

Secrets of Successful Online Fundraising

by Emilienne Ireland and Phil Tajitsu Nash

This excerpt from the new second edition of *Winning Campaigns Online* was featured in the August 2001 issue of *Campaigns & Elections*. The book can be previewed and ordered online at www.ScienceWritersPress.com.

After Campaign 2000, when it turned out that the Internet was not a magic lamp that could turn any fool into a sultan, some pundits bemoaned the failure of the Internet to live up to its promise. Forgotten was the generally uninspiring quality of most campaign websites, and the fact that few used the Internet up to its full interactive capacity. As Campaign 2001 and 2002 get underway, thoughtful candidates and consultants will take lessons from the failures as well as the successes of Campaign 2000.

A prime example of an Internet tool that remains widely underutilized is online fundraising. Online donations can provide significant advantages over traditional offline donations. For example, online donations eliminate the paperwork and make the funds available to you more quickly.

When a donation is made online, you don't have to wonder whether the check is in the mail, send pledge reminders to the donor, type the donation information from a piece of paper into your database, and send the paperwork to the bank. Most important, online fundraising is cheap, and provides an extraordinary rate of return (on average, it costs only about ten cents to raise a dollar online, as opposed to 40-50 cents for direct mail, 60-70 cents for telemarketing, and 90 cents for prospecting lists).

The Internet helps you to improve your performance at each stage of traditional fundraising, but also adds new factors. The most important one is that visitors to your website will make unsolicited contributions. How much and how often are factors that are still being analyzed, with current estimates suggesting that one of every 100 visitors donates, and the average donation is around \$100 for many federal and statewide races. Here are a few simple tips for increasing your odds of receiving online donations:

- Start with a strong website
- You must constantly publicize the site
- Integrate online and offline efforts
- Don't hide your "Donate" button!
- Make it easy to donate
- Provide a choice of payment options
- Adopt a privacy policy
- Send regular emails to supporters
- Keep your website updated

Start with a strong website

Your website should be as effective and polished as your direct mail, your television spots, and every other aspect of your campaign.

If you sent out a badly produced direct mail piece with bad photos, weak writing, and no focused political message, you'd be a fool to expect it to raise money for your campaign. In this respect, the Internet is no different from traditional campaign communication tools, such as direct mail, radio, and television.

When people come to your website, they should see that your campaign is well-organized and effective. Potential supporters should be impressed at your work and your stands on the issues, and have reason to trust that the money they donate will be well spent.

A strong website, however, is just the beginning of your successful online fundraising strategy.

You must constantly publicize the site

When candidates do not raise money online, the most common reason is that they did not do enough to push visitors to the site.

Case Study: How to hide from visitors

A candidate called three weeks after his site was up and complained that he was not raising any money from his website. After checking that the contribution processing system was working, his Internet consultant asked him whether he had carried out the consultant's suggestions for promoting his site.

Was the URL (*www.joesmith2000.com*, for example) displayed on the podiums where he spoke, mentioned in every speech, displayed on the wall at every campaign event, announced by every volunteer answering the phone at headquarters, and printed on every piece of campaign literature?

"Well, I haven't publicly announced my site at all yet," he admitted sheepishly. After that, the candidate had the URL printed on a cloth banner and displayed at appearances. After a few speeches and a postcard mailing, the donations started flowing in.

Start by creating a professional site that is registered on the major search engines. Next, create a publicity strategy that focuses on getting visitors to the website. There, they will spend more time reading about your campaign than in any other medium, and will have the tools for making a donation readily available.

As budget allows, promote the site via radio, TV, direct mail, and print media, such as newspapers and magazines. Incidentally, your TV ads should do more than merely flash the URL (website address) in a small, hard-to-read font during the last few frames of the ad. Instead, feature the URL in large font, display it onscreen for at least five seconds, and have it read aloud by the announcer.

Candidates who are successful at raising funds online enthusiastically drive traffic to the site by mentioning their URL in every speech, displaying it prominently on the podium and on banners at every public event, and printing it on every yard sign, direct mail piece, and bumper sticker.

Integrate online and offline efforts

The *Online Campaigning Primer* produced by the non-profit Democracy Online Project opens with this sound advice: "The key is to recognize the Net's distinctive strengths and weaknesses, and integrate what you do offline with what you do online."

Achieving such integration, however, will test the mettle of campaign managers in coming years, because it requires consultants in different fields (direct mail, TV, Web) to work together in the best interests of the candidate, and put aside any tendency to compete with one another.

