



A BLUEPRINT FOR THE USE OF NEW MEDIA

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The Obama campaign revolutionized the use of the Internet and other new media tools to engage with voters, mobilize grassroots support, and deliver a consistent, disciplined message. Members of the Senate Democratic Caucus now have the opportunity to adapt the high-tech tools of the Obama campaign to governing and the legislative process.

This report lays out a strategy for deploying new media and identifies best practices in the use of specific technologies, including e-mail, online video, social networking, blogs, Twitter and Flickr. These tools provide the opportunity for two-way communications with constituents that will encourage them to participate in the legislative process, mobilize constituent grassroots support, and create constituent-driven message delivery networks.

New media satisfies the huge demand today for *authenticity* from elected officials, *transparency* in the political process, and the opportunity for effective citizen *participation*. New media also fosters a sense of a community among constitu-

ents, which will be essential for leveraging their participation in the governing process.

What Can Be Accomplished with New Media

For the average citizen, there is tremendous interest in understanding what Senators do and how Senate offices operate on a daily basis. People are hungry to learn more about what happens “behind-the-scenes” in Congress. New media satisfies this demand for *transparency*. Tools such as online video, e-mail newsletters or Twitter can showcase a Senator’s activities and give constituents a better understanding of what Senate staff does on a daily basis.

New media also satisfies the demand for *authenticity*. New media tools, especially online video posted to the office Web site and YouTube and digital photos posted to Flickr, allow Senators to create strong emotional connections by telling personal stories about their work in a compelling voice. During the 2008 presidential election, for

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The Internet is Becoming the Primary Means of Communicating about Government and Politics

The Internet has become a major means by which people get information and communicate with each other – three-quarters of American adults now use the Internet. As Internet usage grows, new media technologies are changing the way people get information and communicate about politics.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, 40 percent of all Americans received news and information about the campaign via the Internet, up from 31 percent in the 2004 presidential race. Ad-

ditionally, 40 percent of African Americans went online for news or information about campaigns, up from 19 percent in the same time period in the 2004 race.

The Internet has also been shown to be the preferred method of learning about and communicating with Congress. Almost half of Americans have contacted their Senator or Representative in the past five years, and 43 percent of those who contacted Congress used online methods to do so. This is more than twice the per-

centage that had used traditional mail or the telephone.

The Internet and other new media are the “lingua franca” of the millennial generation, a demographic group which includes 18-35 year olds, and which is trending Democratic. Half of all 18-29 year olds looked online for news and information about politics or the campaign in 2008. But Internet use is not limited to the nation’s young people: 45 percent of 70-75 year olds were reportedly online in 2008.

example, Barack Obama filmed a private dinner he had with a small group of supporters, at which he joked and talked about his children.

New media tools can also satisfy the tremendous demand for *participation* and give citizens a sense of belonging in the political process. Simply giving more constituents a forum to tell their personal stories can be the first step in encouraging their participation. Offices can effectively and efficiently accomplish this by allowing constituents to post comments or personal online videos, or ask the Senator questions. These stories can stand on their own or be integrated into a larger context that sheds light on a particular issue.

Offices can also enhance the constituent's sense of participation by providing them with a more active role in the legislative process. Offices can invite constituents to participate in idea generation exercises, make comments on draft bills, or change legislative language through legislative wikis. The important consideration here is not whether all public suggestions are incorporated. The demand among constituents for participation can be satisfied by giving them the opportunity to offer a suggestion, even if it is ultimately not used.

Citizen participation is not just beneficial for the Senator and his or her staff, but for other participants in the Senator's virtual community as well. New media tools can be used to activate people to "spread the word" on the Senator's behalf.

For example, offices could begin designing video or e-mail responses that not only respond to the constituent's specific request or comment, but that also include an invitation to engage in a dialogue with other participants and organize themselves into policy groups through online social networks. Offices could also use the information gathered from constituent communication as the basis for

organizing online events such as electronic town hall meetings or house parties.

New media can also be used to target groups within the state. One Senate office is currently devising strategies, for example, to communicate directly via the Internet with nursing home residents, constituents in the military, and the blind.

Laying the Groundwork

New media is an efficient means of communication, which increases the capacity for input from constituents, and can be used to amplify messages delivered through traditional channels of communication. New media will never replace traditional one-to-one constituent contact, nor is it a substitute for relationships built through face-to-face contact. But new media does offer exciting new opportunities for Senators to reach and mobilize a broader audience, including younger constituents, more easily.

New media should be an integrated part of a larger, office-wide communications strategy. Offices may wish to hire a dedicated staffer whose role would be distinct from a traditional press person or systems administrator. Whether or not a dedicated new media staffer is hired, the entire office staff needs to be oriented to the new media strategy. This will require "buy in" and support from the Senator and senior staff, including the Chief of Staff, Communications Director, Legislative Director, and Systems Administrator.

