



Political campaigns through social media in elections

Renuka Choudhary

Lecturer, Govt. Girls Senior Secondary School Gurgaon Village, Haryana, India

Abstract

Companies are using the social media for the marketing of their product almost from last decade but the use of the internet for political campaigns is a recent development. Aim of this paper is to create a cohesive strategy for a hypothetical election candidate in a big Indian urban centre with a significant youth population. This article highlights the do's and do not's when it comes to reaching out to voters using social media.

Keywords: India, facebook, twitter, social media

Introduction

The internet today is seen as a vital source of information, and people across the world are waking up to the power of social media in building relationships with their end consumers. Social media can be defined as those platforms which provide their users with personal publication tools i.e. they enable users to generate and share content. Though the applications of social media in the business sphere are huge and well tapped, the use of the internet in political campaigns is a fairly recent development.

Under this paper we focused on the social media impact along with this theory, we also draw on case studies of successful social media campaigns in the spheres of elections and public interest, including Barack Obama's 2012 campaign and India against Corruption's large scale movement for anti-corruption legislation.

Aristotle's Treatise on Rhetoric

An effective campaign coaxes the target individual from his initial state of opposition or indifference to that of support or interest. Hence, fundamentally, political campaigning is an exercise in persuasion. The Greek philosopher Aristotle's in his 'Treatise on Rhetoric' classifies the modes of persuasion into three - Ethos, Pathos and Logos. A study conducted, focusing on the 2012 U.S. presidential candidates' Facebook pages, by Bronstein in 2013 suggested that there was a statistically significant difference in number of comments and likes on posts which used any one of the 3 themes versus a post which did not use any of them¹.

We use this theory to demonstrate how it can be applied to a candidate's social media campaign.

Ethos

It is an ethical appeal meant to convince the audience of the credibility of the individual. Hence the content shared by the candidate must display his achievements, his credentials, his life-story and his plans post-election. This type of content is usually written in first person. The candidate can define himself as an accomplished social worker/thinker/

academician/politician/businessman etc. and can present plans on how he would address the citizens' concerns, if elected. He may try to define his character by talking about issues that are important to him.

"I've taught leaders of men. I've mentored CEOs of industries. I've consulted on issues of national importance. I, more than anybody, understand what it means to lead."

Pathos

It is an emotive and motivational appeal to the audience's emotions. The candidate must understand the audience's sense of identity, their values and their interests. It is possibly the element that a candidate has to concentrate on the most, considering the impact of emotional attachment in getting users to share or tweet content. The content may, for example, either depict a positive future with the candidate as leader, or may try to create a bond with the audience by asking support to achieve a common goal.

"The success and greatness of this city is solely due to the efforts of its hardworking people. It is time to return the city to them."

Logos

It is a logical appeal meant to convince the audience using reason, facts, and figures. Logos can also enhance ethos by making the individual appear knowledgeable. Logos may be used to objectively criticize a rival or to talk about the candidate's previous successes.

"Due to X's efforts national banks have reduced interest on agriculture loans 3 times in the last 2 years. This is estimated to have saved 7.8 crores for farmers in the state of Maharashtra."

Social Media Strategy

Alongside Aristotle's theory, we also refer to examples of

successful social media campaigns and use the key takeaways to construct our strategy. Facebook and Twitter are the mainstays of the social universe, and have gained significant importance in the recent years. Facebook is the world’s largest online community with over a billion active users including 60 million plus in India. Similarly, Twitter has over 500 million active users and is invaluable as a tool to share instant updates. We focus on these two platforms with the objective of creating a cohesive social media campaign for a hypothetical election candidate in a big Indian urban center with a significant youth population.

Increasing the Number of Followers

The main advantage of social networks, for an election campaign, lies in its multiplier effect. A group of supporters who have connected with the campaign are exposed to content generated by the campaign. The content is expected to be engaging enough that supporters are convinced to share it with their friends. Hence to take advantage of this multiplier effect it is imperative that the candidate’s page or account is liked or followed by a critical mass of supporters. To achieve this, the campaign should attract people who are already supporters and do not need much convincing. An easy way is to get introduced by the page of the candidate’s political party. The candidate’s network of contacts could also be leveraged to break through on the social media stage. An introduction by a well followed personality gives immediate exposure to the candidate’s page.

The content created by the campaign must be informative, funny or interesting i.e. content that a follower would want to share with his friends and family. Content shared by family and friends have a greater degree of credibility when compared to content directly shared or promoted by the candidates account. Content such as images, videos and links have a higher click-rate when shared by people who the user trusts. A study conducted by Edelman in 2009 found that only 21% of people would consider information from a politician as credible whereas 60% would trust information if it was conveyed through friends or family.

Converting Likes to Votes

The biggest difficulty facing social media election campaigns is converting armchair supporters into votes. This is an issue particularly in India where eligible voters are either not registered or are apathetic towards voting. The candidate must also encourage and make it easier for his supporters to register for votes. The huge amount of goodwill created by the Tata Tea Jaago Re! campaign which encouraged youth to register and vote is a case in point.

