

Obama Campaign Provides Lessons *for* Nonprofits

by Paul Schmitz

NOW MORE THAN EVER, NONPROFIT organizations need to get ahead of the curve. We have entered a difficult period, when the need for nonprofit services will increase, and resources to pay for these services—public and private—will be constrained. The severity of the current financial crisis—compounded by two wars, a crumbling infrastructure, escalating health-care costs, an emerging entitlement wave, and massive government debt—make most forecasts range from merely pessimistic to gut-wrenching. Our special role in bringing citizens together to serve, deliberate, advocate, and promote public goods will be more important than ever, but at the same time our capacity to fulfill our missions will be greatly challenged.

In such challenging times, nonprofits need to identify the most cutting-edge organizational tools, technologies, and behaviors that engage constituents and achieve results. To that end, I would draw our attention to the campaign organization built by president-elect Barack Obama. Over the past 21 months, this once-improbable campaign generated a potent combination of branding, strategy, management, online and community organizing, and youth lead-

ership that produced unprecedented citizen participation and impressive victories. In many ways, the campaign has exemplified the qualities promoted in recent years by management articles and books and symbolized the kind of organization whose culture of innovation, inclusion, and performance inspires and attracts workers, volunteers, donors, and champions.

The following are five of the best practices embodied by the Obama campaign that may be useful for nonprofit organizations in the current environment.

1. A powerful brand. The Obama campaign's brand of hope and change resonated with the American people's aspirations and, as good brands do, created a platform for related policies and messages. Central to success was that the brand was authentic and reflected not only in speeches and policies but also in the actions of the campaign on the ground. Senator Obama defined change as

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coming from the bottom up, and his campaign staff delivered by putting into motion its core values of respect, empowerment, and inclusion. As never before, citizens were invited to propose policy ideas, host house parties, organize their communities, and much more. The distinct O logo and sunrise motif illustrated the brand clearly and was emblazoned on shirts, hats, yard signs, and even boutique clothing that became the biggest fashion fad of 2008.

2. A clear, measurable strategy. The campaign's chief architects, David Plouffe and David Axelrod, focused relentlessly on the numbers 2,025 and 270: the number of delegates needed to win the Democratic nomination and the number

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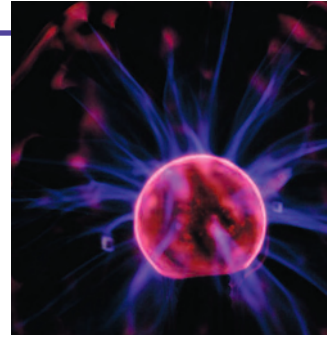
of electoral votes needed to become president, respectively. On January 29, 2008, Plouffe wrote a memo that outlined the roadmap for Obama to win 2,025 delegates and predicted the results in 46 states—he was correct in 45 of those states. In June, Plouffe presented a plan to compete in 18 swing states rather than the traditional four or five, creating multiple paths for 270 electoral votes. He was proved right again. When Obama was 20 points behind in the polls in October 2007, losing ground in March 2008, and failing to break through with undecided voters in September 2008, the campaign never wavered in its core strategy, despite criticism from pundits and major donors. The contrast between the campaign's focused strategy and the shifting strategies, tactics, and messages of its opponents has been striking.

3. Disciplined management. The campaign reminded us that in challenging times, the fundamentals are still the fundamentals. Senator Obama built a campaign right from the pages of

such private-sector classics as *Built to Last* and *Good to Great*. The campaign set out with a big, hairy, audacious goal; got the right people on the bus (leaders who were personally humble yet professionally willful); set a clear, measurable direction (based on what it was best at, most passionate about, and how it could achieve either 2,025 or 270); confronted brutal facts while keeping faith in its ultimate strategy; maintained a culture of discipline; and used technology to accelerate results. The campaign's flywheels started slowly, kept pushing in the same direction, and eventually gained enough momentum and flew to victory.

Senator Obama built a top-notch, diverse leadership team, instructing it to run like a business with "no drama." In contrast with other campaigns, one never read press accounts of infighting, leaks, or high-level defections. Presidential campaigns are chaotic organizations, scaling rapidly to hundreds of offices and thousands of employees managing tens of thousands of volunteers across the country. Throughout its growth, the campaign continued to manage clear goals and expectations for its people: voters registered, leaders identified, volunteers engaged, and dollars raised. With one week left, Plouffe sent an email to all supporters that there were still 845,252 volunteer shifts to fill in swing states, and the campaign filled them. Goals were measured and managed.

4. Face-to-face and online organizing. The campaign rejected the false choice between virtual and interpersonal contact and excelled at both. The campaign built an attractive, intuitive, easy-to-navigate Web site that enabled users to create their own profiles; connect with one another; and share ideas, inspirations, and events. The campaign's Web presence was consistent throughout networking outlets such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, BlackPlanet.com, AsianAve.com, Flickr, and LinkedIn. This distributed approach allowed the Obama campaign to connect with supporters where they were and use multiple tools of engagement. Constant communication arrived from the



campaign via e-mail messages, video messages, webcasts, text messages, and phone calls. As the campaign progressed, additional tools engaged prospective voters on their most important tasks, allowing supporters, for example, to enter a database of undecided voters and call them from home.

But this was a twin-engine approach, and the campaign was as sophisticated on the ground as it was online. Community organizers were asked not only to mobilize people but also to build relationships and to build and empower leaders, thereby multiplying the staff's impact as volunteer leaders recruited and managed volunteers. These community-organizing techniques were as viral as the campaign's online organizing techniques and, again, met people where they were. In various communities, multiple offices were set up to function like intergenerational community centers, where people worked together and became friends. Community and online organizing were woven together seamlessly to engage citizens of all ages and backgrounds to contribute in diverse ways.

5. Youth leadership. By virtue of their low pay, long hours, and high-intensity nature, campaigns are always filled with young people. But the Obama campaign recognized and empowered young leadership. Some of the campaign's greatest innovators are quite young: the field operation was led by 32-year-old Jon Carson, its online strategy crafted by the 24-year-old Chris Hughes, and most of Obama's speeches were written by the 26-year-old Jon Favreau. The campaign's all-hands-on-deck approach meant that top fundraisers and policy advisers—whether they were Goldman Sachs partners, Hollywood stars, or law professors—were expected to canvass door to door and be managed by 22-year-olds. They did so, reporting for duty enthusiastically and building respectful and supportive relationships with these young field organizers rather than questioning them or taking over.

Because the campaign spoke directly to young people's aspirations more than their self-interest,

the message resonated with this young demographic. Young people seek leaders and organizations with authentic and inspiring brands, clear goals and expectations, opportunities to make a tangible difference, and inclusive, innovative cultures. They want to be challenged, to work in diverse teams, and to make online and interpersonal connections. By inspiring and empowering young leaders, the campaign inspired older leaders as well. Caroline Kennedy and Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri, for example, endorsed Senator Obama as a result of their children's involvement.

This inspiring, strategic, well-managed, inclusive, and engaging campaign produced unprecedented citizen participation: record fundraising totals, record numbers of volunteers, and record turnout numbers. By studying and applying these

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best practices (and more will come as the media dissects the campaign), we can better inspire and engage constituents, execute our strategies, and increase our financial support. As Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, once said, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. . . . As our case is new, we must think anew and act anew." These challenging times call for new ideas and action. I believe that nonprofits should be audacious and hopeful in working with citizens and government to solve our biggest problems. But the Obama campaign has also demonstrated that if we are to succeed, the audacity of hope must be grounded in innovative and effective practice.

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