Given limited resources and the time required for an office to adapt new media tools, offices need to prioritize their deployment of these tools. The full menu of new media tools need not be rolled out at the same time. Choices about which types of new media to deploy should reflect the specific needs and capacities of each office.

For example, offices should assess which of these technologies the Senator is most interested in,

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and focus their initial energy on those technologies. Offices should also consider their ability and willingness to deal with various types of activity that will be generated by specific media. Blogs on public sites, to cite one example, give constituents the ability to air criticism publicly.

Offices may also want to consider the demographics of the state when deciding which tools to use. For example, while social networking sites are becoming more popular with older Americans, other new media tools, including Twitter, have not been embraced as widely by retirees. Rural areas, where broadband access is more limited, might not be served as well by online videos and might be reached more successfully through enhanced e-mail outreach.

Constituencies within a state may also be segmented. Offices will want to determine which audiences they want to reach and determine which specific tools are best suited to reach those groups.

It is also important for offices to distinguish between campaign properties and Senate Office properties. E-mail lists generated for campaign activities, for example, cannot be used for constituent outreach, and vice versa. And offices will need to decide whether newly-developed social networks will be devoted to the office or to the campaign.

New Media Features

Each Senate Democratic office should develop a strategy for driving constituents to its Web site and encouraging constituents to return to the site. The Web site address should be visible on all content that is distributed by the office. A general invitation should also be issued to constituents to use the new media tools being offered by the office. This could be an invitation sent to the e-mail list or an open invitation posted prominently on the home page.

The new media properties that an office deploys should be part of a cross-linked, integrated strategy. For instance, an online video posted to the

Senator's YouTube site could include a request to take some action on his or her Web site, and an e-mail could include a request to look at video on the Senate office Web site or on the Senator's YouTube site.

Americans are increasingly using handheld devices, such as Blackberries and iPhones, to surf the Internet, log on to social networking sites, and view online video. Senate offices should ensure that the information and tools available on their Web sites are compatible for use on handheld devices.

It is important to keep in mind that these new media tools do not merely create new channels to distribute traditional content (although new media certainly can be used to amplify traditional content). In fact, offices may choose not to use e-mail lists to distribute a traditional press release. New forms of communication require new content. The information distributed through new media channels should, as a general matter, be shorter and more conversational in tone.

New media staff should be in contact with all staff members who are creating content and encourage them to consider how to re-purpose content for distribution through new media channels.

General Caveats

By embracing new media, offices will – at least to some extent – allow constituents to “co-create” the Senator's brand. Offices should be aware that new media tools can establish forums for negative feedback. Content put out through new media can be distorted. YouTube videos can be remixed and “mashed up.” Negative online content can go “viral” within hours. Offices need to be prepared for this and assign staff to respond appropriately.

Be aware that while offices can remove offensive content, offices should not attempt to “censor” submissions. Offices can show that the Senator is willing to allow participation even if it means participation by dissent. If managed properly,

Senators can turn a negative into a positive by saying, “I don’t agree and here’s why.” The story then becomes about the Senator’s reason for disagreeing with comments posted on the site and his or her willingness to engage with dissenters, not just that people are upset with the Senator’s position.

For example, during the 2008 campaign, a group emerged on the My.BarackObama.com social networking site to protest Senator Obama’s vote on the FISA legislation. The campaign decided to recognize the 25,000-strong group, and Senator Obama posted a personal note to the group expressing his respect for their dissent and ability to organize. It didn’t make everyone in the group happy, but it indicated that the candidate was listening and valued their participation.

Separately, as a general rule, offices should avoid taking back vehicles for participation once they have been introduced. For instance, offices should avoid taking away the opportunity to respond or post comments once the opportunity has been offered.

Execution

Offices should conduct a well-publicized roll out of new media technologies. As part of the roll out, offices can send e-mails inviting constituents to participate through these new media tools. The invitation could also ask constituents to provide immediate feedback on the updated Web site that incorporates the new media tools.

Offices should view this as a dynamic process. New media tools need to be reevaluated and updated frequently, and modified as necessary.

Staff should feel comfortable experimenting with new ideas and technologies to find what works best. Offices should not feel that everything has to be embraced at once – or at all. And an office does not need to continue pouring resources into tools that are not working. One size does not fit

all, and the office needs to continually assess the environment and the results being produced to determine what works best for the Senator.

Finally, offices should keep an eye on new demographic trends, new technologies, and evolving best practices in the field. Dedicated new media staff can lead this effort by maintaining relationships with the DPC Technology and Special Projects staff; other Senate offices; and public, non-profit, and private sector new media leaders.

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Obama/Biden Best Practices

Barack Obama was not the first politician to use new media technologies in a campaign, but he was by far the most successful. He used the Internet and social networking sites to mobilize millions of people. He collected 13 million e-mail addresses and 3.95 million individual donors. He had 3.2 million friends on the Obama Facebook page. While individual Senate offices are operating in a different environment than the 2008 presidential campaign, there is still much that can be learned from the campaign. What contributed to Senator Obama’s phenomenal success?

