



## ALAN ZISMAN

### Obamasphere's online lessons for marketers

In the previous High Tech Office column, I suggested that one of 2008's noteworthy events was the successful use of the Internet for fundraising and organizing by the **Barack Obama** campaign. Most often, websites for both politicians and businesses function as high-tech brochureware, reworking traditional print media into digital form. Like print media, they offer

their sponsors' spin on information, but rarely invite interaction.

In contrast, even post-election, [barackobama.com](http://barackobama.com) welcomes input and interaction. Right up at the top is a request to "share your feedback - help shape this movement." Beside it is a pitch to donate and get a "2008 victory T-shirt." Nearby is a link: "Get involved now - find an

event near you." Lower down: up-to-date blog entries, video clips and more. Companion site, [mybarackobama.com](http://mybarackobama.com), offers users Facebook-like tools to "talk to other voters, join a local group, find an event, fundraiser or blog," along with links to Obama-friendly groups on a range of popular social-networking websites.

During the campaign, [mybarackobama.com](http://mybarackobama.com) hosted nearly 10,000 local groups, more than 4,000 special interest groups - many with memberships in the tens of thousands - and 20,000 volunteer-generated blog pages.

Though the Obama team has not commented, these online organizations might continue post-inauguration - certainly the continued online activities at [barackobama.com](http://barackobama.com) and ongoing regular e-mails to supporters.

Besides using its website to engage and organize supporters, the Obama campaign made online tools central to its fundraising efforts. Obama raised almost US\$750 million during the campaign. More than \$500 million was raised from online donations averaging \$80.

During the election campaign, **Chris Goward**, co-founder of Vancouver-based **WiderFunnel Marketing**, took a look at [barackobama.com](http://barackobama.com). WiderFunnel works with clients to improve their online potential using tools such as **Google's** website optimizer.

Over repeated visits to the Obama home page, he found different images of the candidate, changing in ways that suggested optimization testing. One photo featured a casual group shot of the Obama family, another showed the family waving, while another grouped Obama, vice-presidential candidate **Joe Biden** and their wives. Both colour and black-and-white photos were tested.

Apparently, the coziest image (in black and white) proved the most effective - or at least brought in the most donations - and was used for the rest of the campaign.

Similarly, the donations page offered several variations. Some promised donors "a limited-edition shirt" in

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either dark blue, light blue or white; others simply asked visitors to make a donation.

Goward doesn't know which design was the most effective donation-generator, but he believes the evidence is clear: the Obama campaign was testing to make sure its website was optimized to maximize donations and best engage visitors.

Goward suggests that, too often, marketers avoid testing the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. When testing is carried out, it often makes use of a small focus group that might not be a valid sample of the target population or might not be run long enough

to provide meaningful data.

He likes tools such as **Google's** website optimizer, which allows website owners to post multiple versions of their online content and analyses which provide the best results. These tests offer data by measuring the actions of everyone who really visits the website.

Even these tools are not all-powerful, Goward notes. In the recent U.S. campaign, it might have been useful for Republican candidate **John McCain** to have been able to run tests comparing **Sarah Palin** with other potential vice-presidential nominees, but it probably wasn't practical.

The Obama organizers were able to use website optimization tools to help make their use of the web effective. Goward hopes that marketers will follow their example - particularly in a tighter economy. He suggests that more than ever, marketers have to prove their value to clients by being able to demonstrate the return that their online and other marketing efforts can bring. ■

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