



Sorting through the noise of Election '06

By Kim Patrick Kobza

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The polls have closed; the silver handles are at rest. Change seems apparent in America's future, but has the people's voice truly been heard?

During the weeks and months leading up to [Election Tuesday](#), incumbents and would-be politicians across the country spoke to and listened to thousands of citizens. But unlike the campaign trails of yesteryear, today myriad new tools were at their disposal. These improved methods of communication have been ushered in by the advent of innovative Web 2.0 technologies. Town hall meetings have been replaced by boundary-spanning, interactive online forums, while geographically limited door-to-door lobbying has given way to bi-directional, Web-based engagement sessions.

It is not surprising to see how traditional media has latched onto this trend. ABC recently called upon an innovative engagement technology to give viewers the opportunity to participate in political discussion by submitting video--via mobile phones, if they so chose--directly to ABC News. ABC was then able to collect, sort and create a user-submitted video to pose questions to President Bush during a recent interview with George Stephanopoulos.

So if these innovations transcend geographical and socioeconomic boundaries, allow for instant engagement and bi-directional communication in a secure, structured Web-based environment, doesn't it beg the question: Why are these new interactive technologies not ubiquitous across the political landscape?

Lack of structure, accountability and [security issues associated with most forms of social networks](#)--the MySpaces of the world--are a big part of the problem. Technologies that are designed for entertainment and social networking do not necessarily support constructive dialogue and informed decision-making. While blogs, e-mail and social network sites may have an influence on citizen expectations, they do not provide the structure necessary to meet public comment standards.

So politicians and elected officials are confronted with a Hobson's choice of a citizenry that expects them to listen, but with a set of technology tools that do not follow the basic communications principles upon which most politicians are elected. So what is the answer?

The answer lies in a combination of "something old, something new." In other words, politicians will have tools that reflect time-honored standards of public comment--standards designed to support constructive public dialogue. Yet, at the

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same time, new technologies will enable politicians to collect and manage multiple forms of public feedback, across any type of device, and to then organize that feedback in a way that makes it useful and reportable.

standards.

The technology that makes this possible represents the next wave in data organization and information delivery. It is an Internet native software-as-a-service solution analogous to CRM (customer relationship management) systems. The system is specifically designed for the needs of managing structured public involvement. It provides a complete [ECM \(enterprise content management\)](#) system that incorporates state-of-the-art management of user-generated content. System capabilities are comparable to or exceed those of large-scale tech-development projects in major corporations and government that almost no campaign can afford.

Most important, because the system is delivered in a software-as-a-service model, it can be quickly enabled to meet all campaign needs. And it is easy to use, as many campaign staffs are small and nontechnical. Small teams can manage large campaigns in real time. These systems are also very affordable, with an entry cost of \$27,990 per year inclusive of hosting and support services. So many campaigns are able to redirect budgets for traditional campaign items and gain efficiency and citizen responsiveness at the same time.

Public communications systems will also enable political campaigns to manage all of the work product of their campaigns--such as press releases, voter lists, and other forms of documents and collaboration--all while considering organized feedback both from a geographically dispersed campaign staff and the public. The next-generation technologies will enable campaigns to "turn on a dime" with hypersensitive listening to those in touch with campaign issues.

Interactive technology that provides traditional rules of structure is the future. It will allow politicians to better understand their constituents--on something more than polling or a collection of blog posts. It will invite reasoning. After all, public dialogue helps to build relationships and expectations over time, rather than at a point in time. And most important, it will enable politicians to establish long-term relationships with citizens based on clear, accurate and structured communication. Indeed, this is the future of constituent social media.

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