Chapter II

The Role of Blogs on a Successful Political Branding Strategy

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The Internet is taking on an increasingly major role in political marketing and branding strategies. This is because of the use that the public itself is making of the Internet when taking part in the decisions made by their representatives and in the events of the environment they live in. These digital citizens have found in the Internet, particularly blogs, a new way of forming relationships with politicians, by communicating with them directly, coordinating their activities with other citizens with similar political ideals or even financing electoral campaigns. This article describes the use that some political leaders have made of blogs. Therefore, we analyze the two cases that represented the beginning of the use of the Internet as a major electoral tool: Howard Dean and Wesley Clark in the Democrat primaries in the USA in the 2003-04 campaign. Thanks to the analysis of these two cases and the theories developed around the concept of social capital and virtual communities, this paper presents the main characteristics of this type of digital citizen and the possible political marketing strategies developed around them. The analysis of these cases provides various implications for better management of these political marketing tools, whose potential is yet to be discovered.
INTRODUCTION

Although the use of the Internet by public organizations is a recent phenomenon, in some countries like the USA or Singapore the Internet has become a primary way of keeping fruitful relationships with citizens. Likewise, political parties are beginning to prioritize the development of communication actions via the Internet in their political campaigns. These actions not only include promotional activities but in some cases they go beyond political messages and aim to achieve the electors' participatory attitude in the campaign and the design of the election program. This is especially remarkable in countries like the USA. As we will see throughout this work, the use of the Internet in the USA as a political marketing tool has reached relevant levels over the last few years. It has become a means to collect millions of dollars to defray campaign costs and mobilize thousands of people in support of their candidate.

The use of the Internet in electoral strategies is usually associated with virtual communities and especially the so-called blogs. According to Wikipedia.org, a blog, “is a Web application which contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common webpage...The format of blogs varies, from simple bullet lists of hyperlinks, to article summaries with user-provided comments and ratings.” The data contained in a blog did not used to be compiled and offered on the Net by an individual or an organization, but by a group of individuals acting in an altruistic but coordinated way to serve the community.

The phenomenon of blogs clearly reflects some of the changes produced by the Internet in the transmission of information. Any person may reliably express their opinion on the Internet, reaching thousands of people interested in similar issues and avoiding high costs. Moreover, blog’s messages may be commented by its readers so that the errors made by the person who first published the information can be depurated. Furthermore, the quality of a news item may be assessed according to the number of readings and comments on it.

Very different issues are dealt with in blogs and at present there are between two and five million of this type of Web sites on the Internet, some of which are managed by opinion leaders, such as scientists, artists or politicians (e.g., http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangillmor/, administered by a well-known journalist specialized in the technology). Nevertheless, blogs are not only an alternative to the traditional media, such as the radio or the press. Through these Web sites, thousands of people coordinate their efforts and gather their knowledge in the interest of the community. Consequently, blogs are being used by several groups to manage their resources and coordinate their activities both in and out of the Internet. Among those groups which use blogs to improve the efficiency of their actions we can find the case of the campaign of Democratic Party presidential candidates in the USA. This is a paradigmatic example of the power of blogs, hence the remarkable interest for marketing researchers.

Considering the interest of blogs for marketing experts, the present work analyses several aspects related to the way virtual communities and blogs may affect the group’s social capital and therefore the individual’s democratic and civic behavior. Subsequently, we will analyze how virtual communities, as blogs, were used by Democratic candidates Howard Dean and Wesley Clark in the 2003-2004 USA presidential elections. This analysis and the literature review will allow us to delimitate digital citizen characteristics and the way he influence on his environment, to provide some recommendations for the management of electoral campaigns with the use of blogs, as well as defining the main benefits these communities may generate in the field of electoral strategies.