

Expectations for what you can do with Internet campaigning are set so low that we don't really even get the chance to show what we can do.

BY DAVID LYTEL

# The Wire Next Time

## Rethinking the Internet's Place in Politics

**I**N THE YEAR BEFORE EACH of the last three national elections, speculation has run rampant that perhaps this would be the year that the Internet would revolutionize politics. Thanks to widespread use of the Internet, the story goes, candidates would be more responsive to the public, political dialogue would engage the nonvoters, and the political system would become more transparent. All of this would usher in a new era of dynamic, citizen-centered political conversation.

Then, after each election, an uncomfortable reality once again asserts itself. The campaigns, corporations and foundations that have collectively spent millions on the Internet quietly pull the plug on their ventures, vowing never to make the same mistakes again – at least until next time, which will almost surely be the Year the Internet will Transform Politics.

The interpretation of what went wrong almost always focuses on two easy things to measure – the number of Internet users and the still-limited bandwidth available to most subscribers.

There just aren't enough people online yet, some argue, and that's why Internet politics has been a disappointment so far. Once the Internet reaches as many households as television then surely the revolution will come, says this theory. But already the Internet reaches almost the entire half of the U.S. population that votes in elections. And among the unwired, there is a strong correlation between disinterest in the Internet and disinterest in politics.

The other common argument is that the Internet just isn't powerful enough yet. People may not want to read text, but when the broadband Internet arrives and can deliver video, then surely the revolution will come. But television works because the advertisements wash over you, often too quickly to change the channel. Very little that actually commands your attention comes to you passively on the Internet. There is no medium that's ever been more powerful for screening out stuff you don't want to see, and political commercials fall into that category for most people.

While both these observations are true – of course the Internet would be more important for politics if it had a bigger audience and was more visual and easier to use – neither really explains the lack of a mass audience for politics on the Internet.

I've been doing interactive media and political communication since before there was an Internet. My doctoral research was on how a rudimentary precursor to the Internet called Minitel was used by French voters and parties in the French legislative and presidential elections of 1986 and 1988. From that work and the experience of providing Internet campaign services for several dozen candidates and committees via *Democrats.com*, here is my list of the top 10 reasons why the Internet cannot yet claim to have changed the results of any elections, and what it will take to have a breakthrough.

**10. Low expectations.** Once the Web site works, most campaign managers want their Internet consultant to go away. Campaign managers are generally satisfied if they get a press hit about the release of their Web site, and figure that if they ever hear about their Web site again during the campaign it will probably be bad news. Expectations for what you can do with Internet campaigning, in other words, are set so low that we don't really even get the chance to show what we can do.

**9. High expectations.** The expectations of campaign fundraisers, however, have been excessive because so many of them bought the illusion that people spontaneously race to their computers in a mad rush to send their money to candidates. Admittedly there are fewer and fewer who believe in this magical get-rich-quick miracle, which was born out of the myth of the John McCain presidential campaign's fundraising experience.

The McCain campaign did not, as has been widely reported, reap a windfall in spontaneous online contributions after his victory in the New Hampshire primary. Rather, his organization was so rudimentary that his staff and volunteers used their own Web site as a distributed electronic cash register, and entered the credit card numbers of their supporters into the Web site as a way of collecting contributions when they responded positively to an outbound telemarketing call.

There is, of course, money to be raised on the Internet but it involves the much slower and methodical work of building sizable e-mail lists and then cultivating these people over time.

**8. Misunderstanding the audience.** Some candidates and campaign managers believe Internet users are lunatics. In March 2002, NBC's "West

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Wing” acknowledged the existence of the Internet for the first time – but only to portray the denizens of “LemonLyman.com” as crazies who were not to be seriously engaged. In reality, the 50 percent of Americans who use the Internet are pretty much the same 50 percent who vote. And unlike video zombies, Internet users are awake, alert, and want to have a say in the world they live in.

**7. Lack of creativity.** When we get some of the candidate’s time for Internet stuff we squander it. Online politics still gets reduced to real-time online “chats” with political celebrities, which is almost as boring to participate in as it is to watch.

Campaign managers now understand that they can reach a larger audience during just one day on any licensed radio station in the country than they can by doing a live chat session on even the largest online service. But we seldom give campaigns anything to do with candidates on the Internet besides produce a live chat session, and campaigns almost never use the tactic that has been proven to launch effective viral marketing campaigns – humor, in the form of games, cartoons, jokes and other materials that make people laugh.

