Interview
The Use of the Internet for ePoliticking—Interview with Keith King—CEO of Keith King and Associates Advertising

Interviewed by Celia Romm Livermore, Wayne State University, USA

Keith King is the President and CEO of Keith King & Associates and has 35+ years experience in advertising and public relations. He worked for the (then) parent Corporations of ABC, CBS and Sinclair Broadcasting television stations. Keith has recently completed the US Army Accessions Command (USAAC) Institutional Review Board Protocol for Human Research Behavioral and Social Sciences and is a certified Principal Investigator. Keith is a member of the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) and recently attended the NAGC 2009 Communications School in Orlando. He is also the President of the Veterans Support Foundation, National Chairman of the Public Affairs Committee of the Vietnam Veterans of America and is a highly regarded Veterans advocate. Keith is a past State Commander and was the Public Affairs Commissioner for the Michigan Vietnam Monument. Appointed by Governor John Engler, Keith served on the Michigan Veterans Trust Fund, a $50 million trust to assist Veterans in need.

IJEP: What do you consider the major challenges in promoting public figures through the Internet?

Keith King: Control of the message - once anyone posts something to the internet; it is subject to manipulation and spin. The skill level of the internet users has dramatically increased and the avenues to distribute the messages has increased too, so for someone who has the skill and an axe to grind, the revised message can become an uncontrollable phenomenon.

It is particularly important to understand the power of placing video messages on the internet and the ability of people to edit and re-post those videos with a completely new and in many cases unflattering message.

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**Keith King**: During the last Presidential campaign one of the candidates campaigned on family values and how he had a loving and supportive wife. But, it was the Internet that first reported the affair that he was having with a member of his campaign team. As the noise grew on the Internet, instead of reacting and taking down his web video, it was turned against him and the next thing he knew the person he was having an affair with was not only identified but she became an instant “celebrity” on the Internet in her own right. Once the mainstream media picked up on the story, this Presidential candidate’s campaign was over and his reputation was destroyed. This is a great example of how a problem started on the internet and, yet, because the candidate did not go “crisis control”, it escalated and eventually destroyed the candidate’s campaign.

On the other hand President Obama’s masterful use of the Internet won him “Marketer of the Year” by Advertising Age for 2008. Here are a few of the quotes from the people that voted to give his campaign the award:

“I think he did a great job of going from a relative unknown to a household name to being a candidate for president,” said Linda Clarizio, president of AOL’s Platform A. I honestly look at [Obama’s] campaign and I look at it as something that we can all learn from as marketers,” said Angus Macaulay, VP-Rodale marketing solutions “To see what he’s done, to be able to create a social network and do it in a way where it’s created the tools to let people get engaged very easily. It’s very easy for people to participate.”

**IJEP**: Can you share with the readers of IJEP what you consider to be your major successes in the e-Politics arena?

**Keith King**: In one of the campaigns that we worked on we had a relatively new person running for office. We first went to our personal friends via email and told them that we
supported this person, and we asked if they accepted our word for it. If so, we asked that they forward our message to their friends. This is the classic personal endorsement concept.

We built the campaign around opt-in emails. We followed the principle that it is important to get the permission of the people you send emails to, so you will be in a position to keep sending them emails. The permission question is something that can be both proactive and positive like "please click here to receive emails from us in the future" or it can be the more common "click here to be removed" prompt buried at the bottom of the page. When someone has agreed to receive emails from your campaign, that is known as an “opt-in” and they are like gold, highly valued and precious.

We also used various social media outlets like Facebook, personal blogs and media feeds. Facebook operates under the principal that your “friends” can send you messages. So once we post a message it is sent to all of our friends. Our friends then sign in to Facebook to read our message and based on what we hope to accomplish the message is read and acted upon or noted. We can announce volunteer training or whatever the need is at the time of the message and it’s a great way to let your friends know what is going on, on a daily basis. Blogs are mini-web sites that have various amount of readership and followers but some blogs are very influential and if they support your candidate, they can reach people that are not on your email list or your friends on Facebook because their readers may not be in any database or on any social media site.

As we built support we backtracked and started asking for donations to continue the campaign. Once our candidate won the primary, we were able to also tap into some of the losing candidates’ data bases and ask their supporters for funds and their votes in the general election. The end result was that our candidate not only won the election but was the most successful fund raiser.

**IJEP**: Can you be more specific about how this strategy helped some of your clients?

**Keith King**: Our business is involved in many industries including working for the Federal and State Government, Medical Centers, Non Profit Organizations, Auto Dealers and various retail businesses, as well as, the Public Relations Services and Political Campaigns we work on. Each industry has its unique value proposition for the Internet and each client has his or her own unique expectations what they expect us to do for them. E-commerce is not viable for all businesses but in its purest sense, as a way of generating or securing revenue, the Internet can be very helpful for political campaigns. What we have learned is that the Internet is still young and its rules are still being written. What we can apply to one industry does not work for another. What we would expect to be socially acceptable behavior does not necessary apply to the Internet. We have launched web based marketing programs that have outperformed our wildest expectations and we have seen its power to destroy.

**IJEP**: What features of the Internet made your successes possible?

**Keith King**: Social media sites and emails are the new gossip centers with muscle. Not only can we get out the message but we can accept your credit card or personal check donation at the same time. The sheer mass of the Internet makes it possible to reach more people faster than ever before. If your message “goes viral” you can reach millions of people within hours and it can keep on reaching millions more for days or weeks into the future and without costing you a dime.

