

Word of Mouth Politics 2.0: Now Powered By the Internet

By Brad Fay,
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About the Author

Brad Fay is Chief Operating Officer of the Keller Fay Group, a research and consulting firm focused on word of mouth marketing, based in New Brunswick, NJ. His partner, Ed Keller, is the co-author of *The Influentials: One American in Ten Tells the Other Nine How to Vote, Where to Eat, and What to Buy*. Brad is using word of mouth techniques to run for Township Committee in his hometown of Montgomery, NJ, where he has been endorsed by the local Democratic organization. His campaign site is www.formontgomery.org. The Keller Fay Group site is www.kellerfay.com.

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“Word of mouth” is the oldest form of marketing communication, dating back some might say, to when Eve recommended the apple to Adam. Word of mouth is also the oldest form of politics. In recent decades progressives have used a variety of word of mouth techniques to counter the frequent advantage conservatives have in fundraising, and by extension, mass marketing through advertising. But today word of mouth is new again, both in the private sector and in politics—powered by the reach, speed, and efficiency of the Internet.

The Internet’s power in driving word of mouth works differently than you might think. While weblogs (blogs), chatrooms, and social networking sites are exploding online, the most persuasive political communications are private, personal e-mails and instant messages between friends and family, and between campaigns and widely dispersed grassroots supporters. What’s more, the Internet is at its most powerful when used to connect core supporters who ultimately spread your word through old fashioned, face-to-face conversations.

Call it viral marketing, influencer marketing or evangelist marketing. By any name, word of mouth is all about the relationship—a welcome message from a trusted friend or campaign worker. For campaigns who understand the chemistry of these relationships, word of mouth marketing holds the promise of a groundswell of committed and engaged advocates who deliver their personal networks to your candidate on Election Day.

Political campaigns that are looking for new insights into how to upgrade word of mouth techniques need look no further than to major brand marketers. Companies such as Procter & Gamble, Apple Computer, Starbucks, Honda, and Wal-Mart are engaging with customers and prospects in innovative new ways that are helping them to increase market share. These companies are scaling back on “traditional” techniques such as thirty-second TV spots and large direct mailings, in favor of identifying and connecting with influencers, activating advocates, and leveraging social networks.

Political campaigns can do more of the same. Indeed, the Bush/Cheney campaign raised the bar by adopting true word of mouth marketing techniques in 2004, to their great success. According to then-campaign manager Ken Mehlman, the campaign

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targeted grassroots “Influentials” in Ohio as a way to maximize GOP turnout, and that strategy was a key factor in the record GOP turnout in that pivotal state. In explaining the strategy to the *Washington Post* in May 2004, Mehlman critiqued the challenges of relying too much on traditional mass media: “You have a world where a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention,” said Mehlman. “The way people get through it is by turning to people they trust.”

Mehlman’s comments strongly echoed those a few months earlier by the chief marketing officer of the world’s preeminent mass advertiser—the Procter & Gamble Company—who called mass marketing “broken.”

“Consumers today are less responsive to traditional media. They are embracing new technologies that empower them with more control over how and when they are marketed to. They are making purchase decisions in environments where marketers have less direct influence (in store, word of mouth, professional recommendations, etc.)...We need new channels to reach consumers. Brands that rely too heavily on mainstream media, or are not exploring new technologies and connections, will lose touch.”

- Jim Stengel, CMO,
Procter & Gamble

Stengel’s speech to the American Association of Advertising Agencies, in early 2004, served to accelerate the trend toward interactive and other nontraditional channels of connecting with consumers. It is a trend that NPI documented in its November 2005 report: *Fundamental Shifts in the US Media & Advertising*.

Among the most interesting of the “new channels” is word of mouth, and it is a fast growing phenomenon. Already, there is a Word of Mouth Marketing Association (www.womma.org) that, after less than two years, boasts more than three-hundred member companies, including Coca Cola, Dell, Fidelity Investments, Kraft, Microsoft, and Nestle.

Drawing on case studies and new, never-before-released research, this report will describe why brand marketers are adopting word of mouth marketing, what the strategies and tools look like, and how progressive political operatives can harness the power of word of mouth.

