

The background of the entire page is a close-up, slightly blurred image of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in a diagonal orientation.

Running for Office as an Online Candidate

2014 Edition

A Primer for Local Campaigns

By Shane Daley

A companion guide to

Online Candidate[®]

Running for Office as an Online Candidate - 2014 Edition

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Introduction

A political campaign, no matter how small, cannot ignore the influence of the internet and its ability to build a volunteer base, provide a fundraising platform, and boost voter support.

When we started OnlineCandidate.com in 2003, it was tough to convince local candidates that a campaign website could help them. Today, political candidates of all levels realize the power of an online presence.

And with that power lays peril. From choosing a domain name to hiring a web developer to maintaining a website to online fundraising to keeping up with social networking, there's a lot to do and a lot to know.

This book is a primer written specifically for local-level campaigns who want to leverage online communication to reach, communicate and motivate supporters. It is not a technical how-to on website development, nor is it a comprehensive overview of online marketing. Rather, this book focuses on the essentials of creating an online presence and leveraging that presence for political campaigning. Our goal is to distill the online opportunities, tools, and strategies to reach voters and help build the support necessary to win an election.

Starting early is your best way to success. Read the entire book. Then read it again and use the checklists to help prioritize your efforts. Get others involved, assign responsibilities, and put your plan to work.

Every campaign has a different mix of resources. Not every strategy mapped out in this book is necessary to be successful. Apply the ideas that work best for you.

Effectively managed, you can leverage the power of the web to increase your campaign's overall resources both online and offline. It's not a matter of *whether* you put your campaign online – it's a matter of *how* you do it!

Laying the Groundwork

You, online

In the early 2000s, only the most online-savvy political candidates put much focus on the web. Sure, presidential campaign websites had been around since the mid-90s, but for local candidates the web was not an investment worth spending much time or money pursuing.

How things changed! By 2008, Barack Obama had raised half a billion dollars online during his campaign for the White House. Today, the internet is as influential a medium as television and radio.

Until recently, online campaigning consisted of creating a basic campaign website and then advertising that site online and offline. Bandwidth was not widely available for video advertising, and social media was too small and fragmented to be of much use in building support.

While a campaign website is still the hub of a candidate's online presence, the work begins on a much more personal level.

The value of social networks

The internet allows candidates to make personal connections with voters - quickly, easily, and inexpensively. Through *social networking*, you will get to know many people, and even more people will get to know you. You can directly interact with more people online than you ever can at a campaign event or even going door-to-door in your district.

Social networking is large today, and there is every indication that it will only increase in scope and importance. You can be sure that your opponents will be connecting with others, building and leveraging an online network of support. You wouldn't skip the fundraising and brochures for your offline campaign, so you shouldn't ignore important elements of your online campaign.

The value in building an online network is that you can begin slowly and go as deep as you want. You can start by putting basic information about yourself on the web and connect with other people you know. As your network develops, you can use these connections to build relationships and start a conversation with others. The purpose of engaging others online is to get people to *know, like and trust you*.

Ultimately, you will ask others to act on your behalf. The individuals with whom you have built a relationship will be called upon to give money, donate time, spread the word and, finally, *vote* for you.

Social networking made it big in the 2008 presidential race. There were over a million Obama supporters on Facebook, while McCain supporters numbered just over 150,000. Odds are, your campaign won't hit those sorts of numbers, but the more 'friends' you have online means more links and potential traffic – and additional ways to connect to voters.

Creating your online identity

It doesn't matter if you're new to the web or if you've been online since the days of CompuServe. Odds are there is information about you online can be accessed with just a simple search engine query.

Go ahead, 'google' yourself. Do a search on google.com for your name. What shows up in the results? There might be pages that just randomly contain your first and last name. Or perhaps you share a name with someone else, and results about that other person are showing up. If this is the case, why is information about that other person appearing rather than information about you?

If that other person is somewhat famous (or infamous), there may be articles, blog posts or other content about or pertaining to that person. Another more likely reason is that the person actually *put* information about himself or herself online. Search engines picked up this content, indexed it, and now provide that content as search results whenever someone types in that person's name.

As a candidate, you will want influence over what people see, hear and read about you on the web. To do that, you need an *online identity*. Creating an online identity is simple, and you can do it over time. To start, you need a clear purpose. What are you hoping to accomplish by building an online identity? If it is for political reasons, then you want to create a *personal brand*. That means getting yourself – your history and goals – out on the web.

The ultimate goal of building an online identity is *search result page domination*. This means that when someone searches your name, that person will find the positive information that you want people to see in the top search results. By dominating these search results, you can push down and make unfavorable material that much harder to find.