One of the non-profit campaigns we created and launched was designed to get help for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and two
other health related issues. The target group was Military Veterans but the PTSD message hit a nerve with Civilians and Mental Health professions who took our banner ad and sent it around the internet. The key phrase in the message got picked up by radio and TV hosts and as the message gained in popularity we watched in amazement as the counts grew. Our campaign target was to generate 25,000,000 impressions over a six month period. The PTSD ad generated 10,000,000 impressions in the first 30 days. The ad overwhelmed our client’s system and had to be pulled until we could build the capacity to handle the traffic.

**IJEP:** What do you consider to be the disadvantages of the Internet for ePolitics?

**Keith King:** The Internet is one form of media and in that sense it is still impersonal. Most candidates need to be seen, shake hands, kiss babies, the personal touch still wins elections and the Internet cannot do that. Every politician has their key constituents and they are not always easy to find on the Internet and in many cases the key constituents simply do not use the internet in any form. So any politician that thinks that they can rely on the internet to win is falsely putting their campaign in jeopardy.

To give you an example of this, we had a potential client who wanted us to help his campaign for Mayor of Detroit. The conversation started after he already had his web site up and running and his campaign team was almost in place. All he needed was for us to help him win. We are not in the habit of turning down business but his web site and his video message were so horrible that in fairness to him we called him back and told him that no one could help him win. We suggested that he pull down the site and re-think his campaign strategy. We suggested that he should run for City Council instead, given that the top 18 winners in the primary would go on to the general election. After months of back and forth conversations with him, he informed us that his Internet campaign was so strong and that he was getting so much traffic that he was convinced that he would win one of the two positions for Mayor in the primary. Sadly, this misguided candidate got less than 1% of the votes and was never mentioned in the media as anything other than a footnote to the election.

**IJEP:** What can be done to overcome the Internet’s disadvantages?

**Keith King:** The internet is a tool and as with most tools it must be used in connection with other tools. We call this approach “integrated” and we recommend that campaigns include TV, Radio, newspaper and every other form of media that the campaign can afford to get its message out. The other key is vigilance, someone or a group must be assigned to monitor the Internet and they must be able to respond quickly to attacks or unauthorized revisions of the campaign’s message.

One example that comes to mind in this context is the story of a politician who consulted with us about an Internet attack on him. When he contacted us, the story was already thirty days old. Our client is not internet savvy and he did not expect his “little” issue to take on worldwide implications and coverage, but it did. So, once we were contacted, we went into crisis control mode. We conducted an extensive research of Social Media metrics including a buzz volume report and a complete broadcast and print media monitoring report for the client from news sites, blogs, social media and other websites. Doing this after the fact is very difficult and is not a recommended practice. The lesson learned here is what we have been saying all along, don’t wait, don’t hesitate, bring in the professionals from the beginning and make sure that they have all of the tracking procedures in place from the get go.
IJEP: Can you be a bit more specific about instances in your career where the Internet “back-fired” or actually hurt your clients?

Keith King: One of our elected officials was being viscously attacked on the internet over a decision that he made that was not only being distorted but it was being manipulated for another group’s personal agenda. We were able to acquire detailed reports on the internet traffic and distribution of the story worldwide. What we were able to determine is the “Buzz Volume” of the story. For example, we were able to determine not just how many media sites, blogs, etc. had picked up on the story, but more importantly, what the content of the story was. We found that headlines changed and the body content changed depending on the point of view of the media outlet or the blog writers. The wide difference in simple, factual headlines and reporting to sensationalized headlines with inflammatory copy points surprised us and our client.

IJEP: Can you be a little more specific about the story and how it got distorted by the different media outlets over time?

Keith King: We cannot violate our client’s confidentiality by reciting the exact details of this event but the following example is a fair and accurate rendition of what happened and how the various writers twisted the story over time. Let’s say that our client told a person that he expected him to take off his shoes before entering his home. The person responded that to be bare foot was no big deal and he removed his shoes. After the fact, the person claimed that being bare foot was against his moral principles and that doing it was disrespectful to his belief system. This person proceeded to contact the “Bare foot is Bad” organization that immediately took up the story and issued a press release that attacked our client as being “anti-shoe”. Furthermore, a representative of the organization went on to claim that our client threatened their person with some kind of punishment if that person did not take off his shoes. The story headlines went from “Man tells Person to Take Off Shoes” to “Anti-Shoe Man Orders Shoes Off in my Place” to “Man Threatens to Harm Visitor Unless the Person Undresses” and the “Bare Foot is Bad” group issued the following headline “Man Terrorizes Person to Force Him to Go Bare Foot”.

By being able to see the big picture of the story, we were able to produce a report for the client that showed that the extreme reporting was also the less read and that for the most part the reporting was fair and accurate. It also allowed us to be prepared to release our rebuttal if needed. The damage was done but we were able to evaluate it and be prepared to jump back into the fray if need be.

IJEP: What would be your most important advice to people who are in the public eye on how to avoid the pitfalls that e-politics may entail?

Keith King: First and foremost I would advise all public figures to hire someone full time to run the Internet portion of the campaign. I would also advise them to empower this person to reach the candidate directly. Remember the speed of the Internet, if the person involved with your Internet campaign is some intern who has to go through several layers of management to address a problem, your entire campaign can be side tracked before you even respond. This is a case of keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

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