Barack Obama was everywhere. Senator Obama used every channel available to connect with everyone he could *on their terms*. He accepted the reality that people use different means of communication – voice, video, text, online, and person-to-person. He used all of these means to communicate with people and to drive them to his site, My.BarackObama.com.

Senator Obama maintained a profile on more than 15 social networking communities including Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Digg. He was the first candidate to have profiles on community networks like BlackPlanet, Migente.com, and AsianAve, which are social networks that target the black, Latino and Asian communities,

respectively. He also had a profile on the religious social network, Faithbase. He had links to 18 different social networking sites and tools on his own Web site.

Senator Obama set up his own social networking site, My.BarackObama.com, which had more than two million profiles, and which was used to organize 200,000 offline events, and to create more than 35,000 volunteer groups. Users could upload their personal contacts to the site and send e-mails to their whole contact list to get out the vote or they could get a call list for their neighborhood. The site was used to get people involved in the campaign, not just as a tool for communication.

He made active use of Twitter, the microblogging site. Senator Obama had 118,107 followers on Twitter; Senator McCain had only 4,924.

Senator Obama's campaign uploaded 1,800 videos to YouTube, five times as many as Senator McCain. At least nine staffers contributed to Senator Obama's video team, some travelled with him while others worked in the field.

He used text messaging. To get updates from Senator Obama, users would text "go" to 62262 (which spelled Obama). They could send Senator Obama their questions. The Obama campaign announced its pick for Vice President via text message in part so that it could collect cell phone numbers and contact those voters during voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts.

Senator Obama had an iPhone application. When supporters tapped the "call friends" button on the application, it would search their phone books and arrange the addresses in the order that

the campaign was targeting states. Friends in Colorado or Virginia, for example, would appear at the top. With another tap, an Obama supporter with an iPhone could report back to the campaign about information gathered from phone calls to friends.

Barack Obama made his communication interactive. Senator Obama asked people to share their stories and their goals. Armies of volunteers ensured that every message on the Obama blog and the Facebook page was answered.

The Obama rapid response team also blogged or posted YouTube videos instantaneously when an article or TV segment appeared that was deemed negative.

Barack Obama personalized everything. When users would log on to the Obama site, they would automatically see an activity index that measured their recent involvement in the campaign, such as the number of events hosted and the amount of funds raised. It included a public ranking of 1-10. The campaign thereby created pressure on people to raise their ratings and increased expectations of what it meant to be an Obama supporter.

My.BarackObama.com also allowed supporters to form groups of their own like Veterans for Obama and to plan events themselves. Activists used the site to organize 150,000 campaign-related events and 1,000 phone banking events. They created more than 35,000 groups and 1.5 million user accounts.

WEB SITE

E-MAIL

VIDEO

SOCIAL NETWORKING

NEW MEDIA TOOLS

BLOGS

TWITTER

RSS FEEDS

FLICKR

DIGG

WIKIS

WIDGETS

TEXT MESSAGING

PODCASTS

Before using new media technologies, Senators should ensure that their Web sites are simple, user-friendly, attractive, and geared to the demographics of their home states.

If Senators focus on new media “bells and whistles” before developing a good Web site, they will find it more difficult to use new technologies successfully. A Web site needs to have easy-to-use constituent services and clearly-stated legislative priorities. It should anticipate what constituents will be looking for. A good Web site can make the office more efficient by reducing the number of incoming phone calls and can make constituents feel more connected to the Senator. Web sites are also being accessed by more people than other new technologies.

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How can Web sites be improved to take full advantage of the Internet and other new technologies? Here are some recommendations for what features should be included:

- The most notable recent legislative achievements in accessible, easily understood language.
- Information on the Senator’s legislative priorities and on key national and state issues. Issue-related content should present key information in a way that can be easily understood by all audiences. Links to more specific information should be provided to give interested readers more detailed information
- Links to video/audio, YouTube, Facebook or Twitter accounts on the home page rather than just on a press page.

- Video and audio clips incorporated into the press and issues section and paired with descriptions of recorded events.
- An updated photo gallery linked to Flickr with shots of the Senator in the state and in Washington.
- More videos and blog postings to provide content updates rather than simply posting press releases.
- A sign up for an e-mail newsletter and e-mail updates on issues in an easy-to-find place on the home page and on every page on the Web site.
- A search box, site map, text-only option, and language translation section on every page.
- Interactive elements: This could include asking for people’s stories about health care or the economic crisis or conducting an online poll. Some Senators include quizzes about the state on their sites.
- Office address and office hours on every page.
- A constituent services section with a “tier-structured” form so constituents can check boxes to indicate what they need from the office (constituent services, flag requests, tours, internships, etc.).
- A monthly calendar that is updated daily with the Senator’s activities and videos that show what a Senator does in Washington and during home state visits.
- Educational materials or links to information about Congress and the legislative process.
- A clearly explained privacy statement.

