

Using the Internet to Raise Funds and Mobilize Supporters:
Lessons Nonprofits Can Learn from the Dean for America Presidential Campaign

white paper

Introduction

In early 2003, Democratic presidential hopeful and former Vermont Governor Howard Dean faced a challenge: How could he make the most of a small staff and a limited budget while running a decentralized campaign? The solution came at the suggestion of Dean's campaign manager: Use the Internet. By treating the Internet as an integral part of the campaign rather than an afterthought, the campaign staff could run a truly "people-powered" campaign.

The idea worked. On July 1, 2003, Dean announced that his campaign had raised more than \$800,000 in a single day. Casual observers and political pundits were stunned — particularly because donations averaged just \$74 and were made through a Web site. But that was just the beginning. Since then, the Dean for America campaign raised \$7.4 million online in the third quarter of 2003 — more than double the amount that the organization generated online in the previous quarter and half of its \$14.8 million fundraising total for Q3 2003.

While news media have reported widely on Dean's use of the Internet to raise campaign funds, a largely unreported story is how the organization is using Internet software and online marketing tactics to democratize American politics — enabling "average" people to participate as never before. This approach, based on "viral" marketing or the "ripple effect," allows the campaign to provide supporters with the motivation and online tools to touch the people they know, and allows those supporters to touch the people they know, and on and on for a continuously growing support base. The approach also enables staff members to involve supporters directly with the campaign, giving supporters a sense of access to campaign staff members as well as a feeling of ownership of and responsibility for the campaign's success.

Some nonprofits — including advocacy groups, health research organizations and other charities — are beginning to put many of these same tools and techniques to work, proving that any organization can use the same tools and principles to boost donations and mobilize supporters. This white paper looks at Dean for America's online success and the lessons all nonprofits can learn from the campaign about using the Internet to build a large, strong following, actively solicit support and drive other forms of grassroots participation.

Leveraging the Internet for Effective Fundraising and Grassroots Mobilization

Organizations that need to optimize their fundraising, marketing and constituent communications should be watching what Dean for America is doing online. Using an Internet-based strategy to raise millions of dollars and get hundreds of thousands of people involved in the campaign, Dean for America has set an example for online success that any organization can follow.

It began when the Dean organization established a political milestone by raising \$7.5 million (online and offline) — more money than any of the other nine Democrat presidential hopefuls in the second quarter of 2003. Dean's fundraising efforts produced \$1.7 million more in contributions than presumed front-runner John Kerry, \$2.5 million more than Joe Lieberman, \$3.1 million more than newcomer Senator John Edwards, and \$3.8 million more than Dick Gephardt. As for the rest of the presidential pack, none of the candidates raised even a third of what Dean did.

The campaign proved the second quarter of 2003 was not an anomaly by raising \$7.4 million online in the third quarter— more than double the second quarter online total and half the \$14.8 million total from both online and offline sources for Q3. In addition, the campaign so far has:

- created and sent 358 online surveys that generated 388,000 responses
- signed up more than 500,000 people on its Web site to receive email communications
- motivated thousands of people to create personal Web pages in support of the campaign

By getting its messages out quickly, building an increasing support base, mobilizing supporters over the Internet and creating an online fundraising program with record-breaking results, the organization has demonstrated that it is possible to continually grow constituent support and participation online. In addition, the Dean campaign has mobilized hundreds of thousands of people who previously had never contributed a single dollar to a political campaign, voted in a primary or gotten involved otherwise. The campaign also is giving people more of a leadership role in the campaign as well as the ability to easily recruit more supporters in their local communities.

The campaign uses Internet tools including Meetup.com to arrange meetings for supporters around the country, and Convio®, the Internet software that powers the campaign's Web site, online fundraising and some of its email communications, and that allows Dean to provide Internet tools for thousands of supporters to build their own Web pages promoting his candidacy. With these tools, the group is weaving the Internet into almost all of its activities to raise awareness, build constituent relationships and drive support. By connecting online with its constituents, the group has created support that has its own momentum.

