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Text-to-vote takes to campaign trail

March 31 2008 - 8:49 pm ET | Colin Gibbs |

Just like their counterparts looking to use mobile to sell concert tickets and pickup trucks, politicians and their brain trusts are trying to figure out how to reach Americans through their phones.

John Edwards two years ago became one of the first high-profile candidates to lever- age mobile, encouraging supporters to sign up to receive a welcome message via text as well as notes from the road. Former Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania was also – and improbably – an early adopter, teaming with pundit Mary Matalin to distribute text thank-you notes to the Republican's followers. Hillary Clinton and Ron Paul followed suit, launching Twitter feeds to stay in contact with backers while on the campaign trail.

Perhaps no candidate has done as much to exploit mobile as Barack Obama, though. The Democratic presidential candidate employs Twitter updates and text campaigns, and has a Web page dedicated to wireless where users can opt to receive SMS policy updates or choose from a dozen ringtones. The efforts are powered by Distributive Networks, a Washington-based startup that also delivers more traditional mobile marketing campaigns for NASCAR and other clients.

The Obama campaign began toying with wireless as a novelty, “but as they used it they realized that it has a couple of great applications,” Distributive Networks CEO Kevin Bertram said during a panel at Monday’s Marketing – The Mobile Channel, a warm- up for this week’s show. “It’s a great way to take your other media types ... and give them that additional call to action. Which, I think, is what makes mobile so cool.”

Political campaigns have only just begun to experiment with mobile – John McCain’s campaign has virtually no wireless strategy – but it appears such efforts may be effective. A 2006 study from the University of Michigan and Princeton University found that text-message reminders to young voters boosted turnout by more than 4% at a fraction of more traditional get-out-the-vote efforts such as phone calls or door-to-door canvassing. Concise reminders were particularly successful, increasing turnout by nearly 5%.

Fish phone

And mobile marketing tactics are expanding beyond candidates and voter turnout into social causes. Mobile Commons, a New York City-based outfit, last year teamed with the Blue Ocean Institute on

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a mobile application that encouraged **SPONSORED CONTENT** the type of fish they were considering eating to a short code. Fish Phone, as the offering was dubbed, returned health information and the environmental impact of eating the seafood.

“When they launched that application we didn’t think much of it,”said Jed Alpert, Mobile Commons’ CEO. “But there’s thousands of people a day, on some days, who are using it. It spread like wildfire.”

Indeed, Fish Phone seems a natural fit for wireless: not only is it targeted at on-the-go diners, it requires little effort from the consumer and delivers enough information to be useful without overwhelming the user — or the phone. So while text alerts may be good for quick updates, they're ill-suited for delivering all but the briefest policy statements.

If you think it's challenging trying to respond to a sound bite in a debate, try to do it in 160 characters,”quipped Single- Point Vice President Doug Busk.

So instead of using the phone to convey a boatload of information, candidates and campaigns should keep messages simple and include a call to action, speakers said. A click-to-call initiative from John Edwards’ camp, for instance, asked supporters to phone in to hear a clip of conservative pundit Ann Coulter blasting the candidate, then a response from Edwards’ wife, Elizabeth. The effort drew a “very,very high”response, Alpert said,and generated higher donations per respondent than other campaigns.

That kind of strategy not only can fill coffers, according to Alpert, it can create stickiness between a candidate and voters.

“The (key) of a mobile marketing campaign ... is a call to action,”Alpert said.“It’s a much more meaningful kind of interaction than just being bombarded with messages”on a phone.

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