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SOCIAL MEDIA IN CAMPAIGNS

By

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Four years ago, Barack Obama ran the most advanced and most successful social media campaign in the history of American elections. Yet today, the innovative tactics that the President's campaign deployed in 2012 would seem quaint: the pace of change in social media (and in the broader digital era we live in) is faster than ever before, with voters shifting their time and focus away from traditional media outlets like television and newspapers, towards digital devices: mostly smartphones.

This shift is the reason why American political candidates in 2016 are focusing so much of their efforts to win votes on digital, social channels like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and even newcomers like Snapchat. But while many candidates recognize the first important aspect of this shift (that social media usage is ubiquitous across America), not as many have grasped how campaigning through social media is fundamentally different from traditional methods like TV and print advertising.

Let's look at this situation from the viewpoint of a potential voter. The vast majority of social media activity takes place on mobile phones: small but bright screens; limited in size but incredibly personal; also, they go everywhere with you: most people with a smartphone are never more than 3 feet away from their phone, all day, everyday. So, how does this change campaigning? First and foremost, it means the content must become more personal and authentic: voters are engaging with Facebook posts and Tweets in the same social feeds where they share photos and stories with friends and family. So the expectation is to provide a less polished, but more genuine lens into the life and viewpoints of a political leader—and a more visual one as well: social media is dominated by visual content like photos and videos. Consider

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the fact that newer social platforms like Instagram and Snapchat can only be utilized with visual content from mobile devices; there is no desktop. The candidates that are most successful demonstrate authenticity their social media posts and dialogue with voters.

That word “dialogue” is also crucial to candidates’ success. Traditional media was a one-way street: a politician made a speech or put up an advertisement on TV, and the voters watched. There was no immediate feedback loop, no response, no chance for comment or conversation. But voters today (especially young voters) can and do immediately share their personal opinions on election issues, often responding directly to candidates’ posts! Smart candidates don’t just post on social media sites; they also listen and respond directly to voters’ comments. This is especially important among younger voters, who expect more direct engagement from political candidates. While social media channels like Facebook are popular among all Americans, older voters are still heavy consumers of traditional media outlets like television. In contrast, many young voters simply ignore old mediums and spend time almost exclusively engaged in digital media channels. To engage young voters, candidates must not only shift the medium, but shift their philosophy and approach to campaigning: they must become more authentic, more visual, and more ready for real-time discussions with the voters of tomorrow.

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