"It's (Dean's Web site) tapping into a sense of community," said Harry Wolhandler, an analyst at Accelara Research in Harrisville, N.H. "They've done a lot of things right without having to be sophisticated about it."

Most notable, Wolhandler said, is that the Dean site is direct in getting its message across and connecting with visitors. "Their whole approach is to be connected," he said. (*Computerworld*, July 3, 2003)

Lessons for Nonprofits

Dean's success showcases the potential of the Internet not only for political campaigns but also for nonprofit organizations. There are several conclusions that nonprofits can draw from the Dean campaign about the importance of online grassroots mobilization in today's wired world:

- **Web sites and email are powerful tools for building a following and soliciting support.** Since early April, hundreds of thousands of people have registered on the Dean campaign's Web site to receive email communications and, as a result, tens of thousands have gotten actively involved. By the end of Q3, the campaign had sent 6.5 million emails to supporters to provide updates, ask supporters their opinions through online surveys and polls, recruit volunteers and solicit contributions.
- **Focusing on major donors is not the only way to generate significant financial support.** In Q3, Dean raised \$7.4 million online. A large percentage of those contributions were from small and/or repeat donors: there were 110,786 online contributions from 84,713 supporters giving an average amount of \$61.14. Many supporters have never before donated to or otherwise supported a campaign.
- **Supporters will recruit others if they have easy-to-use Internet tools for doing so.** Thousands of volunteers use Convio® Internet tools on Dean's Web site to fundraise and spread the word. Through Q3 2003, about 2,600 volunteers had built personal Web pages to explain why they support Dean and were soliciting friends and relatives via email, and 9,300 people had registered on the site to host or attend fundraising parties. Not surprisingly, in Q3 alone, volunteers waging their own online campaigns generated almost \$625,000.

Nonprofit organizations traditionally have been slow to use the Internet tools and techniques that the Dean campaign has proven can increase constituent participation and contributions. They typically invest in the Internet simply by having a graphically appealing Web site with good content — without taking full advantage of the Internet for communicating and building stronger relationships with constituents.

In contrast, the Dean campaign recognized from the start that the Internet could be a strategic medium for constituent outreach, engagement, volunteering and fundraising. The group developed an Internet plan, invested in an integrated online marketing solution that uses Internet tools (Web logs, Meetup.com, Convio) and staffed the effort appropriately. Taking a queue from the Dean campaign, nonprofits can use these strategies to incorporate the Internet as an integral part of their marketing plans:

- **View the Web site and email software as strategic marketing tools** rather than cost centers. As the Dean campaign has shown, the return on an investment in Internet tools and strategies continues to pay off.
- **Develop a comprehensive Internet plan** that not only includes Web site design and Internet tools, but also a plan for regular online communication through emails, email newsletters, Web site content, surveys, forms and more.
- **Commit to incorporating the Internet into all activities.** From the Web master to the executive director, every staff member must be dedicated to online communication as an integral part of the overall marketing and fundraising strategy.

Seven Approaches for Online Success

In addition to creating a comprehensive online approach, nonprofits can learn from the Dean campaign's success and apply its proven techniques. Here are seven specific approaches as well as some important tips for online success:

1. Create an online presence that encourages registration

As of late November 2003, the Dean campaign had signed up 509,000-plus email subscribers through Web site registration. Data from June 2003 reinforces the importance of registration: during this single 30-day period, the campaign expanded its list from 50,000 to 130,000 registrants, with more than 45 percent of registrants making contributions.

These results demonstrate that a large percentage of people who sign up and receive email updates can be converted to donors. Comparable donor acquisition efforts through the mail are not only more expensive and time-consuming, they are often less effective because they lack the frequent communication with supporters that the Internet permits. Some tips for involving more constituents online:

- **Ask people to sign up through Web site registration or petitions.** The Dean campaign asks people to sign up for updates or join petitions, and requires minimal information to make the process easy and fast for constituents.