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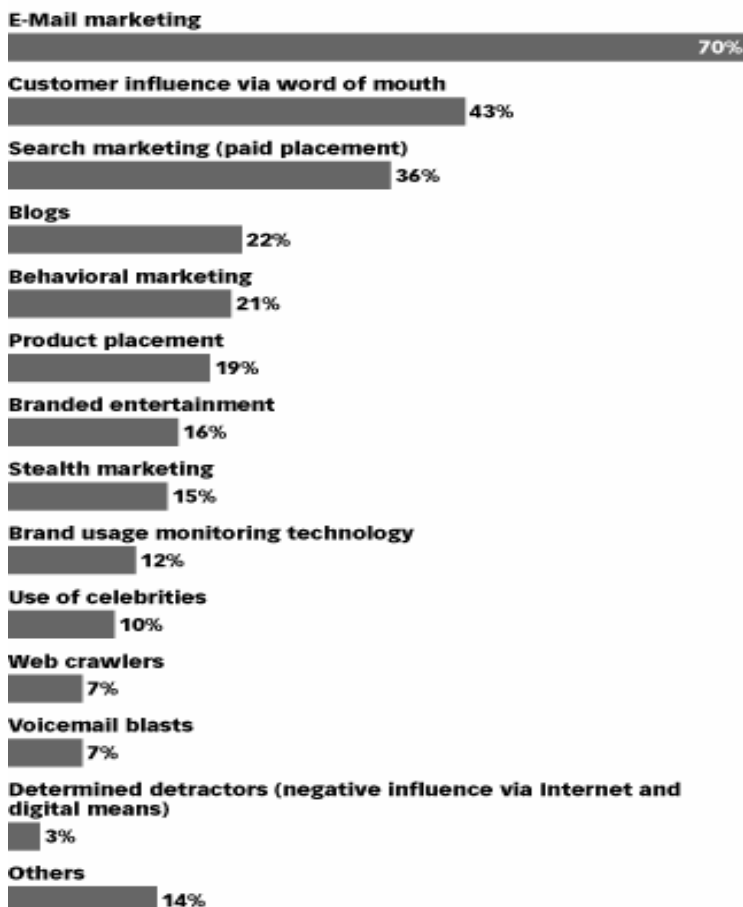
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Word of Mouth Is New Again in the Private Sector

According to a 2005 survey of marketing executives by *Chief Marketing Officer* magazine, word of mouth marketing is one of the most powerful new tools in the marketing arsenal today. The accompanying chart shows that it is the second most popular “emergent” marketing technique, second only to e-mail marketing. Word of mouth marketing even ranks ahead of paid search marketing, such as Google ads.

Emergent Marketing Techniques that US Marketing Executives Use Currently or Plan to within Next Six Months, 2005 (as a % of respondents)



Note: n=481

Source: CMO Magazine, April 2005

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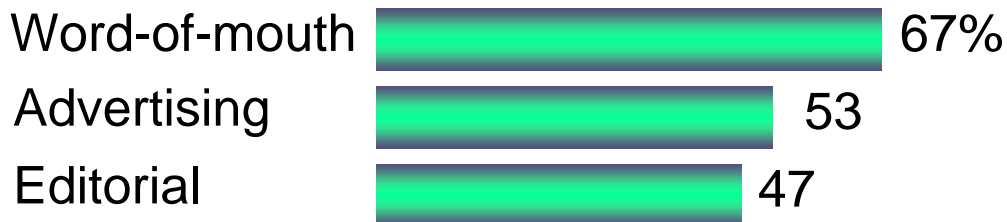
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Word of mouth is being credited with a large number of commercial marketing success stories, including: Google, iPod, Swiffer, Fabreze, Red Bull, the Atkins and South Beach diets, and the comeback of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

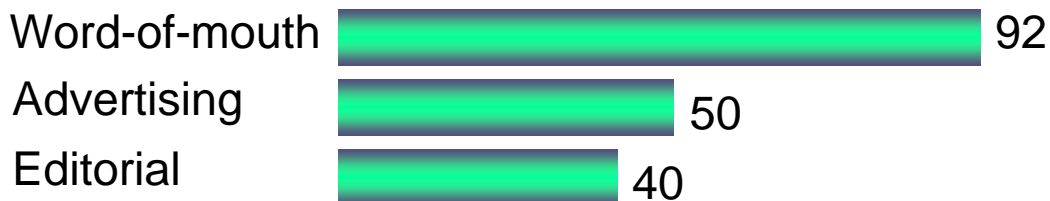
Management consulting firm McKinsey & Company estimates that two-thirds of all industries are at least partially driven by word of mouth. Procter & Gamble believes that a conversation between two mothers can ultimately lead to conversations among one thousand moms. (*Financial Times*, Feb. 18, 2006) And the leading trade publication *Advertising Age* has featured the rise of word of mouth as a marketing tactic: "This 'next big thing' [is] a big thing right now." (Jonah Bloom, Exec. Editor, *Ad Age*, Jan. 30, 2006)