A successful Web site requires the commitment of the Senator and the entire staff. This includes allocating the necessary resources and ensuring that it is truly a team effort.

Below is a list of the specific Internet technologies that the DPC recommends Senators consider using to communicate with constituents in the new interactive, multi-media landscape.

What is it? Most Democratic Senators already have a place on their Web sites that allows visitors to sign up for an e-newsletter from the office. E-mail communication was considered by many experts to be the most successful element of the Obama campaign, and most agree that it is still the best way to share information with constituents. E-mail should be as timely and personal as possible. Unlike other technology tools, e-mail is for almost everyone – it’s used by 92 percent of those who use the Internet.

How do I use it? Along with traditional e-newsletters, staff should use the Senator’s e-mail list to provide personalized communication to constituents as the key to a larger Internet-based communications strategy. At every town hall meeting, and every other event the Senator has in the state, constituents should be encouraged to sign up for e-mail updates.

Also, the e-mail sign up page should be easy to use and easy to spot on the main page, or better yet, across the top of ALL pages on the Web site, much like Whitehouse.gov does now. An e-mail sign up page is useless if people cannot find it. Also consider, as the Obama campaign did, using a “splash page” that asks people to sign up for e-mail even before they are able to see the main content of the Senate office Web site.

The key to successful e-mail is to always include a specific ask. Ask constituents to watch a video the office has posted on the Senate site or on YouTube, including a link to the content or an

embedded video. Ask constituents to send in personal stories or post their own videos – staffers can then select favorite stories and videos and share them on the Senate office site, avoiding the need to screen all the comments and make all of them public.

Senator Bingaman’s office includes a comment box at the end of his e-newsletter that allows constituents to send a comment directly to the office. The office does not promise a personal response to each comment, but it does promise to read every comment. Constituents like this arrangement and have left about 300 comments. Offices can also ask constituents to leave comments about the new Web tools the office is offering. Offices can include poll questions in e-mails and ask for responses. The goal should be to ensure that all Web elements work together with the e-mail list. The e-mail list should be at the core of the strategy.

Possible problems? Don’t overload e-mails with text. Keep them short and easy-to-read. If the office asks for specific actions in an e-mail, such as personal stories from constituents that staffers might then post on the Senator’s Web site, make sure the office has the resources to follow through. Don’t make promises that the Senator cannot keep. Also, because it’s important not to bombard constituents with e-mails, carefully consider what merits an e-mail to the constituent list. Also, set the system up so that staffers can be relatively sure that the Senator’s e-mails to constituents are making it past their spam filters.

VIDEO

Why should I do it? Online video is on its way to becoming the dominant form of content on the Internet, displacing online print content, much in the same way television displaced newspapers. Seventy-five percent of young people say they watch some form of online video and 35 percent of all adults watched online video about the 2008 presidential campaign. YouTube videos mentioning President Obama or Senator McCain during the 2008 election were watched 2.3 billion times. Online video is a particularly powerful tool for elected officials because it allows for direct communication with constituents – without a media filter.

Last year, the Democratic Policy Committee and the Majority Leader’s office worked with the Senate Rules Committee to enact a rule change that allows Senate offices to post video to third-party Web sites such as YouTube and social networking sites. The new rule allows offices to “separately maintain Web sites or channels or otherwise post material on third-party Web sites that are available to the general public subject to Senate Rules, Regulations, Standing Orders and Statutes governing Senate operations...” Materials posted on these sites are still subject to the Senate Rules banning political activity, personal or promotional matter, and communication within 60-days of an election.

How do I use it? Many offices are already showcasing video of their Senators on their Web sites, but video communication could be done much more effectively by making sure every Senator has his or her own page on YouTube, the most popular of the video-sharing sites. Only 36 of 59 Democratic Senators have a YouTube channel right now.

A YouTube page, or “channel,” is different than merely posting static video on a Senate site. It allows for two-way communication – constituents can comment on videos and send the staff private messages through the site. They can sign up to subscribe to videos from their Senator and be updated every time the Senator creates a new video. The page should feature a tally of how

many people have watched the Senator’s videos, how many videos he or she has made, and how long the office has been a member on YouTube. One great thing about YouTube is that the Senate office can completely control it – nothing can show up as a video on a Senator’s page unless the staff allows it to be posted.

Once the office creates a YouTube site, information on the Senate Web site that directs users to the YouTube site should be in an easy-to-spot location. When a video is posted to the site, a full description of its content should be included so constituents will know what they’re watching. Videos should be shared with constituents in e-mails, on Twitter posts, and on the office’s Facebook page. Encourage bloggers to link to the Senator’s videos and constituents to forward videos to their friends. Always allow viewers the option to “embed” the Senator’s YouTube videos on their own Web sites.