The first step is to create *personal profiles* on several free social networks and resume websites. These profiles will reside in sites that are popular, have a high search engine authority, and tend to rank well for personal name searches. Many websites fit this criterion, but we are going to start with the following:

- Google+

- LinkedIn
- Naymes
- ZoomInfo
- Visual CV
- DandyID

Here is a brief overview of the sites listed above:

Google+ – <https://accounts.google.com/>

Google, as you probably know, is the 1000-pound gorilla in search. A Google+ account allows you to create a public profile to display your information to the world. This profile is important, as allows you to tie in other Google services such as webmaster tools, Google Analytics, Google Docs, and AdWords pay per click.

Google+ is discussed in more detail below.

LinkedIn – <http://www.linkedin.com>

LinkedIn's networking audience tends to be business professionals, but the site can be used by people in any field. With a profile, you can post your resume information and link with others. It's not a site where you are likely to 'campaign', but more of a place to lay groundwork before your campaign is launched.

LinkedIn is discussed in more detail below.

Naymes – <http://www.naymz.com>

Designed to create a 'Personal Branding Profile', Naymes is a professional networking platform that allows you to find and discover connections based on similar backgrounds and reputations. Your profile can be made visible to search engines. It also has a real-time monitoring tool so you can keep an eye on what is being said about you across various sources such as blogs, news sites and social networks.

ZoomInfo – <http://www.zoominfo.com>

This popular site extracts information about people and companies from publicly available online sources. Then it automatically compiles that data into easy-to-search profiles. If your name appears as a search result, you can claim your profile and update the listing. If it is not available, you can create a new profile about yourself.

VisualCV – <http://www.visualcv.com>

This site is designed primarily for job seekers, but for political candidates it provides another place to create a professional profile. VisualCV provides an online resume

generator that includes all the components of a traditional resume, along with add-ons like images, video, and links. You can share your profile with a vanity link.

DandyID – <http://www.dandyid.org>

DandyID lets you easily collect all of your online profiles in one convenient place and allows people to discover you across the web. Setting up an account on this site helps to cross-link your profiles, which helps them become more relevant for searches related to your name.

By creating profiles on these sites, you can brand yourself and begin to network with others. The sites listed above are not inclusive. There are dozens of profile sites out there. The sites listed above are free and popular, so you might want to start with them. Depending on your personal or professional status, you may want to create personal profiles on industry-related sites or even local community websites.

Services like claim.io will help you register your name, claim your vanity URLs, and insert your messaging and logo across top social media and social networking sites. This is particularly useful for businesses, but if you plan to have a high-profile campaign, you may want to consider this service.

The least you need to know

Is it essential to build profiles and put content on all of these sites? No, but it is better that you control accounts on these primary websites than to risk someone else picking them up.

In time, your profiles will begin to appear in searches related to your name. Link your profiles together whenever possible (Naymes is useful for this purpose). Cross-linking similar pages builds relevancy for your name. Later in the campaign, you will use these profiles to link to your campaign website and related material to help give it a boost in traffic, search engine rankings, and depth of credibility.

The bottom line is that the web is where voters look for political information. If you do not put out information about yourself, then someone else will.

Action Steps

First, create personal accounts on the recommended websites. Only add information that you are comfortable providing. Keep in mind, of course, that if you are running for public office, there won't be much information about you that *isn't* public.

Use a consistent name throughout your profiles, one that matches your ballot name if possible.

Try to include a head shot photo into your profiles. It should be a recent picture, where you are dressed nicely. A smile always helps, too.

When you have completed your profiles, go back and try to cross-link them where you can.

Finally, maintain a list of your profiles and keep them up-to-date as you move forward.

Creating Your Social Media Presence

A few years back, most candidates considered social networking only after they decided to run for office. Social media was an afterthought, a secondary way to drum up support.

How times change.

These days, experts recommend starting an online presence as early as possible in order to build a network of friends and supporters.

Building an online network before you launch your political campaign gives you a leg up when you announce your intention to run. The payoff is that your friends and fans will be the first to check out your campaign website, provide feedback, help promote you, and perhaps even help in your fundraising and volunteer efforts.

The dark side of social media

Are you already engaged online? Do you maintain a Facebook or Twitter account? Is there an old MySpace page of yours somewhere? Did you ever post comments on online forums under your own name? If you have ever done any of these things, then you have left behind all kinds of digital footprints that could come back to bite you when you run for office.

Young people are more willing to put personal information online, simply because they have been exposed to social media earlier in life. Freewheeling kids who started interacting online some years back will today find themselves older, wiser, and now dealing with the consequences of their online social activities. More and more candidates are dealing with this issue.

Racy photos, crazy party shots, video clips and discussion board comments can remain online for years. Often when these digital artifacts are 'discovered', political opponents use these items out of context (or even *in* context, as the case may be). This can leave candidates confronting a sticky issue.

<End of Sample>

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