According to Roper Reports surveys over the last three decades, the average number of people citing word of mouth as an important source of ideas and information across more than a dozen purchase and lifestyle categories has grown from 67% to 92%. During the same period, advertising has held steady and editorial has declined slightly.

1977: Best sources of ideas, information



Today: What's changed? Word of Mouth



SOURCE: ROPER REPORTS, GfK-NOP

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Why is there such an interest in word of mouth right now? A number of major trends in society and the marketplace are driving the success of word of mouth, including:

- Distrust of traditional advertising and marketing
- The overuse of intrusive advertising techniques such as television and radio commercials, pop-up Internet ads, and billboards
- Fragmentation of audiences and constituencies
- Competition for consumers' time and attention
- The rise of "social networking" Internet sites such as MeetUp and LinkedIn
- And the power of the Internet to efficiently transmit opinions from one person to many other people.

In the political sphere you can add the following additional drivers:

- Decreasing confidence and trust in politics and politicians
- The prohibitive cost of television advertising for many campaigns
- The rise of "single issue" voters who require micro-targeting and mobilization
- And growing distrust of campaign media close to Election Day.

All these factors have led to growth in the importance of word of mouth. In contrast to traditional advertising, word of mouth has always been based on the most important currency in life—human relationships. The power of one-to-one connections between people cannot be overestimated. Personal recommendations most often guide us on the most important "commercial" decisions we make: what doctor to see, who should manage our money; what car dealer can be trusted.

What is new today is the realization that positive word of mouth does not have to be left to good luck. It can be planned, organized, motivated, enabled, managed – and powered by the Internet.

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The Burgeoning Array of New Word of Mouth Strategies in Business

Word of Mouth marketing and campaigning is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of channels and strategies. Many of the terms such as “buzz” and “viral” marketing are used interchangeably, but they in fact mean different (though often related) things. Word of Mouth Marketing Association has published the following useful definitions:

- **Buzz Marketing:** Using high-profile entertainment or news to get people to talk about your brand.
- **Viral Marketing:** Creating entertaining or informative messages that are designed to be passed along in an exponential fashion, often electronically or by e-mail.
- **Community Marketing:** Forming or supporting niche communities that are likely to share interests about the brand (such as user groups, fan clubs, and discussion forums); providing tools, content, and information to support those communities.
- **Grassroots Marketing:** Organizing and motivating volunteers to engage in personal or local outreach.
- **Evangelist Marketing:** Cultivating evangelists, advocates, or volunteers who are encouraged to take a leadership role in actively spreading the word on your behalf.
- **Product Seeding:** Placing the right product into the right hands at the right time, providing information or samples to influential individuals.
- **Influencer Marketing:** Identifying key communities and opinion leaders who are likely to talk about products and have the ability to influence the opinions of others.
- **Cause Marketing:** Supporting social causes to earn respect and support from people who feel strongly about the cause.
- **Conversation Creation:** Interesting or fun advertising, e-mails, catch phrases, entertainment, or promotions designed to start word of mouth activity.

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- **Brand Blogging:** Creating blogs and participating in the blogosphere, in the spirit of open, transparent communications; sharing information of value that the blog community may talk about.
- **Referral Programs:** Creating tools that enable satisfied customers to refer their friends.

Source: Word of Mouth Marketing Association

Two characteristics shared by virtually all successful word of mouth marketing are authenticity and transparency. The only way to build a sustained word of mouth campaign is by engaging with people with true affinity for the campaign or cause. Support cannot and should not be “bought” as occurs in “shill” marketing. Not only will this technique be ineffective, but the backlash against a dishonest word of mouth campaign would be severe and harmful, as a few brand marketers have learned. Similarly disastrous are stealth methods that try to hide the motivation of an advocate or the source of communication.