The content should be timely and posted as quickly as possible to stay relevant. President Obama’s February 24, 2009 address to Congress was not available on YouTube until the next morning, despite the fact that tens of thousands of people were searching for it on the night of the speech.

Be creative with videos and think beyond simply recording a speech. With video, a Senator can:

- Ask constituents to send questions and then answer those questions in subsequent videos.
- Make the complicated work of government easy to understand by posting short videos explaining various pieces of legislation, policy positions, or even the legislative process.
- Spice up press releases. Instead of a traditional one-page paper release, use video to highlight important points. This gives traditional media something to play on television or online and gives reporters a visual cue to the Senator’s message.

- Engage people in the home state directly. Find constituents on YouTube and build relationships with them. By reaching out, the Senator builds credibility on YouTube – and other YouTubers can help spread the Senator’s message across the Internet. If someone subscribes to the Senator’s channel, the office may subscribe to their YouTube channel as well.

The key to creating a successful online video – one that grabs the attention of viewers, bloggers, and the media – is to give the audience the feeling that the Senator is showing them the “inside scoop” on what really happens in Washington. Relatively few constituents will visit a Senator’s Washington office in person, but through video, Senators can introduce constituents to the Senate’s day-to-day operations, including the problems they are working to solve. Videos can emphasize a Senator’s background and biography. Senator Obama’s biography videos, for example, were among of the campaign’s most popular.

Some experts have recommended that Senators capitalize on the popularity of reality television. Using the reality model, a Senator could have a staffer follow him or her for a few days with a camera as the office works to solve a specific problem. The video would then be edited to follow the issue from start to finish, showcasing the Senator and the staff and revealing them to be authentic, real people with real lives.

Videos can have a low-tech look and be filmed relatively cheaply, even using laptop cameras. The Obama campaign used this kind of “reality TV” approach particularly effectively by showing Senator Obama’s talks with staff inside his campaign office and giving them a behind-the-scenes look at the Democratic Convention.

Research studies and real-world experience show that online videos can be as short as one min-

ute or as long as 25 minutes, depending on the nature of the content. Viewers seem increasingly willing to watch longer videos as they become more comfortable with viewing video online.

Videos can also be collected from other sources. Every time a Senator has an interview with a news station, staff should be grabbing those clips online and linking to them or showcasing them on the Senator’s Web site – and even editing them to emphasize key sound bites. Floor speeches can be edited to highlight only one main point or compelling quote.

Offices can also ask constituents to send their own videos responding to a question of the day or sharing a personal story. Staffers can post the office’s favorites on the Senator’s site and through the Senator’s YouTube channel.

Staff can also create videos that showcase constituents. One of the Obama campaign’s most popular videos featured students at a Bronx high school talking about their reactions to Obama’s speech on race. It drew 400,000 viewers.

Possible problems? One risk is that the Senator will create content that no one wants to watch. When shooting video, try to get beyond the Senator sitting at a desk and talking to the camera. Provide some visual interest. Also, keep in mind that any video the Senator releases online can be posted and remixed by others and can be edited in unflattering ways.

Be sure that while a Senator allows comments on his or her YouTube site, staff is aware of the comments and have someone assigned to monitor the discussion to make sure it’s constructive. Tag and title videos well so YouTube users can find them even if they didn’t come to the YouTube site through the Senate site.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

What is it? Facebook is a tremendously popular social networking Web site where users create individual profiles to share personal information and photos, communicate with friends, and meet people with similar interests. There are other popular social networking sites, such as MySpace, but Facebook is by far the most popular of these sites, especially with older people.

According to a Pew survey, 10 percent of all Americans have used social networking sites like Facebook to engage in political activity. This tool is particularly popular among younger people: 66 percent of all Internet users under the age of 30 have social networking profiles on sites such as Facebook and almost half of young profile owners have used the social networking sites to get or share information about political candidates and campaigns. Senator Obama had at least 3.2 million Facebook “fans” during his campaign.

How do I use it? Many Senators already have a page on Facebook, set up by Facebook itself, to allow users to become “fans” of a particular Senator. It is important for the Senate office to take control of this content and harness what is on that page to make sure it matches the Senator’s message. It should not appear to be a campaign tool – the Senator can have a completely separate Facebook page for his or her campaign.

President Obama’s Facebook page provides an excellent example of how the site can work for communications with constituents. Any Facebook user can search the site to find Obama’s “fan” page and elect to “become a fan” of Obama. On this one “fan” Web page, without any further clicking of the mouse, users can find links to all the other multimedia Obama’s team has to offer: YouTube videos; invitations to events, most notably information about attending the Inauguration;

notes from President Obama, such as a “thank you” for electing him; and photo albums from the campaign trail. Supporters can write comments at the bottom of the page. The Facebook page is a one-stop “hub” of multimedia tools.

