

Sample

Running for Office as an Online Candidate

A Primer for Local Campaigns

**2015 Edition
By Shane Daley**

Online Candidate[®]
Campaign websites and more.

Running for Office as an Online Candidate - 2015 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 building and 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 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 remains 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.

While you wouldn't skip the fundraising and brochures for your *offline* campaign, 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
- 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.

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 begin to brand yourself and network with others. 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.

The least you need to know

Is it essential to build profiles and put content on the above-mentioned 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 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 sharing. 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

In years past, most candidates considered starting social networking only *after* they made the decision 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 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.

No amount of detergent can provide a digital scrubbing

Deleting online material will not make the information disappear. A saved screen shot, a digital photograph on a hard drive or even an archived web page on the [Wayback Machine](#) may still be out there. Trying to delete material after it is discovered can only inflame the issue and make it seem like a candidate is trying to hide something.

Users often have a false sense of control by relying too much on privacy controls within their online accounts. Use this rule of thumb: Consider anything that you say or do online will eventually be made public and could potentially be used against you by a political opponent. If you are not comfortable with anyone now or in the future seeing certain material about you, then do not post it online.

Of course, that doesn't prevent *other people* from posting material about *you*. In this age of viral content, you will want to keep the same rule for anything you do or say in a setting where there is the possibility of being recorded.

Here's a good rule of thumb: If you are not comfortable with anyone now or in the future seeing certain material about you, then do not post that material online.

Accept and move on

If you currently use sites like Facebook, Twitter or post to discussion boards, consider cleaning up old material where you can and watch what you post going forward. You might want to clean up slang or colloquial phrasing within your existing profiles, or update your profile images to ones that suit you better as a candidate. You don't have to change who you are, but be aware of how you could be presenting yourself to voters.

Embarrassing online material about you may be discovered at some point. In the end, it is best to fix what you can, accept what you cannot change, and move on to more important issues.

Again, assume that any online communication you make is (or will become) public. Privacy standards are shifting continuously, and information that was once walled off within certain websites might become open at some point.

Choose Your Campaign Handles Carefully

Here's a quick tip for candidates who are starting their online campaigns: Pick a name that's going to last! For your website and social media profiles, you should choose a single name for consistency. The question is whether you should include the name of the office you are seeking.

For example, should you use the handle John Smith or John Smith for Mayor?

Generally, you should avoid using an office name and/or year in your website domain name and social media handles. It's better to use just your name or a more generic 'vote for' handle.

Here's why: If you are going to be in politics for a while, odds are the position you are seeking may change in the future. If that happens, all the work that was done to build your online presence for an old position will go to waste.

For example, for a Facebook page, after you have secured 25 "Likes", you can change your Page web address to a shorter and unique username. However, once you choose a name, you cannot change it in the future. So if your Facebook page is facebook.com/smithforsupervisor, all the followers you have gathered will be lost if you run for a different office and start a new page called facebook.com/smithforstaterep. It will be tough to get all your old followers to the new page.

The same goes for a campaign Twitter account. Choose your name carefully. It will look silly if your handle is @smithforsupevisor when you are running for state representative. Again, it's tough to set up a new handle and rebuild your following from scratch.

For your campaign website, we often recommend that you register your own name as the domain name, if possible. That way, if you want to run for a different office or turn the domain to a personal or business site, you'll find it's easier to keep the same domain name. All the old links and traffic streams will remain, making it easier to restart things later.

So, be sure to choose your online names carefully – and be prepared to keep them for a while!

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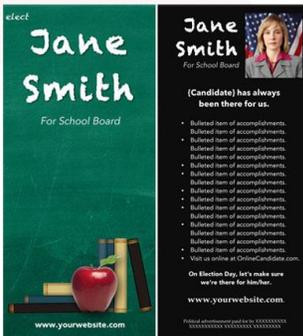


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