

Politics

@grassroots

The 2004 election will go down as the year when political campaigns and the Internet discovered true love.

BY CYNTHIA E. ROCKWELL

When Howard Dean's campaign flamed out, John Kerry's deputy fundraising director called Jonah Sachs '97. "Now are you ready to work with us?" she asked.

Sachs and his 13-person firm, Free Range Graphics, had helped establish the potency of the Internet in political campaigning while producing Internet ads for the Dean campaign. Having declined a previous offer from the Kerry campaign, Sachs was eager to enlist with the presumptive Democratic nominee.

His first ad, called "King George," was an animated Flash project that invited recipients to contribute to the Kerry campaign. It netted \$13 for every \$1 in cost—a highly impressive ratio by campaign standards.

The Kerry Campaign paid for placement of "King George" on newspaper Web sites. With its cartoon caricatures and irreverent attitude, the concept never would have been acceptable in a serious newspaper, yet it was a natural for the more maverick Web, complete with moving images. At other times, Sachs's ads are not placed, but "go viral." These are circulated first to a list of known supporters, with hopes that they, in turn, will send the message to friends in an ever-widening circle. The theory is that people will watch a clever and

appealing ad that is sent from a friend rather than from nameless and possibly suspect sources.

"One of the goals of 'King George'—and one of our roles at Free Range Graphics," says Sachs, "is to convince people that giving money to a campaign is a fun thing to do and a valid way to make a difference."

Americans online are discovering that the Internet and politics are a potent mix. A study of "Online Political Citizens," conducted by George Washington University's Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, concluded that these citizens are far from being isolated cyber-geeks. Instead, they are "influentials," people who have a disproportionate impact on the opinions of friends and neighbors. They are twice as likely as the general public to have a college degree, have higher incomes, and they are slightly younger. Significantly, they are much more likely to donate money to candidates. Nearly 90 percent receive political e-mail.

The Internet has become a "huge vehicle" for campaign fundraising, says Wesleyan Professor of Government Marc Eisner. On June 30, the Kerry campaign was inundated with \$3 million in contributions that crashed the Web site with heavy traffic. By early

July, Kerry had raised \$56 million through the Internet, nearly a third of his money, according to the *Campaigns and Elections* newsletter. Contributions of \$250 or less made up \$100 million of his campaign.

Richard Boyd, also a professor of government at Wesleyan, observes that the Internet has brought about an "interesting change" in America's two-party politics during this presidential election year. "Internet-based campaign fundraising has had the effect of neutralizing the McCain-Feingold campaign financing law," he says. "While everybody expected the Democrats to function with far fewer dollars than the Republicans, the money that has poured in from the Internet has offset the great advantage that people predicted Bush would have."

Campaigns are using the Internet for much more than fundraising. Reuters reported that a half hour before Kerry called Edwards to offer him the vice-presidential slot, one million Kerry supporters had already received an e-mail extolling the North Carolina Senator. By the time Kerry announced the news in Pittsburgh 45 minutes later, Democratic and Republican Web sites were ready with dueling videos, fact sheets, and statements.

BILL BURKHART



Critical listener: Jonah Sachs '97 assesses his nonprofit clients' needs before developing a communications strategy, often Web-based design.

“People used to talk about the 24-hour news cycle when we relied on newspapers,” says Eisner, “but first with 24-hour televised news, and now with the Internet, the cycle has accelerated.”

In January of this year, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press declared the Internet has gone from being a minor source of news in the 2000 election to the equal of many traditional outlets, such as weekly news magazines, in 2004.

Internet politics is an area ripe for young entrepreneurs seeking to make a name for themselves.

Free Range Graphics is one of four firms developing Internet ads for the Kerry campaign, and a visit to Sachs’s office reveals a casualness that seems to meld with the Internet’s unruly ways. Located above a Christian Science Reading Room in the funky Adams Morgan section of Washington, D.C., the outer door is burnished with the Free Range Graphics chicken logo. Inside, a comfortably sagging couch faces a triangle of workstations set against walls of dull neon green. Sachs shares his workspace—which is also the reception area—with the project manager, office manager, and Sachs’s dog, Zorro. When a visitor arrives (through the door next to the one labeled “W.C.”), the staff member nearest Zorro jumps up to preempt the canine greeting.

Sachs began Free Range Graphics six years ago with only one computer and a high school friend, Louis Fox, who slept on a couch in Sachs’s apartment after moving from New York. Although their work is not entirely Web-based, it is an area in which the communications and design firm has made a name for itself. Along with an initial decision to use the chicken logo (“If you get it, you get it—and you’ll like us”) they also decided to focus on progressive nonprofits such as MoveOn.org, Planned Parenthood, and Amnesty International.

Sachs asks, “How do we make compelling messages to support the kind of stuff we believe in and to help build a better community?” He began grappling with this question as editor of the *Argus*, when he sensed that he needed to develop design skills in order to convey the credibility of information presented. Confessing his lack of an art background, he wangled his way into Professor of Art David Schorr’s course in typography. “As one of the only non-art students in that class, I got really interested in coming up with cool concepts that could get the message across. I spent all my time focusing on visual concept.”

“I can’t emphasize enough his hard work,” says Schorr, who then admitted Sachs to his graphic

design tutorial the following semester. Schorr recalls his student as “forthright, direct, gregarious, and very smart.” It was he who encouraged Sachs to pursue a career path that Sachs hadn’t previously considered: partnership in a design firm with a talented designer (Fox). Then, Sachs not only could spend some time in design but also focus his analytic and social skills in helping clients define their communication needs.

