BIZCOMMUNITY

The politics of blogging

By Derek Abdinor

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Any marketeer, public relationista, brander or eventer worth their little black books fantasise about running a successful US presidential campaign. Helen Zille, Cape Town mayor and leader of the Democratic Alliance, has stolen a march and adopted some of the groundbreaking Web 2.0 communication technologies used in that race for her own office, including the newly launched blog on Capeinfo.co.za. Blogging? My PR set it up for me, on the Internet.

Those that run US presidential campaigns may well achieve rock star status. They probably define the apogee of effective and innovative PR, but watching reruns of the West Wing is not going to get you to learn their tricks.

Web PR, or Web 2.0, is a buzz word and therefore generates its own good and bad press. This is how the crème de la crème of spin employ it in their online campaigns:

Blogging

They all have a blog. Most of them blog themselves, others use staffers or interns (they tend to post under the presidential candidate's moniker). They blog about issues, calls to action and special guest comment. Blogging follows the journal style of publishing, so voters feel they are privy to the thoughts of the candidates. The date and time stamping, as well as subscription by RSS, indicates a perception of transparency. Corporate bloggers have found a much richer connection with their stakeholders through blogging than other traditional channels.

Barack Obama even microblogs, meaning he uses a service (Twitter, Jaiku, Pownce etc) whereby one can SMS, email, IM (instant message) or post updates from a website to your (micro)blog. His followers () subscribe to his content, and know where he'll be speaking, what his view on Iraq is and what flavour of ice-cream he had in Chicago.

Issuing newsletters and email or SMS alerts from your website to potential voters, media, commentators and funders is so much simpler: refer them back to the blog for more information. You can bet the search engine marketing on these sites is top drawer.

Social networking

Most of the top candidates have a presence on Facebook, MySpace and other social networks. Why? Do they want to be virtual friends with thousands of strangers? Of course not, but they get to publish on these extremely popular media for free. People who join their networks are listed as friends of Hilary and one click away from being contacted.

All these website have e-commerce functionality where users can donate money, can you beat that? Obama has really tapped into this:

- Barack raised a record amount of money online this quarter.
- Of the campaign's US$32.5 million fundraising total, US$10.3 million of it came through the website. That's almost one-third of the total amount raised.
- Ninety percent of the online donations were under US$100, and half of the online donations are amounts of US$25 or less.

Er... remember mass mailing and databases?

Candidate	Facebook friends	MySpace friends	Other noteworthy Web 2.0 uses

Hilary Clinton (Democrat)	33 487	128 426	Eons
Ron Paul (Republican)	17 552	52 229	Meetup, Digg
Barack Obama (Democrat)	124 646	160 605	Twitter (4 000 friends)
John McCain (Republican)	7 700	40 729	Tele-townhall

Source: http://techpresident.com/

Votojournalism and user-generated content

The term, coined this US election, has come to mean “photo journalism by voters”. The ordinary voting public takes snaps of the candidates on the campaign trail and uploads them to a user-generated content site, such as Flickr. So instead of the usual heroic/sympathetic/magnanimous pics of the candidates provided in press packs and on the wire, users buy into the “see for yourself” aspect of social media.

You may think all these presences are run by supporters and the candidates are more into pressing the flesh and kissing babies. Consider the YouTube-CNN debate, where voters posted questions for candidates onto YouTube and the candidates responded to these videos live on prime-time TV. Loud crashes were heard as various tipping points had just been reached.

Entering into the discourse

Locally, Zille has astutely followed these leads by having her regular blog and vlog, or videoblog. Her blog gives her reach and promenade-cred to residents, ratepayers, tourists and business decision-makers alike. She even has a entry on Wikipedia.

Think this isn't relevant in Africa? Well, try a mobile site and look at your footprint! Mobile blogging (mo-blogging) is close cousins to services such as MXit and Twitter, and once removed from that killer productivity app, instant messaging. Radios were instrumental in spreading political ideas in Africa and Asia post-WW2, and the receiver in those days was a bulky box with dials and tubes.

There will be a lot of debate around these methods; inevitably, some people will be content to label all of this Election 2.0, or the ‘Wired President' or something else inane and not react intrepidly to it.

You can. For presidential candidate, read client. For voter, read stakeholder. For primaries, read results or launch date. Either be president of the world or the other guy. What was his name again?

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