

What Works

Millenials MoveOn

By Lee Bruno

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Millennials MoveOn

To propel young folks to the polls, a political organization mixed Web 2.0 tools with social science savvy **BY LEE BRUNO**

ON OCT. 23, 2008, the political action committee (PAC) MoveOn.org deployed one of its most successful e-mail campaigns. In support of presidential hopeful Barack Obama, the organization sent a message that contained a phony news video from the fictitious network CNNBC. The customized video flamed its recipient by name, claiming that he or she was the one person whose uncast vote lost the presidential election to Republican candidate John McCain. In one segment, former President George W. Bush and conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly personally thanked the recipient. In another, a church marquee read "All God's Children Welcome Except [recipient's name]."

MoveOn originally sent the clip to its 3.5 million members—politically active citizens who were already likely to vote. The organization then expected these members to forward the video to friends and relatives whose will to vote might waver. Indeed, by Election Day, more than 20 million people—almost 10 percent of the U.S. voting-age population—had viewed the video.

With a full quiver of Web 2.0 technologies, MoveOn blazed a new trail in American political campaigns. The organization proved especially effective at mobilizing voters under age 30, who accounted for at least 60 percent of the increase in voter turnout during the election. In total, about 23 million of the 122 million voters who cast ballots in the 2008 election were under the age of 30, reports the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), a nonpartisan group that re-searches young people's political engagement.

Through campaigns such as the CNNBC viral video, an online spoof of antidrug advertisements called "Talk to Your Parents About John McCain," and a video contest, MoveOn penetrated young voters' Internet hangouts—social networking and online media sites. But the medium was not the only message: MoveOn relied on social science research to craft its tactics. The organization then exploited the Internet to test and hone its campaigns in real time.

OLD-SCHOOL SCIENCE

From its inception 10 years ago, MoveOn has made the Internet both the glue and the engine of its activism. (There are two separate MoveOn organizations: MoveOn.org Political Action, which engages in partisan politics; and MoveOn.org Civic Action, which

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Stills from two MoveOn Internet videos: (top) A woman excoriates the CNNBC video recipient for not voting. (bottom) Actor Penn Badgely spoofs anti-drug ads.

is nonpartisan. This article focuses on the former, MoveOn.org Political Action.) Two California-based software developers, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, founded the organization after starting an online petition to oppose the impeachment of then President Bill Clinton. Since that first online campaign, MoveOn has given millions of busy citizens ways to voice their political views in a system dominated by big money and big media.

Like the original MoveOn campaign, the CNNBC video combined the power of the Internet with basic social science principles. The idea for the video came from Peter Koechley, a former managing editor of *The Onion*. Koechley had left the satirical news publication a year earlier to join MoveOn, where he was in charge of the organization's youth programs.

In his new position, Koechley came across a political science re-

search paper called “Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment,” which was published in the February 2008 issue of the *American Political Science Review* (APSR). The paper’s authors, who include Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green of Yale University, discovered that direct mailings informing people that their neighbors would find out whether they voted profoundly increased voter turnout. Mailings that urged people to perform their civic duty, in comparison, drove fewer people to the polls.

It was no accident that Koechley read the paper; the MoveOn staff follows the academic literature on voting very closely. “We had worked with Gerber and Green before to analyze our various programs,” Koechley says. “We were especially attuned to their work.”

Koechley adapted the social pressure tactic of “shaming the vote” for a younger audience by using the fake-news format. “We were playing with more outrageous humor than we’ve used before,” he says. Allowing recipients to pass the video along to friends “added a layer of social trust,” he says.

The CNNBC video clip works on another level: “I give to you first and then you give back to me,” says Robert Cialdini, a professor of social psychology at Arizona State University and author of *Influence*, the classic work on persuasion. The recipient feels obligated to pass along the video to his or her friends. “We are trained in our culture that we must not take without giving back,” he says. Indeed, “nearly

ENTICE TWENTYSOMETHINGS

Use social networking and online media sites

Be funny

Learn and apply social science research findings

Test ideas early and often

how they talked with their parents about their voting intentions. It also offers a sample e-mail with links to Obama’s positions. The text of the sample e-mail: “Hi, I’ve been thinking a lot about the election and how important it is to our family. I’ve decided to support Barack Obama, and wanted to let you know why. There are many rumors floating around out there, so here’s some information about Barack’s positions on things I know are important to you. ...”

This video release was popular, with more than a half million viewings on YouTube, but didn’t register the big numbers like the CNNBC news spoof video.

Other strategies rely not so much on the Internet’s ability to leverage pressure as its ability to remove barriers. A MoveOn video contest called “Obama in 30 Seconds,” for example, invited viewers to submit a 30-second testimony as to why Barack Obama should be the next president of the United States. Viewers next voted on the videos to produce a list of finalists. A panel of movie stars, musicians, and directors, including Oliver Stone and Matt Damon, then selected the winner. Anyone could enter, and anyone could vote, allowing the “wisdom of the crowd” to reign, says Blades.

TESTING, TESTING

Another strength of MoveOn’s Internet-driven campaigns is that the organization can test an idea swiftly. “Most important is always being able to test and improve on it, and in online environments you can do it with a quick turnaround,” says Blades.

“The CNNBC piece was developed and tested extensively,” Blades says. “It wasn’t modeled after anything that had been done in the past.” The team edited the script

many times to increase the number of scenes presented in the short video and improve the perceived reality of each. The idea of prominently placing the viewer’s name in each instance was intended to “create as much social pressure as possible,” Koechley says. “Beyond that, our tweaks were aimed at making a compelling piece of media that people would want to pass along.”

Sometimes MoveOn will test an idea for hours or months before it is confident in its ability to achieve the desired objective. “We have things called joyful funerals for cool ideas that didn’t quite achieve the desired results,” Blades says.

“The idea is to happily kill projects when we realize they’re not going to work, rather than continuing on something just because of sunk costs,” says Koechley. Also at play is the desire to “destigmatize the death of one of our projects” and encourage constant innovation.

By combining social science findings with real-time testing and broad distribution, MoveOn has reached a new, tech-savvy class of voters. In so doing, it has helped make the Internet the new center of civic engagement. As this center matures, the traditional approach of assembling a group of dedicated volunteers and canvassing neighborhoods may become a relic of the past. ■

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all of the 21 million views were the result of friend-to-friend pass-along,” says Koechley.

Direct mailings that exert social pressure are also far cheaper than telephone or door-to-door canvassing, finds the APSR research. The mailings cost between \$1.93 and \$3.24 per vote, far outperforming the roughly \$20 per vote for door-to-door canvassing or \$35 per vote for phone banks.

The CNNBC video was also cost-effective: less than \$60,000 to produce and distribute the video to more than 21 million people—amounting to less than a penny per view. “The beauty of viral video is that having it seen 10 million times would have cost the same amount,” says Koechley. “So the way to optimize the dollar per vote is to make a funnier video.”

Many of MoveOn’s other Web 2.0 campaigns apply social pressure through the Internet’s various channels. For instance, one humorous Internet advertisement, “Talk to Your Parents About John McCain,” warns young voters of the telltale signs that parents may be tempted to vote for the Republican candidate. Much like public service announcements about teen drug use, the ads’ young actors deadpan with such lines as “Lemme give you a little straight talk.” A page called “The Talk” invites viewers to share