

The Changed Media Environment: Reaching Generations X & Y with Political Messages

Executive Summary

Younger people have grown up immersed in the Internet and with the ability to quickly adapt to new technologies. They have a higher comfort level with blogs, podcasts, and video clips. They also regularly multitask while using a media (e.g. reading a newspaper while watching television, talking on the telephone while checking email, instant messaging while listening to music, etc). Generations X and Y can communicate more easily with one another, but become harder for political campaigns to reach and engage their interest and attention.

Campaigns need to address this challenge by engaging generations X and Y through the near concurrent use of a variety of channels, and to encourage individuals to spread information among their peer groups. These generations are more capable than ever before to decipher what is an ad, but will enthusiastically spread content they enjoy and want to share. Campaigns would do well to concentrate on tapping into personal networks with transparent, honest communications that appeal to the individual's desire to be the first to know something and subsequently, be the provider of that knowledge among their friends.

Ease with Technology/New Media & Multitasking

Young people use technology in their everyday lives widely and with ease. They have grown up immersed in the Internet and with the ability to quickly adapt to new technologies. They have a comfort level with blogs, podcasts, and video clips. These X and Y generations have become accustomed to instantaneous direct contact through text messaging and instant messenger programs. They are always on the look-out for the next innovation that will make communication, shopping, dating, and receiving information easier.

At the same time, Xs and Ys usually multitask while using a media, and at a growing rate. A recent Ball State University study reports over 90% of young people multitask about a third of the time they are using a media (e.g., talking on telephone while checking email, instant messaging while listening to music, going through mail while watching television, etc.) Of course, anyone multitasking is not

doing these activities with equal interest. There is a divided attention span as a result of multitasking that makes it different, if not more difficult, to engage with this large sector of the population.

Because of these changes, campaigns may be wasting resources relying on more traditional strategies of one way, mass messaging. There are five primary ways that Generations X and Y, as a whole, differ from other groups:

- Comfortable with technology and use it a lot
 - Forrester Research showed that 87% of 15 year olds use instant messaging
 - Three out of four young people have a mobile phone (*Financial Times* Dec. 2005)
- Have a greater tolerance for different types of advertising – product placement is normal and accepted
- Appreciate tailored suggestions and communications – rely on Amazon.com and Google ads to provide the information they are looking for
- Driven by instantaneous communications – text messaging, email, verbal

The Changed Media Environment: Reaching Generations X & Y with Political Messages

- Multitasking is growing: about 30% of all media time is spent exposed to more than one medium at a time. (*Ball State University*)

What we're seeing from younger audiences is an accelerated and wider acceptance of new technology and a yearning for it. There is little apprehension among younger people regarding the electronic insertion of ads for new products and services (though there is little patience for mass, unsolicited emails). There is also a divided, shorter attention span with this important sector of the population as multitasking grows with their use of any media. Although there is no best channel to reach this audience, there are a greater number of opportunities to engage and interact with the X and Y set. The under 30 generation now has more ways to receive the information they want and, as discussed below, to share that same information than any group before them. How does a campaign get through the noise and arouse interest and attention of the Xs and Ys? How do you reach these voters who are doing things simultaneously?

PERSONAL CONTACTS ARE STILL THE MOST EFFECTIVE

Informed, and Quick to Help With an Authentic Message

Strategy must change. Simply relying on the Web and television is not enough. A tailored strategy must not only use specific messages, but also a variety of channels, often executed concurrently, that are both driven from the campaign and allow the recipient to access the campaign. Access back to the campaign creates a way for opinions to be shared and involvement to increase.

For example, 2004 saw the use of inbound toll-free voter help lines in conjunction with outbound communications and the Web to help access vote-by-mail, early voting, and volunteer/contribute to campaigns. These help lines were able to extend the GOTV period as well as provide real time feedback mechanism voters could use to raise issues and provide intelligence.

Interesting, funny content that is easily sharable is another example of what makes younger people act. An amusing video clip or a "Top 5/10 reasons" to vote for a candidate are the kinds of information that Xs and Ys want to share and that are easy to share by sending a link for the Web site to their friends. 2004's Jib-Jab animations were forwarded thousands of times and

their comical political digs went far beyond the Beltway.

When people are informed they have a natural desire to share what they know with those around them. The same Forrester study noted that 52% of 12-21 year olds regularly rely on recommendations from

INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY TO A CAMPAIGN IS A GOOD THING.

friends and family when making a purchase (compared with just 34% of adults). As this information can be gained through newer and faster sources, it can also be transferred with more authenticity and ease through those same sources. Campaigns need to feed this appetite and offer salient, timely, and accessible information for those they hope to engage. This content can then be shared through an individual's own network and passed on virally. If it comes from a trusted source, the information is generally treated with much higher regard than if it were viewed as mass marketing.

Back to the Future: Old Tactics in a New World

The Changed Media Environment: Reaching Generations X & Y with Political Messages

Pardon that expression, but with all the advances in technology older tactics have an important place in reaching these audiences. As shown repeatedly in recent studies by *Yale's Institute for Social and Public Policy Studies*, personal contacts are still the most effective when it comes to civic engagement. The closer the contact, the more persuasive it likely will be. This has resulted in an increased emphasis on the type of viral marketing programs described above.

Often relying solely on the Internet (or any one medium for that matter) will be self-defeating. You may spend a lot of money and not reach anyone. It's vital to allow the person being contacted to select their channels of choice and then use those channels to receive content and pass it along. And the growing use of multitasking with the X and Y set points to the importance of integrated communications programs. The use of telephone – both inbound and outbound – and mail to emphasize and reinforce prior contacts or point people towards the Web will increase the overall success of a campaign by personalizing the contacts.

New Approaches

The changed media and technology environments, as well as the characteristic multitasking among younger audiences, necessitate that campaigns adapt by:

- Allow the X and Y set to share information and opinions with others – provide content and opportunity; blogs are a great example of this.
- Increased accessibility to a political campaign is a good thing. People should be able to get information, volunteer, and give feedback in one location and without much effort. (800 number, Web)
- There needs to be a dialogue with a constituency, and then there must be mechanisms to take in information as well as give it out.
- Accessibility must also follow an integrated, multi-channeled approach.
- There is no magic bullet, but whenever possible, find out what are the media channels of choice...if someone gives the campaign an email address and uses it, then make it easy for them by sticking with their channel of choice.

There is an increased need for audience segmentation and targeting (both

geographically and demographically), and with it a greater role for message development. Starting under-the-radar communications as early as possible is central to involve younger people in every campaign. Getting used to the campaign's structure, message, and communications does not occur quickly. Tapping into personal networks also requires a solid head start.

Even more importantly, these people do grow up. Not only will they be more technologically savvy when they do, but they'll also be approachable for years to come. For example, the *University of Michigan* recently indicated that “voters set permanent party loyalty after voting the same way three times in a row.” (*Congressional Quarterly*) Many of these Xs and Ys will become important activists and donors as they grow older. Engaging individuals at an early age and keeping them involved may be challenging at times; however, it will grow an organization with loyal informed members who will act on things when approached.