One of the best ways to use Facebook is to locate and foster relationships with different groups of constituents who might have an interest in a particular issue that is important to the Senator. The Obama campaign, for example, had dozens

of groups linked to its main Facebook page, including “teachers for Obama” and “women for Obama.”

One way to recruit members to issue groups is to contact bloggers who write on those issues, develop relationships with these bloggers and ask them to promote the Senator’s Facebook group. Then, if a bill is on the Senate floor that is relevant to that constituency group, the office can use the Facebook group to send a

targeted message to those constituents.

Possible problems? Because users can leave comments on Facebook pages, there is a potential for those not friendly to the office to attempt to post negative comments or to create negative groups about the Senator. Senator Obama’s campaign experienced this phenomenon when the Senate was considering FISA legislation and a group used Senator Obama’s own social networking tools to organize against his position on the bill. The campaign chose to allow the group to continue and even had Senator Obama post a message to the group praising their organizing ability and explaining his position on the FISA issue. That way, the campaign was able to turn a potentially negative news story into one about Senator Obama reaching out to those who opposed him on FISA.

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What is it? A blog is a Web-based journal that would be written by the Senator or his or her staff. Experts say at least 12 percent of Americans are bloggers and about half of all adults read blogs. A blog is one good way to keep a Senate Web site's main page fresh and up-to-date.

To be effective and attract repeat readers, blogs should be engaging, use a conversational tone, and – whether written by the Senator or a staffer – possess a consistent and authentic “voice.”

The office should develop a good relationship with popular bloggers, particularly those in the home state. These relationships are important even if the Senate office doesn't have an active blog. Getting the attention of the right bloggers is one of the best ways to drive traffic to a Senate blog and draw attention to the interactive Web tools the office is using.

How do I use it? Every time a constituent logs on to the office's site, he or she should ideally see a new blog posting about what his Senator's office is working on that day or that week. The blog updates should include links to other new content on the Senate Web site – if the office posts a new video, post a blog entry about it on the Senator's main page. If the Senator wants personal stories from constituents, ask for them on the Senator's blog and include a link to the office's e-mail feedback page.

The Senator should have face-to-face, brief meetings with bloggers, not just online relationships with them. During those face-to-face meetings, ask bloggers if the Senator can write a guest blog for their Web site. Once a relationship is established, a staffer should regularly monitor and post comments on the blogger's Web site that promote the Senate office and provide links to the Senator's new Web content, including various Facebook groups representing various constituencies.

This method can be particularly effective in combating negative news stories or blog posts, which sometimes go viral and can grab the attention of

the mainstream media. When a staffer spots a negative blog post, he or she can contact the blogger and ask if the blogger would be willing to post the Senator's response to their critical blog post. This kind of immediate response can sometimes shift the outcome of a news story – instead of a story about a negative attack, the story becomes one about the Senator's response.

Contact with bloggers can also help foster better relationships with constituencies that might not naturally support the Senator. For example, a Senate office could set up a Facebook group specifically for “sportsmen” on the Senator's main Facebook page. The page would state the Senator's position on hunting and gun rights and showcase the areas where the Senator might agree with pro-gun constituents AND the areas where he or she disagrees. The office could also post an entry on the issue on its blog and contact local bloggers who write about hunting and gun rights and ask them to allow the Senator to write a guest blog. On the “user comment” section of that guest blog, the office could post a comment to promote the Senator's new sportsmen Facebook group. That way, multiple new media tools will be working together to promote a single message.

Possible problems? While some Senate offices have blogs on which Senators post information, computer security considerations currently prevent offices from allowing users to post comments to those blogs. The Senate.gov sites do not currently have a security mechanism in place to verify users' identity. (Note that this rule does not apply to public sites, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Flickr.)

Also, even if an office does have a blog, it is important to have tight control over anything that is posted on a blog that would be perceived as coming from the Senator. A staffer should monitor this communication at all times. If a Senator writes his or her own blog and allows comments on posts, the Senator will be opening himself or herself up to critiques from other bloggers.

TWITTER - RSS

TWITTER

What is it? Twitter is a “micro-blogging” tool that allows users to share instant, brief, 140-character updates, including news items and links. Twitter and similar services have been avidly embraced by young adults: A recent Pew study found that nearly one in five online adults ages 18 to 24 have used Twitter or a similar service, as have 20 percent of online adults 25 to 34. The median age of a Twitter user is 31.

How do I use it? Senators or their staffers can set up individual Twitter accounts to give frequent, quick updates about what the Senator is working on that day or to push a message they would like to deliver to the public and the media. “Followers” can sign up to read the office’s updates instantaneously throughout the day. Offices can use Twitter to break news, update what’s happening on the Senate floor, share links to important video and documents, and alert the public about new things they have added to their Web sites. The content should feel immediate and intimate to the reader. Twitter posts, known as “tweets,” do not have to be grammatically correct or have correct punctuation, but they should feel authentic and “of the moment.”

