

VIRTUAL LESSONS FROM A REAL LEADER

Barack Obama's campaign success has proved that digital marketing is not only cost-effective but can also move mountains. Paul McDonnell distills the lessons

The recent American presidential campaign highlighted how effective a digital communications strategy can be in uniting people behind an issue. Obama's team marketed their candidate using web, e-mail and mobile phones. Anyone who was interested in supporting Obama could become part of the team because they were given simple tools – tools that made it easy for them to engage in word-of-mouth marketing, creating a buzz and a groundswell.

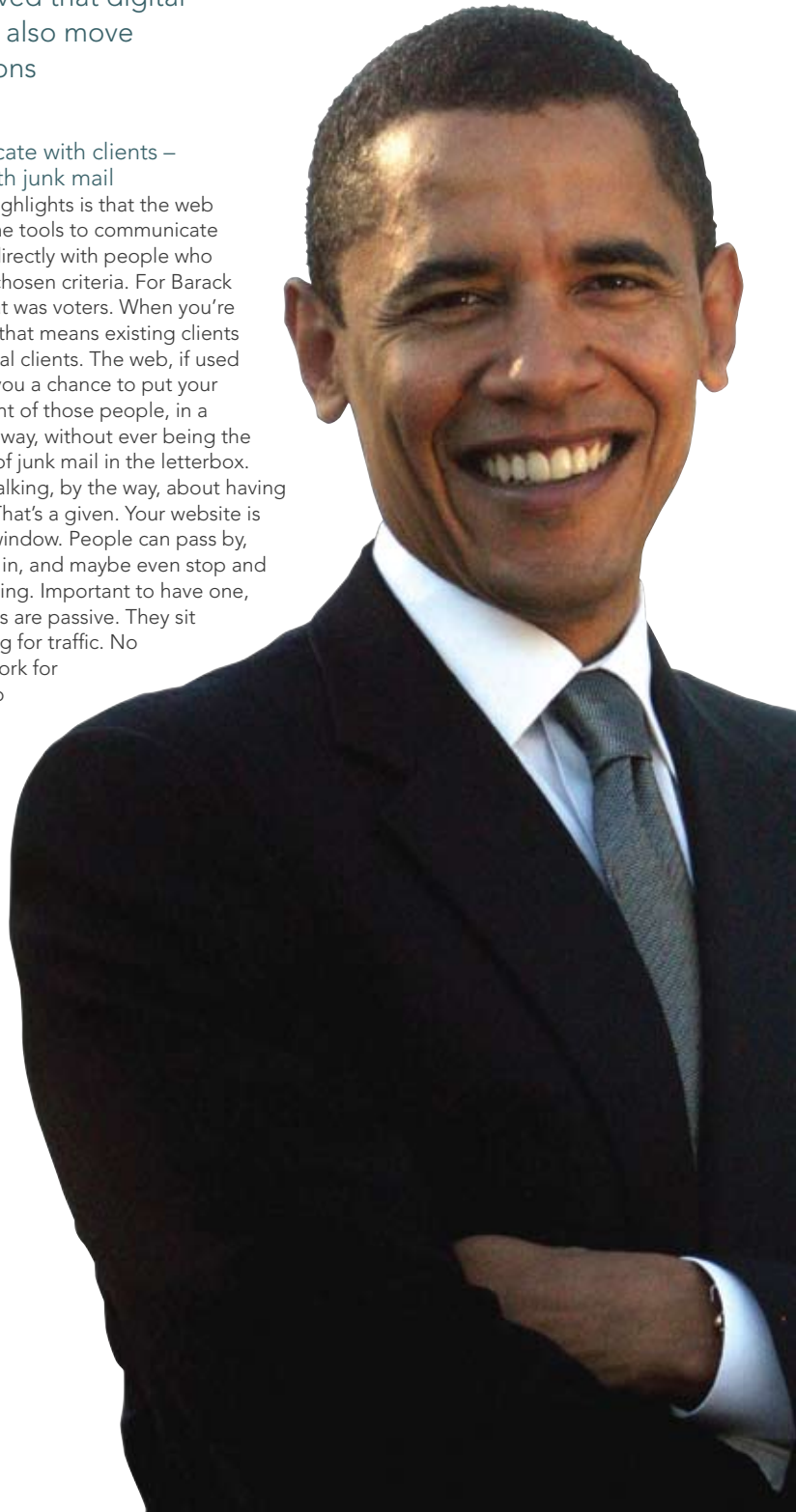
Getting out the message

You may not be running for election, but you could easily apply the same thinking, and the same tools, to market your business without big investment and without needing to become a 'tech nerd' overnight.

One simple example: days before the presidential election, everyone on the Obama mailing list received a 'get out the vote' video clip by e-mail. The clip was a CNN-style newflash with a shocking announcement: Barack Obama lost the election, and it was down to one single vote. Up popped the name of the one lazy voter, and if your name was Paul Murphy, there was your name on screen. The clip then showed footage of demonstrations and protests, thousands of people carrying placards promising all sorts of retribution for Paul Murphy. It finished with the words 'Don't let this happen – vote Barack Obama on November 4.' And you then got a link to send a personalised version of the clip to your friends, family, anyone on your email list. The clip was so clever, so funny, and so easy to pass on that millions of people did. As well as being funny, they were also achieving what they were meant to achieve. Some of these clips were the most circulated and the most viewed web clips, ever. (If you haven't seen one and would like to, send me an e-mail, ask for Obama Link and I'll send it to you. Someone has to send it to you for it to work.)

