Building an Online Communication Strategy

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Abstract

The initial phases of communication projects are all too frequently characterized by an overemphasis on the tools to be used rather than on the goals to be achieved. The choice of tools must be determined by the objectives identified, not the other way around. Online communication is a limitless field where new possibilities seem to crop up and catch on almost daily. There is an ever-present risk of wasting energy on countless details rather than focusing on what is really important. While every campaign is different and unique, there are a few key objectives that apply to any political endeavor. The first is *spreading the campaign's political message*: presenting ideas, making proposals, managing communication crises, and addressing the opponent. The second involves *stimulating and organizing participation*, online as well as offline. This chapter gives special attention to a consideration of this activity in the current context, which is characterized by a marked decrease in political participation. Finally, the chapter outlines the role and the recommended practices for political *fundraising*.

3.1   Introduction: Objectives and Phases of an Online Political Campaign

"Let's start a blog." "And a Facebook page." Then: "Twitter, of course, and YouTube." "Why aren't we on Flickr?" And then: "I read an article about Instagram—apparently it's all the rage." People who work in communications have heard these words repeated again and again in a variety of contexts. All too often, the effort gets under way with a sharp focus on the tools to be used: testing out graphics for the website, proposing ways to access new social media, or floating ideas for new mobile-phone apps, but neglecting to identify, fully and clearly, the *goals* that these tools are intended to help achieve.

The first question that should be asked before laying out a plan is, "What precisely does our organization (or campaign or party) hope to achieve?" To pass a reform in the legislature? Stop the construction of a power plant? Sell a product? Get a candidate elected? Strategies will vary according to the objective, which ought to be clearly identified from the outset. It is a simple rule that is all too often ignored.

It is not at all uncommon for consultants to be called in to propose projects and develop processes before the desired outcomes have been appropriately determined. A little reflection often reveals not only that the product or service requested is not really needed but that there are other alternatives, often simpler and cheaper ones, that would be much more useful in reaching the goals. We are also often guided by the past—"This is how we've always done it"—or by a friend's advice or what others have done, but we fail to ask ourselves if it is truly what the situation calls for.

Along with the objectives, it is important to keep the target audience in mind. These are the two elements that should determine our course of action:

> Who are you trying to reach? What will you be asking them to do? Are there intermediate targets that need to be reached first? A campaign designed to motivate college students to vote will probably be structured very differently than a campaign designed to encourage senior citizens to pressure their state legislators about Medicaid long-term care coverage. Your online campaign, whether for advocacy or office, is much more likely to succeed if you've thought about these basic questions *first* (Delany 2011, p. 5).

The greatest error to avoid is starting to construct an online presence without having identified a strategy and an action plan. Each campaign is different and has unique elements that must be considered carefully before setting out, but there are three key objectives that are common to every political effort:

- *Spreading the campaign's political message*: presenting the ideas, the proposals, the reasons why it is important to support the campaign.
- *Stimulating and organizing participation*, online as well as offline, because consensus can only be built and maintained if the campaign succeeds in getting a large number of people involved.
- *Raising funds*, because every political effort, however small, requires financial resources.

Although the roads that lead to these objectives may vary according to the context, all strategic plans will include three points, which reflect the three principal *phases* of any online communication campaign (Delany 2013). The first is *to build a large group of supporters*. These can be people who follow the campaign on Facebook or Twitter, or perhaps newsletter subscribers. The preceding chapter and the following ones focus on this matter; for the moment, let it be noted simply that investment in advertising on social media is fundamental to the growth of the community of supporters. It is a particularly efficient investment, requiring limited costs but producing contacts with whom campaign staff can interact regularly. This

is quite different from traditional advertising, which involves spending money to contact people a single time, as happens with an ad in a newspaper or a television commercial. The essential topic of how to make best use of advertising funds will be addressed in greater depth further on (see Sect. 4.4).

The second phase involves *turning supporters into activists*, people who will support the campaign through concrete action. Those who follow you online will welcome the opportunity to help, to take an active part in your effort. This can best be accomplished by involving them regularly in specific activities, such as asking them to subscribe to a newsletter, sign a petition, or share your site's content on the web in order to increase visibility. This relationship, though, is like any other: it requires give as well as take. Requests for service or participation should be reciprocated with information, responses, and useful news and updates.

The third and last phase is GOTV,* or *get out the vote*. Online advertising is a particularly useful means of bringing the campaign's message to as many people as possible. This is without doubt the most important point—we will see it again later (see Sect. 3.5.3)—and is one that worries even many communications specialists, who anxiously count "likes," "fans," and "retweets." This, though, reflects a fundamental problem. They are so focused on the means that they lose sight of the ends. The real goal, the final objective, is to get people out to vote, and the web can make an important contribution not only as a means of communication, but above all, as a tool for organizing effort and for stimulating involvement and participation.

3.2   Defining Which Actions to Take (and Which to Avoid)

Those who work in online communications often receive suggestions, criticisms, and recommendations from supporters, staff members, and journalists who believe, sometimes rightly, that they have the best advice for improving a candidate's online presence. This conviction reflects the experience that many people have garnered as web users, experience that they feel translates naturally into professional skills. It is not surprising, then, that people handling a candidate or organization's web presence frequently receive requests and proposals, often useful and appropriate, on the most diverse matters.

