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Barack Obama's Cutting-Edge Campaign

*Sure, technology helped him win.
But how did he do it and what does
it mean now for us and our clients?*

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In many ways, Barack Obama is a transformational politician, and all expectations are that he will be a similarly transformational United States president. Regardless of one's political beliefs or affiliations, every political follower has been extremely impressed with the rhetorical, political and organizational talents of the president-elect. One of the areas in which Obama soared far above his Democratic primary and Republican presidential rivals is in how well he leveraged the power of technology.

Use of technology is nothing new in politics – sophisticated databases and computer systems have been in place for decades to increase the efficiency and sophistication of polling, direct mail and other traditional tactics. In 2004, Democratic presidential primary candidate Howard Dean was the first to launch a successful campaign largely online, and his early success in fundraising, communicating to and organizing supporters was replicated and enhanced in almost every campaign that followed. President George W. Bush's two presidential campaigns were renowned for their use of highly sophisticated databases to manage robust and targeted get-out-the-vote efforts. But, while Dean and Bush helped politicians understand the power of technology and the online channel, most campaign managers still viewed it as an accessory to an integrated campaign.

Obama's campaign separated itself from its predecessors in two major ways. First, it considered online a central front. With his principal primary challenger, Hillary Clinton, far ahead in levels of support among traditional Democratic leaders and fundraisers across the country, Obama had no choice but to rely on online channels to build a new constituency of matching strength and potential. This strategic decision, along with the natural synergy between Obama's youth, visual appeal and rhetorical gifts with the style of the Internet, gave Obama powerful new ways to use the online channel as a positioning, communication and organizational vehicle. Second, Obama made almost exclusive use of new and emerging technologies to raise money and recruit supporters, mobilize them and keep them informed.

Obama's reliance on the online channel took advantage of important trends in media consumption as well. The Pew Research Center found that 33 percent of Americans (and half of young Americans) received most of their campaign news online in the 2008 presidential election, compared with 10 percent just four years ago.

Some of Obama's most important online initiatives included:

- **Packaging himself as the new-media candidate.** Obama's brand, message, activities and communication style were all optimized for the online channel. His Web site routinely received two to three times more traffic than those of Hillary Clinton or John McCain, topping out at nearly 10 million unique visitors in late October. He had four times as many online friends as John McCain and more than three million supporters on Facebook. His YouTube videos were watched almost 100 million times. He frequently distributed campaign announcements via text message and e-mail, often before (or as a way of) leaking them to the mainstream media. His campaign used blogs, photo galleries and even a mobile ringtone mashup of

Obama's speeches to build energy and buzz among his supporters. Through these and other efforts, Obama was able to secure more than 10 million e-mail addresses of supporters. This positioning was not accidental – the campaign spent more than \$500,000 alone on its Facebook strategy.

- **Enabling new-media surrogates.** Obama's campaign not only allowed, but also encouraged, supporters – especially young supporters – to help shape the media narrative about his campaign by applauding their activity and empowering them with tools. By freeing up this powerful part of his base, Obama allowed his supporters to overwhelm social media sites with pro-Obama content, some of which was then featured admirably by mainstream media reporters (e.g., YouTube's self-proclaimed "Obama girl" was even parodied on the popular Saturday Night Live comedy show). Obama supporters also pushed favorable news about their candidates to the top of social bookmarking sites, increasing visibility and ranking in the search engines that still direct nearly 90 percent of all Internet traffic. Although Obama admitted that he personally does not read political blogs, most of the major Democratic-leaning blogs came to adopt him as their favored candidate and helped him take on critiques (and expose gaffes) by Hillary Clinton, John McCain, their surrogates, columnists and reporters. Established groups also engaged – MoveOn.org, for example, launched an online "Endorse-O-Thon" through which members raised more than \$1 million in campaign contributions from 622,677 of their peers. Beyond just fundraising, MoveOn and bloggers like Joshua Micah Marshall of Talking Points Memo created material and drove messages that grew to be part of the mainstream discussion – much in the same way talk radio celebrities tend to drive conversation among conservatives in this country.
- **Converting online enthusiasm into constructive campaign activity.** One of the Obama campaign's most significant accomplishments was its ability to use the energy created online to achieve meaningful results. Obama worked with Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes to launch his own social networking site called MyBarackObama.com, which recruited more than eight million volunteers, attracted more than 500,000 accounts and helped organize more than 30,000 supporter-created campaign events in all 50 states. As an example of its effectiveness, Amy Beech, a volunteer in the electorally critical Columbus, Ohio, suburb of Bexley, remarked during the primary that "Ohio's never mattered in the primaries...There really was no infrastructure, and now it's all over the place – within three weeks we have this million-[person] door-knocking campaign." And Obama's online fundraising prowess was well-documented; nearly half of all his campaign donations came from small donors over the Internet, surprising even campaign officials.
- **Getting out the vote.** Obama's team launched a new computer system it called "Houdini." Houdini is a real-time tracking tool that allowed neighborhood canvassers to input which households had likely Obama supporters, who was willing to volunteer, who was most likely to vote and who needed help getting to the polls. On primary and election day, volunteers checked voter rolls and input who had voted in real time.