On Facebook, a candidate may send his supporters personally addressed private messages (easily automatable) containing links and requesting them to register themselves for voting for to vote for the good of the country. This helps portray the candidate as passionate about the democratic process and can be a part of the ethos appeal Barack Obama’s presidential campaigns recognized that the biggest hurdle for youth voting is registration and hence actively appealed to his supporters to do so. His campaign uploaded videos where he asked voters to commit to voting and directed them to a link on his website where users could both register to vote and commit to vote for him. This commitment was obviously a non-binding

agreement but it promoted a sense of responsibility among his supporters and helped combat Election Day apathy.

Identifying Issues & Trends

The usual lament of young voters is that they do not identify with politicians who belong to the older generations. Issues which the urban youth are passionate about are not those being talked about by the current day political leaders. In addition to this, very often during the course of the election, the talking points of the electorate change according to current happenings. It is important to recognize these topics and the people’s sentiment regarding them.

It is easier to take this feedback continuously using technology. Each post must be tracked to figure out what worked and did not work in terms of generating engagement. Sentiment analysis on comments could be used to find out what is finding favour among the young voters. However technology such as this is expensive. For a relatively frugal campaign there are other low cost approaches like using Google analytics and trends or simply Facebook hashtag(#) searches which would give a quick insight into the important issues going viral on social media and the internet.

It is important to develop an emotional connect with users. This helps to push followers to share content from your page and drives visibility, bringing more hits onto the candidate’s page. The India Against Corruption movement did this successfully, by tapping an issue that the public felt deeply about, and by using social media to give a voice to the middle class, who traditionally felt left out of the political process. The emotional angle was perpetuated by drawing parallels with the Arab Spring movement.

Narendra Modi is an Indian politician who has hit the nail on the head when it comes to social media. Narendra Modi is at the top of a list of India’s most mentioned on social media (see Exhibit 1). Both his Facebook and Twitter accounts have upwards of 2 million followers. He keeps users engaged by sharing updates about his activities, and makes sure that the content is relevant, with development being the main theme. He is also a pioneer when it comes to face to face engagement, and conducted a widely popular Google Hangout.

Table 1

	Apr-13	May-13
Narendra Modi	507,163	421,321
Manmohan Singh	58,442	100,341
Sonia Gandhi	45,920	70,881
Rahul Gandhi	118,325	58,642
LK Advani	20,706	21,827
Arvind Kejriwal	35,800	19,694

Table 2

	Total mentions	Total reach on Twitter
Narendra Modi	421,321	86,441,128
Manmohan Singh	100,341	32,835,568
Sonia Gandhi	70,881	26,642,208
Rahul Gandhi	58,642	24,466,067
LK Advani	21,827	16,666,940
Arvind Kejriwal	19,694	8,774,806

Exhibit 1 Buzz Summary of Indian politicians, Apr 2013 vs May 2013, adapted from www.blogworks.in

Controlling the Campaign

It is very difficult to control a political campaign on social media. Social networks are platforms where users contribute their own content by commenting and conversing, which sometimes are in conflict with the campaign's message. This can be combated by ensuring that posts are short and concise and that they link to the candidate's website for more information. It is important to realise that on social media platforms, an innocent post or picture can turn into a public relations disaster. On the other hand, not talking about issues that matter creates a disconnect with the voters and this is a fine line which must be treaded carefully. In the 2012 US Presidential elections Obama's posts dealt with only nine, mostly related to economic issues. There was no mention of controversial issues like abortion or the Afghanistan war.

Handling Negative Publicity

Negative publicity is inevitable in a high profile field such as politics. The same platform which gives a lot of eyeballs can also cause counterproductive effects when an untoward incident occurs or is bought to the fore by the press. A prominent example of negative publicity is the Mitt Romney video in which he said that his job is not to worry about 47% of Americans who will definitely not vote for him. This video went viral days before voting was to take place and many regard this as the turning point in the 2012 presidential election. The political campaign cannot control what people say on social media, it can still use the same platform to set things right. It is also important to realise that the candidate will be subjected to personal attacks (also called trolling), but the only obvious way to deal with trolls is not to engage with them.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the use of social media in the Indian political scenario throws up interesting strategies to engage internet users and connect with potential voters. The most significant themes that crop up are *emotional connect* and *continuous engagement*. The social media space is a treacherous one to navigate, and political parties would do well to learn their lessons quickly, as brands can be made or broken within hours. Adding to this melee is the freedom which the internet provides, allowing every user with an account to air his opinions, whether based on fact or fiction.

How these "trolls" are handled should form part of any social media strategy as well.

Though this report is aimed at being a 'Do It Yourself' social media strategy, one must realise that the internet is one of the most dynamic platforms on the planet, and what works today might not work tomorrow. Strategists must be mindful of this fact before they take any strategy as dogma, because the only strategy that has been proven to work is constantly adapting to the changing environment.

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