrod added, “We’ll fan out . . . make [it] clear to people why we need to do what we’re doing . . . We want the American people involved in this discussion.”

Audience. Message. Spokesperson. Channels. The Obama team won the White House by knowing that the basic tenets of public relations still work well. ■



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