Twitter is a particularly useful way to communicate with reporters. Journalists have flocked to Twitter as a way to get regular feedback and ideas about breaking news. Several top journalists, including *Meet the Press* host David Gregory, have set up their own Twitter accounts where they share information and can also follow the Twitter posts of anyone else on the site. If a Senator joins the site, make sure these reporters know about the Senator’s Twitter feed and encourage them to sign up to follow updates.

Senator McCaskill uses her page, to share details about her life in the Senate and even outside of the Senate, as well as to break news that she feels is important.

This Twitter “feed” can be “streamed” on a Senator’s main Web page, so that the updates appear not only on the Twitter site, but also on the

Senate page. Senators and staffers can download special programs on their Blackberries that allow them to send Twitter messages when they are away from the office. Followers of a Senator’s Twitter can also use the site to send direct questions to the Senator, much like businesses such as Starbucks and PetSmart use the site to answer customer’s questions.

Possible problems? Because of the “immediacy” of the medium, it’s possible that a spontaneous “tweet” could land a Senator in trouble. Republican Congressman Pete Hoekstra created a security breach recently by Twittering while on what was supposed to be a secret trip to Baghdad. Mr. Hoekstra gave away his position in the Green Zone on his Twitter account.

RSS

What is it? RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication) is a format for delivering regularly changing web content. RSS solves a problem for people who regularly use the Internet by allowing people to easily stay informed by retrieving the latest content from the sites they are interested in. Users save time by not needing to visit each site individually. Many news-related sites, blogs and other online publishers syndicate their content as an RSS feed to whoever wants it. Any user who signs up for a feed will get regular updates through RSS reading programs or sites like Google Reader.

How do I use it? Senate offices can create a RSS feed to update constituents every time the office posts something new to a blog or other parts of the site. Many Senators currently have an RSS feed option for the press releases on their sites, but this could be expanded to include more constituent-friendly content.

Possible problems? Be aware that RSS feeds do not require constituents to visit the Senator’s site, so they may be missing other content posted to the site that does not feed through RSS.

FLICKR

What is it? Flickr is a photo sharing Web site that is particularly popular with bloggers. It hosts more than three billion digital images.

How do I do it? Sharing photos requires very little effort and resources. Every Senator has pictures from events that he or she would like to share with constituents. To use Flickr to share the photos, sign up at www.flickr.com and upload the photos to the site.

Flickr is a clean-looking, easy-to-use home for the Senator's photos and allows the office to better organize the photos it already has. Flickr also has a large capacity to store photos, so the Senator can share many images instead of just the best ones taken at an event. Senator Dodd does a particularly good job of using Flickr.

When the Senator posts new photos, a staff member should write about it on the office blog or Twitter account and share a link. Constituents can also download the Senator's images easily from Flickr and print copies of themselves at a Senator's event, for example. They can also leave comments about the images. Like YouTube, the Senator's office has complete control of what images are shared on his or her Flickr account.

Possible problems? Because the images are public, it's possible someone could download the images to a separate location and deface them.

DIGG

What is it? Digg.com is a popular "social news" site designed for people to discover and share content from anywhere on the Web, by submitting links and stories, and voting and commenting on submitted links and stories.

Visitors to the Digg homepage can get a quick look at the most popular content – photos, news stories, videos – on the Web for a given day or

week. The site displays a list of the stories on its home page, which is ranked by what content is winning the most votes, or "Diggs," from users on the site at any given moment. Users can also vote against a story by electing to "bury" it. They can also e-mail the content to their friends through the site.

How do I do it? Digg can be a very effective marketing tool, especially since bloggers and other Internet savvy people regularly check the site for news and videos. The key is to get people to vote for the Senator's content. Let's say the Senator does a great interview on CNN that the office would like to draw attention to. Or the office posts a new YouTube video the Senator would like bloggers to see. A staffer can post a link to the interview on Digg and then send an e-mail, Facebook message and Twitter post to constituents asking them to vote for the Senator's content on the site. Bloggers may then spot the content on Digg and link back to the Senator's CNN interview on their sites.

Republicans are already using Digg fairly effectively. House Minority Leader John Boehner has several videos on the site and has participated in a "Digg Dialogue" with CNN where Digg users submitted questions and then allowed the Digg community to vote up or down on the questions to pick their favorites. Mr. Boehner answered the top questions in a CNN online video. Al Gore and Nancy Pelosi have also participated in Digg Dialogues online.

Possible problems? There are some limitations to Digg. Because of its somewhat chaotic nature, it's not an ideal way to reach constituents, but is a great tool for blogger outreach. Another thing to remember is that it's somewhat difficult to move stories on to the main Digg page unless the office is able to amass 100 votes or more, so requests for "Diggs" should be carefully targeted.

What is it? A wiki is a Web-based facilitation platform that allows large groups to create content, solve problems and share ideas.

