

## Understanding Political Web Strategy

*A dynamic, data-driven web presence should be designed to grow and strengthen the campaign's community of support.*

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### *I. The New Web*

It's easy to see that the web has gone through a radical evolution in the past few years, but few people who are not professional web developers have a clear understanding exactly what that evolution is or what it means. Here's a quick guide to the web's past, present and future:

#### **Web 1.0: Static Sites**

The first version of the web featured sites that **mimicked printed documents**, with the added feature of hyperlinks from one document to another. So early web sites were the online versions of brochures, reports, periodicals or storefront advertising — they were called “static” sites because they didn't change unless a web developer changed them manually. These sites were mostly written in HTML, a page “markup language” derived from a printing industry language called SGML.

#### **Web 2.0: Dynamic, Community-Oriented Sites**

In a nutshell, dynamic web sites assemble themselves on the fly, and change their content or behavior in response to the user's actions. Amazon.com, for example, assembles itself uniquely for each user, based on his or her buying history and demographic profile.

Web 2.0 sites are not collections of pages so much as **collections of programs that can do things**. For example: forms, forums, blogs, shopping carts, news feeds, info graphics, calendars, maps, fundraising thermometers. Where web 1.0 sites were based on one-way communication from site to visitor, web 2.0 sites support at least two-way and often multi-way communication, including the creation of content by users, not just site owners. These sites are developed using a combination of languages and software, including HTML, PHP, CSS, JavaScript, MySQL and more. The content is stored in a database, and is fetched and formatted as needed.

This is the current standard.

## Web 3.0: The Semantic Web, Readable by Machines

This is the version of the web we appear to be heading towards (although some are skeptical we'll get there because of technical challenges). The data in web 3.0 sites will be readable not just by people but by software. For example, this might mean that one of the programs running at my site might send a request for information to other sites and use that information to do something that wouldn't otherwise be possible, such as assembling a comprehensive medical history, or analyzing a portfolio of investments held at many different institutions.

## II. Features of Web 2.0 Political Sites

Politicians and their campaign consultants were initially skeptical of the value of the web in comparison with the long-established effectiveness of bread-and-butter strategies such as direct mail, precinct walking and broadcast advertising. Most political sites, where they existed at all, were small-scale and static. But the 2004 campaign of Howard Dean convincingly proved that a web presence — one based on web 2.0 — could make a critical difference in raising money and building support. The Dean campaign was the proof of concept for Web 2.0 political sites.

### The Current Standard

Since 2004 web-savvy campaigns have developed a set of web 2.0 site features that have proven valuable enough to become more or less standard, at least for the time being. These features are usually linked to a master database — one of the foundations of a web 2.0 political site. The contact database represents the campaign's community of support, and the rest of the features should be designed to work together to grow that community in size and strength.

**The contact database is the hub of a web 2.0 political site. Other features are designed so that with each interaction with a site visitor, the database is added to, meaning the relationship can be deepened as more information is collected.**

**Focusing on building relationships like this is at the heart of Constituent Relationship Management, or CRM.**

### Web 2.0 features include:

- **Contact form.** This invites communication with the campaign, while also adding value as compared with standard email links:
  - Collection of user information in a master database
  - Routing of messages to appropriate staff
  - Protection against spam
- **Volunteer form.** Allows people to sign up to help the campaign, and collect volunteers' personal information in the database.
- **Contribution form.** Allows secure online contributions and collects donor information for the database.

- **Letter-writing tools.** Allow users to send letters to the editor, or to send pre-designed recruiting/fundraising letters to their friends. The fact that someone sent a letter can be tracked and added to the database — such people are likely to be interested in getting more involved.
- **Fundraising tools.** These allow supporters to set and track personal fundraising goals, donate money, send branded solicitation emails, organize events, and receive credit for their bundled contributions.
- **Calendars.** A simple calendar will show the politician's public schedule. Typically it will also automatically post upcoming events to a box on the home page, Calendars can offer a user options to subscribe to email notices or RSS feeds, or to synch his own calendar with the campaign's.
- **Event sign-up forms.** Integrated with the calendar, these forms serve both to collect RSVPs and to add more information to the database.
- **Email lists and forums.** At the most basic level, email saves money on printing and postage. But it has other advantages:
  - Responses and “click-through's” can be tracked, so that the effectiveness of messages — or even parts of messages — can be tested.
  - Recipients can easily forward messages to their friends. Compelling messages can spread virally.
  - Lists can be one-to-many broadcast lists, useful for disseminating a controlled message, or many-to-many discussion lists (and forums), useful for building community.
- **Site membership.** Users can register to get greater access to site features or other benefits in exchange for more information about themselves, starting with their email address.
- **User pages/profiles.** Registered users can be given their own presence on the site, a place to establish an identity they can refer to when making contact with other supporters, and to find people with similar interests.
- **Blogs.** Regular updates from the candidate and/or campaign staff increase the usefulness of the site to visitors, and encourage their deeper involvement via comments. Registered users can be given their own blogs, if the scale of the site makes that seem worthwhile.
- **Image, video & audio galleries.** For some campaigns, it can make sense to provide galleries for user-generated content, as a way of building community. For example:
  - “Post your photo of our recent event”
  - Video ad contests
  - Music playlists.
- **Polls.** A quick, easy way to invite involvement with the campaign while getting a (non-scientific) sense of voters' opinions.

Choose from these  
community-building  
features to create a web  
2.0 site.

