

Political Campaign Strategies that can work for Nonprofits

By Kevin J. Conlon

Nonprofit organizations can and should advance their causes in the same ways that political campaigns approach attracting voters and donors- through techniques devised to create maximum impact with minimal resources.

At first glance, political campaign tactics may seem inconsistent with the missions of many non-profit organizations. They often bring to mind negative attack ads, a deep menacing voice warning you about the evils of Congressman X while a montage of unflattering pictures of the candidate floats across the screen. But smear tactics can only take a candidate so far. A campaign must cost-effectively build a strong base of support if it is to succeed, and to do this campaigns find themselves compelled to stay on top of cutting edge strategy.

In the last two election cycles, political campaigns have field tested a wide variety of non-traditional, generally internet-oriented tactics. Those that have proven successful are emerging as the latest "must-have" weapons in the arsenals of serious contenders. Campaigns are bypassing traditional high-cost television with non-traditional on-line publication, wireless and guerilla advertising, and blogging, all of which can be easily adapted for effective use in other contexts. Non-profits in particular can realize significant benefits, as they often share many of the same goals and constraints as a political campaign.

Nontraditional advertising

It is common knowledge that Americans are spending less and less time reading traditional newspapers and watching major television networks, as new sources of entertainment and information mature. Nontraditional advertising has increased along with this trend, through online publications, niche-market cable networks, internet search engines, wireless technology networks- the list keeps on growing.

These new vehicles are much more cost effective than older blanket advertising methods because they are so highly targeted. For instance, many local newspapers with online editions offer advertising packages that can be purchased with targets, such as specific zip codes. Google search ads appear only when a user is searching a specific topic, ensuring that you reach those who express an interest in your subject. Many online advertising firms offer "pay-per-click," a system whereby you only pay when a user actually clicks on your ad, resulting in additional cost savings. Wireless technology advertising appears on the user's cell phone or PDA, can also be targeted to zip-code, and often blends advertising with entertainment in the form of interactive games or text-message quizzes.

Guerilla Marketing

Guerilla marketing is defined as an aggressive and unconventional way of performing promotional activities on a very low budget. One form of guerilla marketing that had a significant impact on the recent elections involves creating a short video to post on your website, Youtube (a video-sharing website), and/or to send to your email list. Users watch your video, recommend it to others and send it on

through their personal network, creating an ever growing web of exposure that is naturally targeted to the type of people you want to reach. This is often called “viral advertising”, because of the infectious nature of a good video, game, or even photo. Production costs should be minimal. The most popular videos on Youtube are not those with the highest production values, in fact the opposite is often true. It does however require a high level of creativity and/or timeliness to capture the attention of the viewer. Humor and sincerity can be critical to success. A funny or powerful piece of video can attract large numbers of viewers to the organization’s website, as well as add to a nonprofit’s cachet and ability to raise funds.

The ‘Blogsphere’

Campaigns, corporations, and other organizations have also harnessed increasingly popular “blogs” (web-logs) for their own purposes. The Pew Research Center reports that over 30 million Americans read a blog regularly in 2005, and this figure keeps climbing every year. These frequently updated online journals provide nonprofits with a simple, high-tech method of building an online community. Virtually any message a nonprofit crafts for any medium can be posted on its blog. A good blog can also give an organization a more human feel, as the more relaxed and casual tone of blog-posts encourage identification with the organization and its workers. This is especially true if you allow a space for visitors to leave comments or discuss issues relevant to your nonprofit, which will also help to make your blog more interesting and therefore more heavily trafficked. In addition to promoting the nonprofit’s mission to the public and helping its image, blogs offer the opportunity to

share information and resources among other nonprofits.

Starting a blog can be free, and there are resources available on the internet to assist with the process. One online group, the Nonprofit Blog Exchange, contains more than 120 nonprofit blogs, ranging from a local ASPCA to a branch of the United Way. Nonprofits can search for other philanthropic blogs using blog search engines, such as the Google blog search, Blogdigger, or Feedster. An organization should place a prominent link to its blog on its website to enable easy access for all interested readers. Consider designating one staff member to own the organization’s blog and manage outreach to other blogs.

Nonprofit leaders have already successfully adopted many of these techniques. Type charity into the Google search engine and you’ll see an ad for the ‘Make-a-wish foundation’ in the right hand column of the web page. Type “Katrina” into Google and you’ll see a sponsored link for OxFam America.

Like politicians, these nonprofits have recognized that effectively implementing marketing e-strategies will permit them to raise more money and help more people. The Political lesson applies: get the right message to the right people, as quickly and as often as possible for maximum impact.

Kevin Conlon is president of Conlon Public Strategies, a public affairs firm based in Chicago. For more info please visit: www.conlonps.com