Other volunteers willing to door-knock would then download the latest information from each neighborhood, compare that with lists of likely supportive voters and pay them personal visits, offering rides to the polls or general encouragement to vote. In the aftermath of the election, a recent study of voter contact rates versus support received calculated that this effort alone added 2 to 3 percent to Obama's vote total, and even more in key swing states.

- **Modernizing phone banking.** Getting volunteers to make phone calls has been a core part of political operations for decades. But Obama transformed it. His phone bank was almost completely virtual; volunteers logged on from home, downloaded target call lists and made phone calls through their computers so they could be aggregated and tracked and lists optimized in real time. The system connected volunteers with the optimal phone targets, including a massive Spanish language effort targeting likely Hispanic voters. On November 4, Obama supporters made 1,053,791 phone calls to likely voters in swing states from volunteers placed all over the country.

- **Leveraging mobile devices.** Text messaging is nothing new in modern politics. But Obama's campaign used this technique aggressively and was the first to make this portion of online outreach interactive. The facts supported the strategy – according to Princeton University and the University of Michigan, young people that texted on Election Day during the 2006 mid-term congressional elections were 4 percent more likely to vote, with a cost-per-vote of \$1.56 (compared with a \$32 cost-per-vote for leafleting). To build the program, Obama promised exclusive or first access to key announcements (like the vice presidential pick) to text-message recipients, which encouraged more than three million to register their numbers with the campaign. Interactivity helped as well. Text messages reminding voters to visit polling stations included a link to a phone number that could help them find their polling station and ask for a ride. Victory messages encouraged recipients to get their friends to join the movement by texting “HOPE” to pre-established mobile numbers. And Obama launched a sophisticated new “Obama08” mobile application for the Apple iPhone that re-organized the supporter's address list into a target call list based on state-by-state priorities (and communicated the data back to the campaign), used GPS to help the supporter find the nearest campaign events and get driving directions, profiled Obama's position on a customized set of legislative priorities and supported phone patch-through to a donation hotline for contributions.

- **Understanding search engines.** The influence of Google and other major search engines on online debates is unquestioned. How to harness that power, however, is not well understood. But the Obama campaign made dominating engines a priority. In addition to aggressively supporting the blogs and online news aggregators that tend to increase rankings in these engines and purchasing keyword advertising on them, they also launched initiatives exclusively aimed at capturing search traffic. In one such effort, they sought to de-bunk the rumor that Obama was a Muslim. They launched a one-page Web site with the URL “IsBarackObamaMuslim.com” and the

title “Is Barack Obama Muslim?” The entire site was then one word printed in a huge font – No – with six footnoted links to credible, major media sources. The dramatic and unusual nature of the site quickly attracted in-bound links from supporter, blogger, news and other high traffic sites. The popularity and highly optimized nature of the tiny site vaulted it almost immediately to the top ranking on Google, where it was waiting for the tens of thousands seeking the answer every day.

- **Optimizing advertising for the Web channel.** Online advertising is another campaign tactic that many have used in recent campaigns, but one which Obama’s campaign modernized. Rather than simply run banners and keywords with campaign messages, Obama leveraged interactivity within banners to great effect. For example, Obama launched an online tax cut advertisement and – instead of parroting the campaign message that 95 percent of Americans would receive a tax cut under his plan – he invited viewers to input their adjusted gross income and other basic factors and let the ad calculate how much tax they would pay under both his and John McCain’s plans. A general campaign message became a very personal benefit for potential voters.

So what does the future hold?