- **RSS feeds.** The site can offer visitors a subscription to content updates, which are automatically supplied to their news reader application via RSS (Really Simple Syndication). And it can provide content on its own pages that it draws from other RSS feeds.
- **Widgets.** These are small programs that users can install on their own sites — for example, a fundraising widget that can be put on a supporter’s MySpace page, inviting friends to contribute to a favorite candidate. Widgets are in effect small pieces of the main site that can be broken off and sent out to extend the campaign’s presence elsewhere on the web. (See “Beyond the home site, below.”)
- **Constituent Relationship Management.** CRM systems allow site owners to access and work with the data collected through the various site features such as forms, tools, calendars and email lists. Campaigns can find, group and contact site visitors by their interests, location, voting history, gender, age, level of contribution, attendance at events and more.

### ***III. Beyond the Home Site***

Web 2.0 has enabled the extension of web presence beyond the home site. It’s an important part of a political web strategy to take advantage of this kind of extension. For example:

- **YouTube.** With millions of videos now on the web, why bother adding another one? The answer lies in search space: the candidate’s video, like other web content, will be found by people searching on a related topic. And if the candidate has no video while an opponent does, that’s a disadvantage.
  - Note: It’s important to understand the emerging production style of the web. Traditional video production is polished and expensive. On the web, that approach can be counter-productive: since marketing is over-abundant, authenticity becomes valuable, and rawness is seen as a sign of authenticity.
- **Social networks:** Facebook, MySpace et al. A candidate Facebook or MySpace site can serve as a parallel presence targeting a narrower demographic. It might also be looser and more personal than the official site. Supporters can be encouraged to customize their own social network sites with campaign graphics, information or widgets. The links among all the various sites create “network effects”, most importantly a stronger community and a larger overall web presence (see section IV, below).
- **Mobile.** Text messaging and mobile web browsing extend the web presence to supporters’ phones, and can link those phones back to the home site. For example:

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- **Opt-in text messaging.** This can be a way to quickly mobilize supporters in response to events, to maintain contact by sending them short greetings, updates or “random thoughts” from the candidate, or to run games and contests.
  - Some campaigns might consider having the candidate or a staffer share micro-updates via **Twitter**, which can provide an intimate look inside day-to-day life on the campaign trail or in government.
- **Viral messaging.** Supporters can be enlisted to generate or forward messages to their friends.
- **Mobile-ready site.** The home site can be designed to “degrade well” for mobile web browsing, or can have a special section designed for that purpose, at “mobile.homesite.com”.
- **Mobile widgets.** As with the home site, widgets can be supplied for users to “take with them”.

In some ways we are already moving into web 3.0. Programs running on one site can communicate with programs running on another, which is a step towards the Semantic Web described in section I, above. RSS subscriptions are one example of this; widgets are another.

#### ***IV. Web Presence and Search Optimization***

Understanding the web requires a new understanding of the concepts of space and presence. In pre-media times, a person existed only in physical space, and their presence was largely confined to the physical space they occupied. With the advent of print media, a person’s presence could be extended into the linguistic space of the world of readers. With film, TV and radio, presence extended into moving images and sound, and reached a larger audience.

To that point in history, achieving a bigger presence required pursuing the audience, often through advertising. But with the web, presence extends into “search space”, and a bigger presence is achieved not so much through pursuing as through being found.

**In “search space” a bigger presence is achieved not so much through pursuing as through being found.**

In a universe of millions of other web sites, it’s unrealistic to expect most people to go to a particular URL to see if there’s a new and interesting message there — that’s like relying on one billboard along one of millions of roads. Instead, visitors are likely to find the site because they were searching for something else. So it’s important to optimize the site so as to increase its likelihood of being found in connection with relevant search strings. For example, a candidate with a position on universal health care would want to make sure that that phrase was featured in the text of the site in such a way that it was likely to lead to a hit by a search engine.

There is also a defensive aspect to search optimization. If opponents put up lots of pages, blog posts, forum topics and the like containing negative comments about the candidate, they can overwhelm the positive messages. So it's important that the campaign continually produce and encourage positive content about the candidate steadily over time, not only on the home site but elsewhere on the web.

## ***V. Web Advertising***

In the past, advertising on the web seldom made sense for politicians — paying to advertise to the whole world on a portal site such as Yahoo! was not an efficient use of money. But with web 2.0, advertising has become more targetable and so, more cost-effective:

- Ads can be placed dynamically and intelligently, matching ad placements to sites whose content closely matches the interests of the target market.
- An emerging trend refines this approach through **behavioral tracking**, analyzing what users do on web sites and matching advertising to what their behavior implies about their interests.
- With **search advertising**, specific search strings can be bought, resulting in prominent placement on Google or other search engine results pages for a small but carefully targeted subset of web users.
- Note that web advertising can be targeted to a small geographic region. The placement software checks the IP address of the browser's computer, which may be identifiable by building in the case of an organization's IP address, but is at least identifiable to down by town.

## ***VI. Flexibility and Ease of Maintenance***

In addition to all their enhanced capabilities, web 2.0 sites are more adaptable to changing requirements and easier to update. This is because:

- Presentation is separated from content
- Web 2.0 technologies enable easy-to-use Content Management Systems, or CMS's.

**Presentation and content.** Raw content, such as the unformatted text of an article, is stored in a database. The presentation of that content — how it is formatted — is controlled by templating languages such as Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). In practice this means that the look of the entire site can be updated by making a change to one document, such as a cascading style sheet. For example, if the CSS definition of a heading is changed, the appearance of every heading of that type in the site will change.

**Content Management Systems.** CMS's enable non-technical people to change the content of a site about as easily as they would edit a document in a word processor. They don't need to know HTML or any other specialized language. This means the campaign does not have to pay a web developer every time the site needs updating.