

Proven Practices

Political volunteering and the Web

When historians assess the national election of 2004, a lot of words will be spent describing the newly-demonstrated power of the Internet to inform, influence, rile and mobilize voters.

Howard Dean's primary campaign, despite its lack of success at the polls, stunned anyone not already impressed by the Web and its ability to reach both young volunteers and older donors. Six

months later, John Kerry told delegates at the Democratic National Convention: "So now I'm going to say something that Franklin Roosevelt could never have said in his acceptance speech: Go to johnkerry.com." He may have seemed a bit nonplussed as he said it, but no campaign from this point on can afford to waste the potential of a great Web site.

All of the political parties and interest groups want to engage Web surfers in more than passive "hits" to a site. The goal is to move site visitors to action, whether small or large, and ultimately to vote.

What can we learn from these volunteer recruitment and management efforts? First, it is clear that the principles of real-world volunteer management apply to online efforts. A site that offers a link to click to "volunteer" better have some useful information on the page that pops up next. Some don't. Those that are serious about allowing interested people to

get involved offer the following:

- Specific ideas for immediate action (host a house party, help with a voter registration drive, work at the candidate's local headquarters);

- More clickable information describing these possible actions, including detailed instructions if these will be done independent of campaign supervision;

- A sign up form asking minimal personal information, but enough to identify the volunteer's voting district, some demographics, and that all-important email address for follow up.

Now the candidate or special interest organization must motivate through ongoing communication while avoiding email overkill. The point to learn for any nonprofit is that it's critical to act without delay when someone indicates the wish to volunteer; if you can't use the help, stop asking for it until you can.

Distinguish between online recruiting for on-site service and for special events or independent efforts. The latter are especially well-suited to Internet organizing, as is using each volunteer's concentric circles of family, friends, and other contacts to disseminate information for you.

MoveOn.org has mastered online service techniques and ought to be analyzed for its skill in establishing a solid link with its supporters and volunteers. With a paid staff of fewer than 10 people, MoveOn.org has managed to gain wide visibility, raise millions of dollars, and tap a wellspring of frustration among the electorate that needed to be channeled in order to have an impact. Its staff uses the technology of automatic mass emailing with remarkable savvy that can be a model to any nonprofit organization.

As a case study in excellent volunteer management, let's look at the April "Bake Back the White House" special event, in which hundreds of small, local bake sales were to grab attention and generate funds. See how each step of the process reinforced participation:

1. **RECRUITMENT:** Before announcing the event to the general public, MoveOn.org did some personal recruitment among volunteers already in their databank so that some bake sale organizers were on board when the campaign started. But after the initial seeding of the soil, bake sales materialized all over the country, following the guidelines clearly outlined on the Web site.

Prospective volunteers could choose to be organizers, sellers (they were given a list of all the registered sales, which grew in length daily as the date approached), bakers (again, with instructions such as "put cookies into small bags so they can be easily sold"), or purchasers. Observant Jews were given the option of holding a bake sale on Sunday instead of Saturday. (Details matter.)

2. **PREPARATION:** Once volunteers selected a local bake sale and one or more roles, they submitted a sign-up form which was automatically sent to MoveOn.org's office and to that bake sale's specific volunteer organizer. That volunteer organizer got in touch by personalized email to arrange necessary logistics, such as who had folding tables they could loan for the day.

So what began as an automated transaction rapidly became friendly and higher touch. Organizers were fed hints and email text samples by headquarters.

But from sign up to bake sale, the preparation was local, except that about a week before the event, MoveOn.org sent another mass email to all volunteers registered for the bake sale, asking if they had been contacted by an organizer, had any feedback to make, or needed any help to make the event work. That was smart communication.

3. **THE DAY OF THE BAKE SALE:** MoveOn.org did its bit to get media coverage of the event. Thousands of emails were sent to everyone on the list, urging people to buy the cookies and cakes. Note that they separated this larger list from the names of the volunteers already committed to working at the bake sale.

Volunteers who went to their local site found their organizer, whom they felt they knew because of the personal emails, name tags and other like-minded people. When volunteers give time on a Saturday, they want to enjoy the company.

ON VOLUNTEERS

It was quite amazing to watch people pour to the site carrying baked goods of all descriptions, while others came to buy. Some items never touched the table top, but exchanged hands from baker to eater by the money box. At least half of the purchasers paid more than what was requested, stipulating it was "for the cause."

4. FOLLOW UP: Within 24-hours of the event, MoveOn.org had an email in every volunteer's in-box with a thank you and a link to a Web page with the following:

- Digital photographs of every sale that submitted pictures;
- Clippings from news coverage;
- Comments from volunteers; and,
- A preliminary sales total, which was updated as more results were turned in. In addition to the tone of celebration, the thank you email asked each volunteer to click to a brief evaluation form. Completed and submitted online, this form asked about the way the event was organized, what could be done better in the future, and allowed for comments.

Also the next day, each local organizer sent a personal thank you and announced the local total.

On a personal note, I felt recognized for my efforts but, more importantly, I felt that my efforts had accomplished something. This is classic good volunteer management. And it's why I continue to open the emails I receive from MoveOn.org, often take the action requested, send their notices on to friends, and show up in person at other volunteer opportunities. I am not alone.

Consider how this massive mobilization is accomplished with a minimum of funds and paid staff, but a maximum of planning and caring. When prospective supporters come to your organization's Web site, what actions can they take to help you? What might you ask them to do and how might you apply the lessons of Election 2004 to your cause? *NPT*

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She can be reached via email at susan@energizeinc.com. Her Web site is www.energizeinc.com