

THE FIRM VOICE

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Five Tips to Presidential Candidates on Using the Internet (And They Also Apply to CEOs!)



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Nearly half a century ago, television transformed the presidential election. Our current national election is also undergoing a radical reshaping ... as a direct result of the rise of the new social media.

Senator John Kennedy of Massachusetts joined Vice President Richard Nixon for the first-ever televised presidential debate in 1960. People

who listened on the radio believed that Nixon won the debate; television viewers credited Kennedy with the win. It was the dramatic visual contrast between the two that made all the difference. On TV, Nixon looked pale, sweaty and uncomfortable; Kennedy was young, polished and confident. It was his television persona that may have cost Nixon the White House.

There are three important lessons to learn here: image matters; the medium is a factor in crafting the image; and the media evolve.

More than 75 million U.S. viewers tuned in to watch that first Kennedy-Nixon debate; and in 2004, 75 million

Americans used the internet to participate in the political process, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project.¹ In the intervening four years, the numbers have nearly doubled. In 2008, one in four Americans (24%) said they regularly learned something about the latest presidential campaign from the internet, up from 13 percent in 2004.²

(Last year, the Council hosted a client advisory committee meeting, and this topic was front and center. There were some interesting opinions and predictions made by a couple of campaign strategists. Click here to read, or click here to listen to podcast.)

For politicians, the social media represent a potential political juggernaut that comes with substantial risks, as well as rewards. Here are five tips for candidates about how to adapt to this new world order.

1. Beware of the "gotcha": There are no more out-of-town runs to test speeches and make mistakes; everyone's a reporter today. If there's any kind of problem, you can count on some citizen journalist with a digital camera, cell phone or PDA to share your gaffe with the world within a matter of minutes.

2. Don't pander: If you promise one thing in one location and something different somewhere else, you will be found out. Candidates who change their personae or promises in different markets may find them-

selves ridiculed in video mash-ups that expose their contradictory statements.

3. Understand the medium: The social media abhor conventional marketing. They rely on word-of-mouth endorsements from independent third-parties. You can't treat them as you would the traditional media, with a mass mailing of press releases and video B-roll.

4. Look for new opportunities to dialogue: For example, as a public service, YouTube offers a YouChoose channel as a place for candidates to showcase their speeches, television interviews and ads. Viewers interested in the grittier — often embarrassing — actually will gravitate to opposition websites or YouChoose's sister site, YouTube.

5. Tone down the nastiness: In this election, your words can come back to haunt you, as a Clinton campaign volunteer in Iowa recently discovered when she made the mistake of emailing a vicious smear that targeted Obama.³ This kind of tactic could well have boomeranged on Clinton, tarnishing her image. The email was swiftly denounced by Clinton campaign manager Patti Solis Doyle and the volunteer was asked to leave.

The new rules of engagement for a presidential candidate also apply to the CEO. Be aware of your vulnerabilities. Be consistent in your communications. Know your stakeholders and where they get their information. Keep looking for new ways to connect and communicate. And do the right thing ... always.

A few years back, former California Governor (and current candidate for California Attorney General) Jerry

Brown wrote, "Bloggers are a force. The established order of politics (EOP) and the MSM [mainstream media] face a big challenge from this fearless army."⁴

I couldn't agree more.

About 70% of Americans — nearly 211 million people — use the internet.⁵ An estimated one in four of them reads blogs⁶... of which there are now nearly 113 million.⁷ There are also over 250 million pieces of tagged social media.⁸ Just one social network — LinkedIn, a virtual gathering place for more than 20 million experienced professionals — grew an astonishing 260 percent between 2006 and 2007.⁹

The social media are not a passing fad ... for politicians or corporate CEOs. Increasingly, they matter to their stakeholders. Thus, social media are critical to their career, if they care about their credibility, their reputation and their future.

1 http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/150/report_display.asp

2 http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/234/report_display.asp

3 http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/1207/Clinton_staffer_on_antiObama_email_chain.html

4 <http://jerrybrown.typepad.com/>

5 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm>

6 http://blog.nj.com/jerseyblogs/2007/09/is_anyone_reading_this_the_lat.html

7 <http://technorati.com/about/>

8 <http://technorati.com/about/>

9 <http://webmill.blogspot.com/2007/08/social-media-july-2007-statistics.html>