Clients who visit Free Range Graphics are ushered into a skylit conference room shared with another company on the second floor. Sachs will slouch his lanky frame into a chair and sit with pen poised above

**“Storytelling is perhaps what distinguishes Internet ads from those for television. Television is a passive medium, but no one just spaces out and stays on a Web page.”
—Jonah Sachs ’97**

notepaper. Many clients seek their services for animated Flash projects. Kerry campaign representatives called him after they’d seen “The Meatrix,” a takeoff on the *Matrix* films, which conveyed an unsettling view of factory farming practices in meat production.

While Flash projects are attention-grabbers, Sachs is not enamored of technology for its own sake. “We’re really about the most effective way to convey a message. We tell our clients, Try not to get too complicated here; storytelling is storytelling. It’s always been that way.”

Storytelling is perhaps what distinguishes Internet ads from those for television, which, he says, are more about creating an impression. “Television is a passive medium, but no one just spaces out and stays on a

Web page. Every page has a million places to click; you could be gone like that. You have to invite people deeper into the story and to become part of the story.” Online viewers become part of the story by, for example, giving a donation.

Internet political ads also raise the issue of sponsorship, one of this election’s hotly contested topics. The lines between the candidates’ official communications and those of special interest groups are easily blurred—although this isn’t a new phenomenon. In the early ’80s, Eisner recalls, NetPac put out independent television ads that were effective in shaping political debates. Some thought the Republican Party was sponsoring the ads, just as MoveOn’s ads are often mistaken for those put out by the Democratic Party. “It’s not clear to me that a lot of people can draw a distinction between the sponsors,” he says.

So-called 527 committees, such as the Democratic America Coming Together or the pro-GOP Progress for America, are funding political advertising in 2004 and operating outside the McCain-Feingold guidelines. For the time being, the Federal Election Commission has ruled that 527s may continue to raise funds, but the future remains in doubt.

Also unclear is the extent to which the Internet will influence the political process and outcomes. Both parties have raised funds on the Internet, but the Republican Party, particularly its religiously oriented conservative wing, has not used it to mobilize in the way the Democrats have. “The Christian Right’s way of mobilizing is fundamentally through churches and face-to-face meetings and through the commitment of people to the beliefs of the Religious Right,” says Boyd. “The religious divide is currently the most important political divide in this country—and that’s a social movement that does not depend on technology for its effectiveness.”

Will the Internet prove to be truly effective in politics? Assistant Professor of Government Melanye Price says the Dean campaign shows that the jury is still out on that question. “People saw Howard Dean’s campaign as a watershed, because he had so many people involved and he raised a lot of money, but it didn’t translate to votes.

“We have to see whether the Internet efforts in this presidential campaign produce votes.” 🗳

**Do you have an opinion about this topic?
Please write us at letters@wesleyan.edu.**

Politicking with a Touch of Humor

“If it weren’t for Internet dating, General Wesley Clark may never have run for president,” John Hlinko ’89 announces, grins, and then explains. The initial funding for the DraftWesleyClark campaign, which Hlinko launched with a friend, had come from the profits generated by another Hlinko brainchild—an Internet dating site for political activists, ActForLove.org. The slogan he gave the group, “Take Action/Get Action,” makes unnecessary Hlinko’s confession that he delights in bad puns.

Hlinko sports a goatee, casual khakis, and soft-soled shoes. He is a self-described “geek” who majored in the College of Social Studies and economics at Wesleyan and public policy at Harvard’s J.F.K. School of Government, where he earned a master’s degree. He now combines these interests with panache and humor in a knickknack-cluttered office at Grassroots Enterprises, where he is the V.P. of marketing and creative engagement for this nonpartisan communication and P.R. firm. His clients now include TheNaderFactor.com, a group seeking to encourage Nader supporters to get behind the Democratic party’s nominee.

Hlinko, who also helped lead MoveOn.org in an anti-impeachment petition in 1998 that generated more than half a million signatures and several million dollars in donations, is himself an innovator on the grassroots engagement front, although his six-month effort to drum up support for General Wesley Clark, a candidate whom he had never met and who was not at that time seeking nomination, is perhaps his most surprising—or one might say outlandish—venture. Still, Hlinko was inarguably effective: his effort generated nearly \$2 million in pledges for a Clark candidacy, engaged tens of thousands of volunteers, and earned national media coverage. “General Clark was actually shown our TV ad on national TV five times—MSNBC, CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS—before he even knew who the heck we were,” Hlinko recalls.

When they began hearing rumors that Clark would make a decision whether to run or not, Hlinko’s team decided, “We’ve got to at least meet with this guy and let him know his level of support.”

“We’re the people who have been nicely stalking you,” is essentially how Hlinko introduced his group to the general, and a half-hour appointment turned into a three-hour dinner. Later that month, when Clark decided he would seek the Democratic nomination, he appointed Hlinko as his director of Internet strategy.

In recognition of Hlinko’s unique role in a political cam-

paign, the American Association of Political Consultants awarded him its prestigious “Rookie of the Year Pollie,” an award for excellence in public affairs. He was also the 2004 Golden Dot winner for “Best Breakout/Impact Internet Movement,” for what the association considered one of the most successful grassroots movements in American political history.

Hlinko’s success in generating both money and buzz for Clark is just one example of the inroads that the Internet is

making in American political strategy.

Even a decade ago, launching a grassroots campaign still meant thousands of telephone calls, miles of walking, and many dollars in postage. E-mail has changed the paradigm.

“Most people are not going to sit down and make 1,000 phone calls,” says Hlinko. “But with something as simple as a tell-a-friend format on every page of your Web site, you make it a lot easier for them to help you.”



The Internet is fertile ground for grassroots movements, maintains John Hlinko ’89, who brings a sense of humor to his own Web-based political activism and his nonpartisan firm.

BILL BURKHART