Tom Hockaday, whose firm helped raise \$6.4 million online for John McCain's presidential campaign, is also an expert in direct mail and telemarketing strategies. Hockaday is a strong advocate of integrating offline and online fundraising efforts:

"Whether online or offline, you must make your pitch, you must provide a sense of urgency, and you must make it easy to donate. Sometimes we provide a different URL on our offline mailers, such as *www.candidate2002.com/donate*, because we want to distinguish money raised from offline and online sources. Nevertheless, we always encourage clients to maximize their returns by integrating their online and offline strategies."

Likewise, Democratic direct mail veteran Tony Fazio emphasizes the importance of having Web and direct mail consultants work together as a team:

"We have found opportunities for mail and the Internet to work together to deliver a campaign's message by using mail to drive targeted voters to visit a campaign's website. It is important that both Web and direct mail experts begin early to build a strategic team. Cooperation is the key in utilizing these two unique but complementary media."

Synergy between Web and television is even more important. While we noticed substantial boosts from offline fundraising events, direct mail, and targeted email, the really big surges came from exposure on nationally broadcast radio and television. After a

while, when we ran our database reports and found a certain candidate suddenly had \$4,000 fall into his bank account that day, we knew without calling the campaign that the candidate had received broadcast media exposure just before the spike in donations.

Case Study: Offline publicity boosts online donations

When we first started online political fundraising, we couldn't figure out why some candidates would earn a steady average between \$600 and \$1,200 online every week, and then earnings would suddenly spike up to \$3,000 or even \$6,000 in one day. We'd call the campaign staff, and they would say, "We don't really know why donations went up yesterday" or "No, nothing special is happening. We're working hard, though. Everybody's really busy."

Soon we noticed that the dramatic boosts came immediately after TV and radio exposure. As we asked more questions, we realized it was publicity in other media—direct mail, television and radio—that was causing the big surges in online contributions. As we asked better questions, here are some of the answers we heard:

"Tuesday was the day we sent out the new flyer with the URL printed on it."

"[The candidate] mentioned the URL during an interview on CNN. It ran three times and got picked up on some other channels, too."

"We got featured on [radio show]"

"That was the day we started our email newsletter. We sent out the first edition to 2,500 subscribers."

Other campaign consultants we have spoken to are seeing comparable results for their candidates. Finding synergy between online and offline fundraising efforts clearly is the way to succeed in Campaign 2002 and beyond. Promoting your site offline is one of the surest methods of boosting online contributions. In fact, if you don't actively promote your site offline, you won't raise money online.

Don't hide your "Donate" button!

Every campaign website should have a link or button labeled "Donate," "Contribute," "Get Involved," or "How You Can Help" prominently displayed near the top of the Home page. Some candidates initially resist naming the button that way, objecting that it's "too obvious." However, being obvious is good when it comes to donation buttons. That way, when potential donors are looking for that button, they can actually find it!

Don't play hide-and-seek with your donors by labeling the button something original, such as "Guess What This Leads To," "Mystery Button," or "Please Don't Think I Need Money."

Case Study: How to hide from donors

Here are actual examples of how some candidates in Campaign 2000 labeled the links and buttons that led to their online donation pages:

"One in a Million"

"Let's Make It Happen!"

"Join the [candidate's name] Family!"

Although the importance of encouraging donations seems self-evident, some candidates force potential donors to go several layers into the site before they see a Contribute or Donate button. At the opposite extreme, candidate John McCain had several Donate buttons on his home page, and even had a Donation pop-up box that jumped into your face whenever the Home page was brought up. This aggressive approach contributed to \$6.4 million being raised for McCain.

Unless you are a wildly popular candidate, however, you might find that hardball fundraising techniques tend to irritate your potential donors. A more conventional approach—simple, direct, and low-pressure—usually gets better results.

Make it easy to donate

Steve Forbes, Republican presidential candidate, had a website that was reputed to have cost the campaign over half a million dollars. Despite spending far more than most candidates, he had a contribution solicitation process that forced potential donors to wade through three screens of text before completing the contribution. He raised very little online.

By contrast, Bradley, Bush, Gore, and McCain had contribution pages that clearly differentiated the optional text (explanation of FEC regulations) from the required fields (name, address, and so forth). Their contribution forms were designed to make it easy for the donor to complete the transaction.

Good site design gets the donor locked in by getting them working right away. A donor who has already entered personal information on a form is likely to take another minute to read and check off the required FEC affirmations. By contrast, if your donation form requires the donor to begin by reading a tedious list of regulations, that donor is more likely to lose interest and decide to postpone making the donation.

Provide a choice of payment options

Your website should provide two options for potential donors: contributing directly online via a secure server connection, as well as printing out a form and later mailing or faxing it to your campaign.