Dean "sign up today" promotion, November 2003

- **Send regular email communications with compelling and consistent messaging.** The Dean campaign emailed millions of messages this year to keep supporters updated and involved. Although such frequency exceeds what is appropriate for most nonprofits, regular email communications with content that reinforces key messages can be effective.
- **Use "viral" marketing by actively asking people to forward messages.** Constituents may only contribute once or twice in a given period, but often want to show additional support through contacting legislators or other decision makers, participating in an event, volunteering and getting others involved. The Internet makes it easy for constituents to provide additional support — for example, an email asking constituents to forward a message to friends can increase distribution exponentially as one person talks to another, and that person talks to another, and on and on.

2. Give constituents a voice.

Constituents who feel they have a voice are more likely to contribute time and money to a cause. Dean created an ongoing dialogue with constituents through online surveys, polls and petitions, as well as online forums (Web logs, also known as blogs) to allow constituents to voice their opinions, make suggestions and communicate with other supporters. In addition, the campaign creates a constant narrative by regularly updating Web site content. Supporters stay engaged online to follow the story line, see how the campaign is progressing and communicate with other Dean supporters.

3. Create a sense of shared identity.

In addition to giving constituents the sense that they have a voice, it is important to make them feel part of the cause. The Dean site's blog allows supporters to talk to each other and voice their opinions. Supporters across the country also can link from the Dean site to a Web site called Meetup.com (see side bar) to view and participate in regional meetings set up by the campaign. The unfettered access to ideas and opinions on the site gives each supporter a sense of being part of the campaign and part of a community.

4. Give constituents access to staff members.

The Internet can be an effective tool to establish an ongoing conversation with constituents. The Dean campaign ensures that its supporters feel connected with staff members by regularly posting comments from the campaign on the site's blog. This strengthens the impression that staffers are involved with supporters, and gives supporters the sense of having direct access to the campaign.

5. Create a context in which supporters can participate.

By its very nature, the Internet is an ideal vehicle for providing campaign context and for creating a sense of urgency. The Dean campaign continually challenges supporters to participate in specific drives by quickly setting up online campaigns with deadlines and goals. The campaign creates the context, then gives supporters the opportunity to take action and be heard within that context.

For example, in July 2003, supporters donated more than \$500,000 in four days when the campaign asked them to match a single \$300,000 event by Vice President Dick Cheney. In another four days in August 2003, supporters gave about \$1 million online as Dean made a 10-city campaign tour. In another effort, the campaign created an online petition that enabled the group to gather 12,000 signatures quickly, with half of those signatures being new to the campaign.

Dean staff members update Web pages regularly — sometimes multiple times a day — to continue the momentum and keep supporters involved. Staff members also issue regular "call to action" emails asking supporters to contribute by a deadline. Nonprofits can create similar urgency to drive activism on political issues or stimulate donations as a deadline approaches, e.g., for matching gift campaigns.

6. Give feedback.

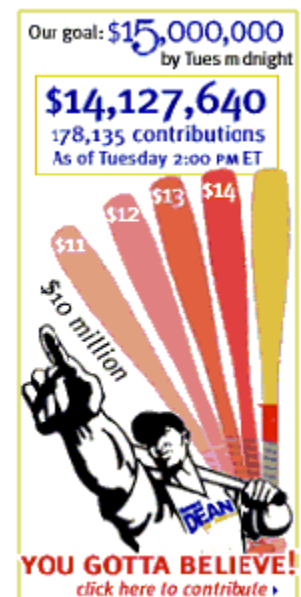
Constituents can feel disconnected with an organization when they make a donation then never hear from the organization again. They may ask themselves: What happened to my donation? Did it make a difference?

To keep constituents involved and give them a sense of power, the Dean campaign is careful to always give feedback. If they sign a petition, for example, they see how many other people also signed it. They do not feel as if their actions are futile, because they're always told about the result.