How do I use it? The wiki platform could be a great resource to develop new policy ideas or get input from constituents on legislation. Using wikis, the Senator's office could pose a question to constituents (or a group of experts) or share with them a piece of legislation under development. The group could modify the idea together, ask questions, and discuss the changes. This online tool could enhance existing efforts to tap networks of experts and make these efforts broader and more effective.

Wikis track and record all changes, and users can quickly see the history of any page, determine who added a particular piece of content, and revert a page back to its previous state. Wikis typically do not require advanced technical knowledge by users.

The key to effective use of wikis is to make them easy to use. It should be obvious to users how to edit the page and how to navigate around the space. The site should have a clean look rather than being cluttered with confusing features. A wiki should also be easy to adopt and share. New members should be able to start participating immediately. Sign up should be quick and easy.

Current Senate rules do not allow the use of a wiki on a Senate Web site, even if it is password protected, because the Senate.gov sites do not currently have a security mechanism in place to verify users' identity. There are third-party wiki hosting services, or wiki farms, however, which will host an office's content. Offices could forward the link to selected experts or constituents

and ask that they contribute to the wiki-based project.

Some wiki farms are available at no cost, though others charge a nominal monthly fee in exchange for greater flexibility and additional storage space. An extensive list of wiki farms can be found on Wikipedia's "Comparison of Wiki Farms" entry.

Wikis can be set up in one of three ways. *Public* wikis like Wikipedia allow anyone on the Internet to view, create, and edit pages. The public wikis could be set up to require users to create an account before receiving permission to alter content, or to allow anonymous users add or change pages.

Protected wikis are visible to the general public but can only be changed by authorized users. The wiki should have a designated administrator who grants users the permissions required to edit, add, or delete information.

Private wikis add one more layer of security by allowing only authorized users to both view or edit the wiki.

Possible problems? If a Senate office decides to open its wiki to the general public, the wiki administrator should be prepared to remove undesirable content. Some individuals might post inflammatory content while others might delete useful information. Spammers have also been known to deface wikis by loading them up with links to commercial sites. A Senate office using a public wiki should enlist the support of its core community to help police the content for inappropriate entries and create a feedback form for reporting wiki vandalism.

This online tool could enhance existing efforts to tap networks of experts and make these efforts broader and more effective.

WIDGETS - TEXT MESSAGING - PODCASTS

WIDGETS

What are they? Widgets are small specialized programs that run on a Web page. They can include interactive graphs and charts. Some examples include tax calculators, clocks, calendars, and weather forecasts. More specialized widgets even let users monitor traffic on their route home. Widgets allow people to take content and tailor it to their needs and interests. They are also easily shared with others and can serve as a basis for discussion. Widgets do not take up much space, can be fun to use, and handle live data well.

Widgets can also be accessed via downloadable icons that people can put on their Facebook page or blogs, which is one way for them to show support for the Senator. The Obama campaign used widgets extensively to engage voters.

How do I use it? A tax calculator can be used, for example, on a tax issues page to allow people to type in their income and figure out their tax savings under certain legislation. A widget could also be used to create pie charts that show how federal money is being spent or how much money has been spent in Iraq.

Offices do not necessarily have to design custom widgets. There are a number of ready-made widgets that can be downloaded from the Internet for use on a Senate site.

TEXT MESSAGING

What is it? Text messages function much like e-mails, but are sent through cell phones. While text messaging, or “texting,” did not match e-mail as a political tool in the last presidential campaign, nearly one in ten text message users – about four percent of all adults – were sending or receiving texts about a political campaign or other political issues on a regular basis in 2008. About half of all cell phone users say they use

text messaging – most of those texting are under the age of 30.

How do I use it? Using special programs, a Senate office can create a spot online for people to sign up to receive text messages from the office. As with e-mail and YouTube videos, the key is to make texting a two-way conversation. The Senator can ask constituents to send text messages with questions that he or she might later answer on the Senate site in a YouTube video.

The Obama campaign did this effectively by asking people to text the word “go” to 62262, which spells “Obama.” They used this network of texters to announce their Vice Presidential pick, in part so that the campaign could build a database of contact information from supporters.

Possible problems? Too many text messages from a Senate office might be annoying to some constituents, just as too many e-mails could be.

PODCASTS

What is it? A “podcast” is a downloadable audio or video file available on the Internet for people to listen to and/or watch on their computer or a mobile device like an iPod.

How do I use it? Many Senators already have audio files on their sites, some in the form of downloadable Podcasts. To create a Podcast, Senators can use the resources the Democratic Communications Center has available in Hart 619. Users can listen to podcasts directly from the Senate Web site, or download the files to a personal listening device, such as an iPod. Offices can post the audio on their Web site in a variety of formats including those compatible with iTunes.

Possible problems? As with a YouTube video, it’s possible the content of an audio or a video podcast could be remixed to show the Senator in an unflattering light.

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