Now that his campaign has ended and the transition to his presidency has begun, a key question is what Obama will do to harness the incredible online support, infrastructure and strategy he has built. Based on his announcements and early first steps, every indication is that he plans to use the online channel to govern as significantly as he used it to campaign. For example:

- **Transforming communication.** It is likely that Obama the “new-media candidate” will become Obama the “new-media president.” Reports suggest that he plans to use the online channel to launch an ongoing conversation with the American people. Specifically, there are expectations that WhiteHouse.gov and other government Web properties will transform from broadcast channels to interactive social networks that include elements like comment-enabled YouTube videos as a 21st-century version of the fireside chat, discussion areas to solicit feedback on policy positions and the needs of Americans, and blogs and Twitter feeds to give every American deep insight into the workings of their government. And Obama’s influence will not stay limited to the White House. Blogs like Mike Leavitt’s at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the informal DipNote blog run by the U.S. Department of State will become much more prevalent, and agency Web properties much more interactive. It will take the effort of the entire U.S. government to respond to the avalanche of input from 300 million Americans once they are asked.
- **Shaping policy.** Obama has already announced that he plans to enact a five-day comment period before signing any non-emergency legislation to allow Americans to register their point of view and become more a part of the legislative process. Will Obama listen to this input? The best indication we have was the debate during the

campaign that raged about the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). Obama switched his position and decided to support FISA in June, even though defeating it was one of the most important priorities of progressives and the liberal blogosphere. Obama solicited, and received, a huge amount of passionate input through his Web site and social network. In fact, a group of 20,000 formed on the site solely for the purpose of convincing him to reject the measure. While this group and its hundreds of comments did not change his mind, it caused Obama to draft and distribute to its members a detailed explanation of why he ultimately chose to back the legislation. His staffers responded personally to every comment. And the strategy worked – Obama lost no major supporters over the disagreement because bloggers and other online political leaders felt respected and heard in the process.

- **Mobilizing grassroots.** One of the most compelling post-election questions is whether and how Obama will use the 10 million supporters for whom he has e-mail addresses and/or mobile phone numbers. Of course, not every campaign supporter will agree with Obama on all issues, nor is it as easy to mobilize allies on detailed policy debates as it was during an election. But, harnessed effectively, Obama could be the first sitting president with his own grassroots army in place; he easily could mobilize this group in unprecedented ways to lobby Congress and other political leaders to push his legislative priorities. Obama will undoubtedly be aggressive in raising awareness among his supporters about important legislative actions and debates. If Obama adopts the strategy of some past presidents and barnstorms across the country to rally support for some of his proposals, he can also use this list to attract the same types of huge, passionate crowds he received for campaign events. Obama may also use his list to ask Americans to adopt certain behaviors, like conserving energy, volunteering for public service, etc. And, of course, the supporter list will serve a powerful role in the 2010 mid-term elections. Micah Sifry, co-founder of the Personal Democracy Forum, captured this point best when he said, “The White House has always had the bully pulpit to go over the heads of Congress through the mass media. What Obama now has is the ability to go between the legs of members of Congress.”

The importance of the online channel in impacting politics and shaping policy continues to grow every day. Obama not only understands and has leveraged this power, but he is also a true believer – even having discussed appointing a chief technology officer for the U. S. government and pledging to get true broadband to every community in the country. His apparent desire to use technology to humanize the office of the president, enhance transparency, grow participation in policy debates and keep citizens involved with their government will have a profound impact on how companies, associations and coalitions advocate on their own behalf. Our advice?

- **Don't ignore online.** Online communities, and the passionate debates they support, can be difficult to navigate, penetrate and influence, but avoiding them on any campaign is incredibly risky in today's world.

- **Adapt your style.** Obama's campaign clearly reinforced that personality wins online, as do informality, personalization and a high degree of interactivity. It is better to adapt the corporate culture than lose the battle online.
- **Empower others.** Although we would all prefer to route all communication through trained expert spokespeople, one main lesson of the 2008 campaign is that although letting go creates some risks, the rewards can be astronomically high.
- **Build online coalitions.** Find your allies online and work hard to get them active – provide the tools and platforms if necessary. These online coalitions are increasingly important, and political leaders within the new administration will pay attention to them.
- **Mobilize the grassroots.** Grassroots mobilization has evolved from helpful to absolutely essential. Direct lobbying of the White House and related agencies by citizens not only will be easier and more effective, but also welcomed by Obama's Administration.
- **Find and use the best tools, tactics and channels.** There are millions of online communities and hundreds of different ways to get things done online. Finding the right mix of tactics, and the right targeting strategy, can make the difference between winning and losing.

We started APCO Online® 13 years ago with the goal of helping clients understand and leverage the risks and opportunities of the online channel. As the Internet moves center stage, we recognize its increasing power and importance and are helping some of the largest global companies fully harness its potential. Obama's campaign teaches us some crucial lessons; we stand ready to apply them to your business. If you are interested, please contact Evan Kraus, senior vice president and director of APCO Online, at 202.778.2015 or ekraus@apcoworldwide.com for a private briefing.