It's important to give your donors the option of using whatever method they prefer. Some donors still are more comfortable sending a check in the mail, so you should provide a printable form on your website for those donors. By the same reasoning, you should give potential donors the choice of donating online by either checks or credit cards. Some donors prefer to donate online via credit

cards, while others are more comfortable using online checks. If your donation system is easy-to-use, convenient, and allows donors to choose their own preferred payment method, you will raise more money.

Adopt a privacy policy

Every website that collects financial data or other sensitive personal information from visitors should have a privacy policy. Failure to do so is increasingly viewed as irresponsible or worse. Ideally, you should have a small text link labelled "privacy" or "privacy policy" included among the standard navigation links that appear at the bottom of every page on your site. In addition, your donation form should prominently feature a button or link to your privacy policy.

Posting a privacy policy, of course, does not discharge your responsibilities. You must abide by your policy. Sometimes the campaign treasurer is completely unaware of the promises made on the website privacy policy, and may share contributor lists with other campaigns without realizing that the privacy policy may have promised the campaign would not do this.

It is perfectly ethical to share data with like-minded organizations, provided this is done with the full informed consent of the person who provides the data. It is unethical—and may in some cases be illegal—to disclose any personal data for unauthorized purposes. Moreover, if a donor informs you that they do not wish to receive unrelated email solicitation from you, or if they ask to be removed from your email list, comply with their request immediately. Because this area of Internet law and practice is changing rapidly, you should consult your campaign attorney for updated information on protecting your campaign from charges of spamming or other objectionable fundraising practices.

Send regular emails to supporters

Send emails to your supporters on a regular basis—and especially after each media event. Nothing succeeds like success, and those who have given you money like to know that their money has been well spent. Send emails after positive polls, successful debates, healthy fundraising reports, and other key events. Keep your supporters involved, and they will be more responsive when you return to ask for more support.

Case Study: Don't send email that is boring, impersonal, and rude

One of our staffers recently signed up online to receive email updates from a candidate in a major statewide race. A few minutes later, she received a confirmation message via email from the campaign, which appears below (names have been changed):

Subject: **Your registration was processed**

JoeSmith2002 Registration

You are now registered to receive updates on the Joe Smith 2002 campaign. If you received this message in error, or would like to remove yourself from our records, click below...

<http://www.joesmith2002.com/index.php3?>

Action=Delete&Email=mtr@campaignadvantage.com
This form was completed 22:39 Tuesday, April 24, 2001

This email was processed and sent to you by:

JoeSmith2002.com

<http://www.joesmith2002.com>.

Note that the message above consists mainly of awkward instructions advising the recipient to “remove yourself.” While every campaign email message should include a footer line with instructions about unsubscribing, a potential supporter might hope for more. Doesn't the candidate have anything more inspiring to say? If the candidate has no political vision, even a campaign slogan would do. Alas, this email contains no message at all about the “Joe Smith” campaign or what it stands for. Note also that the simple words “thank you” are never used—not even once.

Your email strategy is key to the success of your overall online operations. Too often, candidates waste the opportunity to send their campaign message to thousands of voters at almost no cost via email. Candidates sometimes say they are afraid that

the opposition will get the information and somehow use it against them. This makes no sense. Any information you publicize via your website and campaign emails should be the same information that you publicize in other venues, such as press releases, TV spots, and direct mail. The rule of thumb is simple: if you have released information in any other public communication medium, you also should include it on your website. The email below shows how you can provide an informative and inspiring message to supporters without giving any advantage to opponents:

Case Study: Send email that inspires support

Compare the example on the previous page to the confirmation email below, which our staffer received after signing up as a “member” on John McCain's post-election PAC website:

Subject: **Thank you for joining Straight Talk America!**

Thank you for joining Straight Talk America. With your help, John McCain will be able to continue his fight to reform the way our government does business.

Straight Talk America will keep you updated, via email, on the latest news and ways you can help John McCain.

You can start today by emailing a quick message to 5 friends about John McCain and his reform message.

Simply visit

<http://www.straighttalkamerica.com/team/tell.cfm> now to send your message. Again, thank you for joining John McCain's Straight Talk America!

Note that the recipient is warmly thanked, given a clear message about what the campaign hopes to accomplish, and even invited to take immediate action to support the campaign. To make it easy for the recipient to help out, the email provides a hotlink (the Web equivalent of a stamped, addressed envelope). Note also that the recipient is urged to email “a quick message to 5 friends”—an example of viral campaigning, a proven technique for boosting online effectiveness.

Your online operations can inspire support by showing your campaign at its best. Treat online supporters respectfully, by communicating in a personal way, by providing current information, and by encouraging them to participate.