**6. Too few campaigns publish a readable campaign newsletter.** The method of Internet-enabled campaigning that has been proven to work is the publication of a regular electronic newsletter mixed with occasional requests for financial support.

But in many cases candidates and fundraisers are in such a hurry that they simply blast the hell out of the lists with repeated overt solicitations for funds while the lists are still small. Not surprisingly, people unsubscribe from them in droves rather than subject themselves to a barrage of requests for contributions. When people do receive a newsletter they think is valuable, not only do they contribute but they also forward the newsletter to their friends.

**5. The only list-building activity most campaigns engage in is operating a Web site.** The metrics of success with a Web site are amazingly simple. A good Web site is a good e-mail address collection machine and a bad Web site is a bad e-mail address collection machine.

Most campaigns don’t use any method for creating sizable e-mail lists besides the conversion of ambient Web traffic to newsletter sign-ups. Since a campaign is doing

great if it has a 5 percent conversion rate and traffic on campaign Web sites is never very high, this method almost never creates lists of sufficient size to have an impact either on the campaign or on the election.

**4. Campaigns spend 100 percent of their Internet budget on a Web site and then spend nothing promoting it.** Think of the motion picture industry. In the 1940s, a film’s budget was almost entirely the cost of producing it. Since there was a ready audience going to the movies regularly, the studio didn’t have to do much more than print up a poster to display. By the 1970s, however, there was so much competition for the consumer’s entertainment dollars and so many films that production and promotional budgets were roughly equal. Today, of course, the promotional budgets are an order of magnitude larger than even the most elaborately overblown production budgets.

It takes money to break through the incredibly noisy message environment so that a film can find its audience. In the commercial Internet world, no one believes that they can just build a Web site and sit back and wait for people to find it.

Campaign managers don’t tell candidates to rent an office and stand in the doorway waiting for voters to wander by, but that is exactly what most campaigns do with their Web site. Instead, being successful means going out and finding voters and supporters, just like with every other medium used in campaigning.

**3. Campaigns almost never give their Internet presence the level of effort required for it to succeed by keeping their site regularly updated, animated and alive.** If a campaign manages to scrounge up a little bit of money to get on the air with one television spot that airs two times the weekend before the election, would anyone think that television had been tried and failed? No, we’d all agree that the campaign simply didn’t do enough paid media to have any impact. So it is with the Internet. Since the sites are infrequently updated, not promoted and little effort is made to build lists, the Web sites mostly just sit there, like a car waiting to be taken out for a drive.

**2. The media consultants don’t get their cut of a campaign’s Internet expenditures, and keep Internet expenditures to a minimum.** Media consultants have for the most part figured out that having an Internet address in the last few frames of a television

commercial helps legitimize the claims contained in the ad. But the “Web site” they want consists of a few lines of text citing the ad’s sources. The media consultants have a vested interest in sucking all of the campaign’s expenditures into their domain because they get paid a percentage of the campaign’s advertising budget.

**1. The rules for being successful in an interactive medium are heretical to people trained to understand the reality of the broadcast regime.** The biggest obstacle to getting campaign decision-makers to authorize serious online organizing is that it requires that they suspend the cardinal rule for all political professionals who have come of age in the era of the television-centered campaign – that effective, modern campaign management is about message control.

The Internet is most effective as a campaign medium when a campaign’s strong partisans can be harnessed to carry on a sustained conversation with its weak partisans, so that they become sufficiently engaged to actually get out and vote. (Undecided voters, of course, already have the perfect medium to help convince them. It is called television and we should let it do its job.) To create this dynamic means, the vote hunters have to do something really counterintuitive and difficult for them – they have to hand the rifle over to the deer. That’s right, actually distribute firearms with live rounds so that the prey can help hunt other prey.

To a campaign manager this is very scary. It is a whole lot less risky to spend the money on messages that the campaign can control. We all know that monologues are incredibly boring interactive programming. They just don’t work online. But most campaigns and most campaign Web sites are paid monologues.

In fact, there are a handful of campaigns using good, tested permission-based marketing techniques and pay-per-action advertising to build their lists. A few of these will be the first to build lists of unprecedented scale and generate the kind of impact that so far the Internet has not achieved.

In 2003 or 2005, in the White House, Congress, or maybe a governor’s mansion there will be a politician who got the Internet very right in his or her campaign who will turn to his aides, as John F. Kennedy did after the 1960 election pointing to a television set, and say “we wouldn’t have won without that thing.” That will be the year the Internet will have come of age as a political medium. ■