The field of online communication, however, is boundless. Every day new possibilities are born and developed, and there is a great risk of wasting time and energy running in a thousand different directions rather than focusing on truly productive, value-adding activity. This is why it is so important to define the goals clearly. A good starting point is determining the number of votes required to win an election or to carry proposed legislation, then defining specific objectives for each phase of the effort. How many people do we want to follow us online, how many volunteers would we like to mobilize for the campaign, how much do we need our fundraising activity to produce?

Often, though, the objectives defined are too general, unrealistic, or in any case unable to serve as a guide for daily decision making. Winning the election is an

obvious goal, but how can this be translated into concrete choices and actions? An effective method for defining clear and effective objectives is the one introduced in 1954 by Peter Drucker, who described the essential characteristics of good goals by using the acronym SMART:

Specific: The goal cannot be vague; they must be clearly defined
Measurable: Benefits obtained must be quantifiable.
Assignable: The person(s) responsible for performing each task need to be known and identified.
Realistic: the goal must be attainable using available resources.
Time-based: the date by which each task is to be completed must be set.

How does this apply to defining web communication targets?

Common, yet ineffective, answers to this usually look like this:
- Generating a lot of buzz and conversation online.
- Having our video go viral.
- A-list influencers or web celebrities talking about us in positive ways.

None of those are quantifiable, so they shouldn't be true goals. Better versions of them might be:
- Generating at least 100 new mentions of our product online.
- Having more than 10,000 views of our video across all sharing platforms.
- Having ten bloggers write positive posts about us.

Do you see the difference? The first set of goals is vague and subjective, but the second set is clear and you can objectively determine whether you hit them. There are no gray areas in the second batch; they therefore are the type of metrics that you want to set so that you can accurately assess a project and deem it successful or not (Handley and Chapman 2012, Chap. 3, Par. 4).

As an example, if a campaign staff set the goal of increasing their number of online followers, that goal would be too vague. A better objective would be reaching 10,000 fans on Facebook and 5,000 followers on Twitter within 3 months, defining just as precisely the levels to be reached within 6 months and 1 year, then going through the same exercise for each platform where the campaign plans to have a page, profile, or account. Similarly, the goal must be realistic. There is no use in determining that you want to have 100,000 Facebook fans if the candidate is running for municipal office in a city with a population of 40,000. Setting unattainable goals will only cause frustration and will negatively impact team morale and motivation.

Of course, goal-setting cannot be limited to determining how many people to add to a list of network contacts, the number of volunteers to bring on board, or funds to be raised. There are many other requirements to attend to, such as the number of people who write in and receive a satisfactory answer or the percentage of online comments responded to within 20 min. Setting clear goals will help motivate those who will have to do the hard work that relationship management requires in any context. This is even truer of online communications, where responding to the

questions and criticisms of citizens is the key to making a real difference and obtaining lasting results.

Defining objectives also calls for some consideration of targets. Identifying at the outset who you want to reach will help you make decisions that focus your online efforts. If you want to reach an audience of journalists and opinion leaders, Twitter can be a useful tool, while Facebook is better for the general public. If you are interested in a particular niche of users—e.g., environmentalists, cyclists, or families—single-topic blogs may be the best route to take.

Defining objectives will be fundamental for determining which projects to set in motion and which to set aside. It is not at all rare during a campaign for other staff members, organization managers, or even the candidate to ask that an account be opened on a new platform they have recently heard about, perhaps on the radio or the TV news.

> Everything a campaign does—everything—has a cost, even if that cost is a few minutes of a staff member or volunteer's time. Successful campaigns will be ruthless when it comes to resources like time and money—i.e., they won't waste them unless it's unavoidable. So when someone says, "hey, we should be on FourSquare," the first question a campaign manager should ask is whether or not being on FourSquare helps in any significant way with recruiting, mobilization or messaging—and ultimately, whether it'll help the candidate win. The next question? Is being on FourSquare the most efficient and/or effective way to further that goal? If not, a campaign should question whether it's worth the time and money (Delany 2012, p. 5).

In other words, we have to ask ourselves if it will increase the number of supporters, if it is the best way to convert them into activists and get them out to vote, and above all, if it is the most efficient means of achieving those objectives. If it is not, we need to ask if it is worth spending time and money. This applies to all the tools that we will discuss: it is worth using them only if they are the best means of achieving our ends. We shall start with the first one.

3.3 Objective One: Getting the Political Message Out

Before the web, there were limited ways of communicating ideas, political proposals and accomplishments. Nearly all of them relied only in part on those who produced content: institutions, politicians, businesses. The real control was in the hands of the directors of TV stations, of daily-newspaper and news-agency editors. These were the gatekeepers of information: they decided what was news and what wasn't, what became public domain and what was kept for a small circle of "insiders." They decreed whose popularity rose and whose fell. This has not changed and the media's influence is still enormous, but the web adds a new dimension, one that alters the dynamic: it allows us to circumvent the mediation of journalists. We can decide what news to share and when to share it.

A news piece can also be posted more than once. If an institution has completed the largest renewable energy project in Europe, if it has built 100 new child-care centers in the city, if it has compiled the most extensive network of cycle paths in