Communicate with clients – but not with junk mail

What this highlights is that the web gives you the tools to communicate easily and directly with people who meet your chosen criteria. For Barack Obama, that was voters. When you're in business that means existing clients and potential clients. The web, if used well, gives you a chance to put your name in front of those people, in a meaningful way, without ever being the equivalent of junk mail in the letterbox. We're not talking, by the way, about having a website. That's a given. Your website is your shop window. People can pass by, have a look in, and maybe even stop and buy something. Important to have one, but websites are passive. They sit there waiting for traffic. No traffic: no work for your site, no



matter how nice it is.

You need to drive traffic to your site and you need to get people engaged. And that was the magic of the Obama campaign. They didn't just sit there waiting for traffic. They encouraged people to move, to do something. They built a database of interested people – and they used that database. If you went to a rally, visited the Obama website, bought a piece of merchandise, you were showing an interest. They looked to engage with all those people who had shown an interest. You need to do the same: help existing and potential future clients to engage with you.

Help people to engage

An early development of the engagement process was the ability to leave a customer review on Amazon or to leave a comment on a hotel or travel website. And the fascinating thing is the number of people who do. And how much we have come to rely on these comments. You may have left a comment yourself, or rated something on Amazon.

Wikipedia, for all its shortcomings, is a prime example of visitor collaboration – an encyclopedia written and self-edited by the public. People (and not just cranks or nerds) spend their own good time updating entries.

More and more people are participating in some form of social networking – interacting with others through sites such as Twitter, or Facebook or LinkedIn. Businesses now need to recognise that this presents them with an opportunity to interact with clients and potential clients. It's like attending networking events, except, in this instance, the networking events are happening in the ether, on the web, and you may not currently be present.

Reach out

Assuming you have a web presence to begin with, now you need to look at how you use it. The principle to follow here is to reach out: allow your web audience to communicate with you (and each other). So, for example, give people simple options to review your service, to post a

comment on your site, to ask for further information from you – or other clients of yours.

It's not a difficult technical option to implement, but it could be the convincing argument that closes a sale. People are more inclined to accept recommendations from peers than they are from you, so providing the mechanism on your website to let them review and rate your service will encourage others to believe in the quality of your service.

Speak out

You could do something as simple as offering an online newsletter, a regular form of contact that reminds clients of you. You know the issues that affect your clients, the things they're interested in. If you send clients a simple on-line newsletter that isn't a blatant sales pitch, but clearly contains real value, views and opinions on current issues, they can choose whether or not to read it. People hit 'delete' instantly only when they recognise that this is a sales pitch, the equivalent of junk mail through the front door.

If they see that you have put some time and real thought into addressing issues of current interest, they will read. And because it's not going to be printed, it is a low cost way of interacting with clients. Depending on how you put it together, you can let people select their areas of interest or set their preferences for future newsletters.

Give away your expertise

Another option to consider is to create a blog around your area of expertise. A blog is essentially a soapbox. You stand up and say something, hopefully, something interesting and relevant. People can comment on what you have said. They can agree, disagree, argue, put forward other views. These discussions happen online countless times every day but, right now, you may be completely unaware. Right now, there may be people passing messages back and forth on issues that you can help with and have an input into. If you set up your own blog, this can help

position you as an authority in your field boosting your profile and reputation, while also acting as an online calling card for prospective clients.

A blog also drives up the number of hits to your site. When search engines such as Google are hunting, they also look at blogs. If you are a regular blog user, then your web presence comes up more often.

Know who's talking about you

We all engage in 'word of mouth' marketing every day. You visit a restaurant you like, you tell your friends about it. You read a good book, or see a good film, you recommend it. And marketing research shows that when people have a bad experience, they tell even more friends and acquaintances than when they have a good experience.

Because the web makes it so easy to talk to others, good news (or bad news) about you and your company can spread like wildfire and you may not even know. You should be very aware of managing your web reputation.

This involves taking active part in the blogosphere and bulletin boards to discover what people may be saying about you. You need to realise and recognise the importance of blogs and bulletin boards as a legitimate forum for reputation management. Companies have been known to reverse unpopular decisions or actions based on the negative backlash posted in blogs.

In February of this year, for example, Facebook (the social networking site) withdrew a proposed change to their terms of use based on blog reaction. The change seemed like a small change and they may have hoped that people would have no objection.

They were wrong. People noticed. They objected. And they set the internet alight with the volume of criticism of Facebook. The result: Facebook backed down.

In that landscape it would be remiss not to find out what people are saying about you online. Do a Google search for your name or organisation and see what reputation you have online. You may be surprised to find discussions about you or your organisation turning up in surprising places.

Final word: the web is there and your clients use it. It's free and, with a little know-how, there are dozens of ways of talking to new and potential clients.

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