Meetup.com

Dean for America sets up meetings around the nation through Meetup.com — a free online Web site that organizes local gatherings about anything, anywhere — and publicizes them on its Web site. Chatting with each other on www.meetup.com, supporters can get together with other Dean supporters in their areas to write letters, exchange ideas and voice opinions in support of the campaign.

For example, after an online supporter suggested a "Meetup" to write letters to undecided Democrats in Iowa, word spread quickly through Meetup.com and large groups in more than 300 cities nationwide met to write letters and stuff envelopes to support Dean.

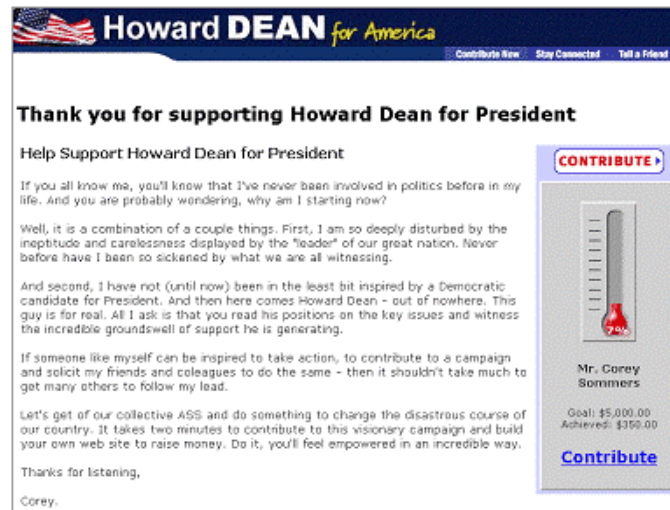


The Dean Web site uses a baseball theme that updates supporters on progress in achieving goals.

7. Leverage volunteers as fundraisers.

An organization can turn its strongest supporters into volunteer fundraisers. By encouraging supporters to reach out to their networks and by providing them with online tools to reach those networks, any organization can take advantage of this “viral” marketing technique to create an ongoing ripple of interest and support.

Dean’s campaign, for example, has signed up thousands of “Dean Team Leaders” to recruit and raise money from friends and relatives. Using Internet tools provided by Convio®, each Dean Team Leader creates a personal Web page explaining why he or she supports Howard Dean, logs in to a personal fundraising center to email solicitations to his or her contact list, checks on responses and thanks contributors. Doctors for Dean, for example, have set up their own Web page to recruit other doctors to support the campaign.



Dean Team Leaders can create Web pages explaining why they support Dean. The site also allows communities, such as “Doctors for Dean,” to establish Web pages in support of the campaign.

Conclusion

Howard Dean’s presidential campaign clearly demonstrates the power of the Internet for fundraising and mobilizing supporters. By understanding and applying the Internet tools and techniques used by Dean for America — and available to all organizations — nonprofits, too, can generate excitement, urgency, participation, donations and other forms of support.

Powered by Convio®

Convio can help any organization leverage the Internet for more effective fundraising, marketing, advocacy, event management, communications and constituent relationship management. It can be used to attract, motivate and retain constituents online.

The Dean campaign uses an integrated solution of Convio software products and services including online fundraising, email marketing and Convio TeamRaiser™, which enables volunteer fundraising and, in the third quarter of 2003 alone, generated almost \$625,000. Through its Web site, the campaign provides volunteers with TeamRaiser tools to create their own Web pages and solicit friends and relatives via email to contribute and get involved.

About Convio®

Convio is the leading provider of software and services that help nonprofit organizations use the Internet to build strong constituent relationships to drive support and participation. Convio offers online solution centers, with software and services for:

- Fundraising and membership
- Advocacy
- Volunteer fundraising
- Special events
- Web site management
- Email communications
- Alumni relations

All centers include the Constituent360™ platform, a sophisticated online marketing database that centralizes constituent data and integrates with offline databases. This gives nonprofits a unified view of constituent interests and motivations — key for personalized and targeted outreach and communications.

Find out more

For more information, please visit www.convio.com, or sign up for an online demo at www.convio.com/demo.

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