Keep your website updated

Because roughly one in every hundred visitors to your site makes a donation, it's essential to keep visitors coming back. That is why it is so important to update your site as often as possible.

Case Study: Website Neglects Supporters, and Loses Online Donations

A large, high-profile campaign launched a promising website, but quickly squandered its Internet capital. Against the advice of its Web consultants, the campaign did not list any phone numbers on the site, did not update the site, and did not respond to email inquiries from website visitors for weeks at a stretch.

Reporters on deadline were unable to contact the campaign, and cut back coverage they had planned. Volunteers eagerly asking how they could help received no reply. Online contributors who asked for more information were ignored. Nothing could be done without the campaign manager's approval, and he was too busy to think about the website.

As the weeks dragged on, the site remained unchanged, as if frozen in time. Photographs of the candidate announcing his candidacy were available, but they were not posted on the site. No news about the campaign was posted to the News page.

Not surprisingly, although this site was raising over \$5,000 a day online during its first week, donations quickly dwindled to an average of less than \$200 a day. This unfortunate outcome was completely avoidable.

Newspaper websites offer the latest news about the world at large. What you have to offer is news about the campaign, as well as anything else that would be of interest to potential donors, voters, and volunteers. For instance, pages that compare your views to those of your opponents can be very effective, if they are perceived as fair and backed up by independent information sources. Don't forget to post audio and video clips, downloadable versions of

direct mail pieces, and full versions of your television ads.

Several presidential campaigns in 2000 featured volunteers on their websites, including photos and personal statements about why they supported the candidate. Team Bradley was especially effective at doing this, and Bradley's site allowed visitors to browse through volunteer pages by state and city. This made it easy to find snapshots of neighbors in your own or nearby communities, alongside their personal comments about Bill Bradley and why they supported him on a particular issue.

Likewise, former Congressman Tom Campbell (R-CA), running against Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) for her Senate seat last fall, included a "Town Hall" feature that showed he was confident, open to dialog, and responsive to constituents. Every day, he personally answered five emails from constituents on his website, and even archived each dialog by topic so voters could read his responses to previous questions.

Note that Campbell's Town Hall was not an unmoderated free-for-all "chat room" that allowed visitors to post irrelevant and potentially damaging messages on his site. Far from it. Campbell stayed in control and on-message by posting questions and answers he specifically chose as relevant to his campaign.

The pages that typically require most frequent updating are the Home page, News page, and Calendar page. In addition, you should post press releases and video clips of your television ads at the same time they are released in other media. Audio clips and downloadable versions of your campaign's direct mail pieces are also of interest to your website visitors. Keep your site fresh, and you will be rewarded with loyal site visitors who will support you with time, money, and votes.

Case Study: Successful Website Maintenance on a Tight Budget

This candidate had a very tight budget early in the campaign and simply couldn't cover the cost of weekly professional maintenance. The candidate was committed to having a good website, however, and came up with a creative solution.

A talented volunteer was brought in. This person was a serious Web hobbyist who maintained a respectable public service site in his spare time. Throughout the campaign, he added all the press releases, and even a search engine and other improvements.

The volunteer and the professional consultants worked out an arrangement whereby the volunteer did most of the work on each update at no cost to the campaign, and the professional developers did only the remaining hour or two of final touches and adjustments to the code. This candidate received excellent site maintenance at an 80% discount.

Show Leadership

When it comes to online fundraising, most candidates today are still very ambivalent, and it shows. This ambivalence results in either micro-management to the point of paralysis, or exclusion of the webmaster from the campaign's inner circle of strategists. Both problems result in a boring, static brochure in the sky.

When consultants point to some of the effective Internet strategies used by John McCain during his presidential bid and currently, on his PAC website, too often candidates say that McCain is a special case, and they can't expect to generate the same kind of support that he inspires. Yet the basic techniques that McCain uses so well are available to everyone. The difference is that McCain uses the Internet aggressively and intelligently, while most candidates today are still very ambivalent about the Web, resulting in lackluster results in most online campaigns.

If you want results online, you must earn them. Show leadership and accountability by providing good information on your site and updating it regularly. Actively encourage grassroots support. Invite visitors to communicate with your campaign,

to receive news from the campaign, to volunteer, to bring other supporters to the campaign, to donate, and to vote.

Unless you do all these things, you may have a website, but you are not campaigning online.

About the book

Winning Campaigns Online: Strategies for Campaigns and Causes, 2nd Edition by Emilienne Ireland and Phil Tajitsu Nash
Paperback, 320 pages, with case studies, glossary and index. ISBN 0-9701854-1-3.
Science Writers Press, 2001. \$24.95

Available online at www.ScienceWritersPress.com

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