There’s no reason to be anything but transparent. Research published by Dr. Walter Carl of Northeastern University finds that being open about one’s relationship to a marketing campaign actually *increases* the effectiveness of a word of mouth campaign.

Getting Beyond the Usual Partisan Social Networks

The most important element of a word of mouth strategy is the targeting of influencers—people whose opinions affect dozens, hundreds, even thousands of other people. And of course, all political campaigns target influencers—union chiefs, newspaper editors, officers of fraternal and civic groups, advocacy groups, business leaders, other office holders, and the like.

While word of mouth marketers are interested in these same kinds of people, they are also interested in reaching everyday people who happen to be relied on for advice by their local friends, family, and neighbors. Perhaps it’s the baseball coach who everybody admires; or the sixty-something woman who organizes bingo at the senior center; or maybe it’s the local real estate agent who spearheaded fundraising for the

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victims of Katrina. Anyone who has a network of people who turn to them on public affairs matters is an influencer and there is at least one influencer on every street in every neighborhood in America.

These social networks are often *not* based on partisan politics. Instead, they are built around hobbies, interests, children, work, clubs, neighborhoods, and all kinds of other topics unrelated to politics. But these networks are invaluable because they are based on respect, trust, and personal relationships.

The key is to find the people who make up these networks, connect with them, and then activate them on your behalf. And the best way to find them is for *them* to find *you*, which is why it is critical to make it easy for people to join a campaign's broad network of supporters.

Integrating Online and Offline Word of Mouth

Today the easiest way for someone to find a campaign or political organization is through the Internet. Assume every visitor to your website is an influencer interested in supporting your campaign. Make it easy for them to sign up for periodic e-mail updates they can cascade out to their own social networks. But remember, their networks often are not based on party politics, so the e-mails cannot be stridently partisan. They should offer interesting facts and news that can be comfortably forwarded to the dozens of names in your supporters' address books, with links back to your website and main messages.

Offer your supporters a tool box of other ways to advocate on your candidate's behalf: tips for writing letters to the editor; talking points; events to bring their friends to; links to other groups supporting the campaign; conference calls they can attend as individuals or in groups.

While the Internet is the indispensable tool for word of mouth politics, it is mostly just a conduit that connects you to influencers and helps enable them to connect to their family and friends – and that final connection mostly happens off-line.

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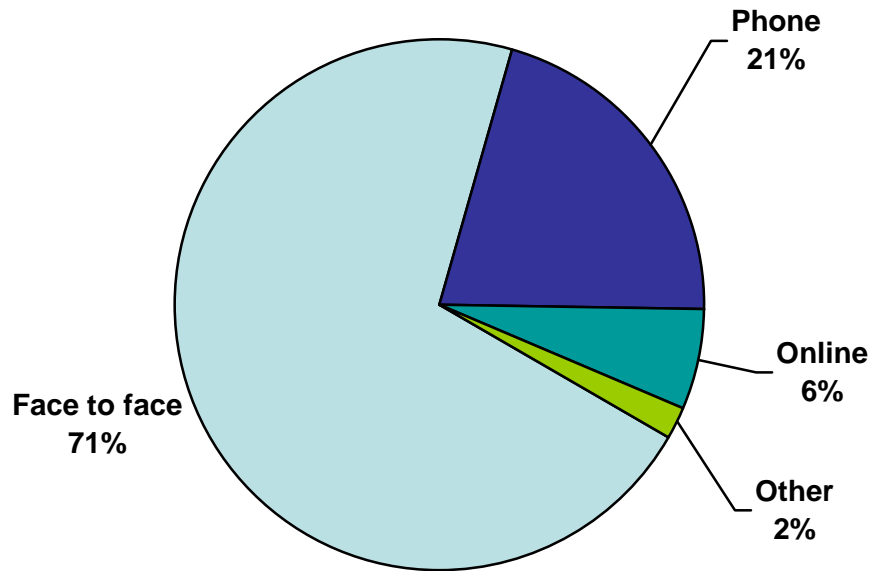
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New findings from the Keller Fay Group find that even outside of campaign season, Americans talk with each other about politics and public affairs eight times per week, on average. Among influencers, that number goes up to twenty-five times per week. The vast majority of those conversations happen face to face, not online.

Keller Fay Group's ongoing TalkTrack™ research program finds that more than 70% of word of mouth about companies, brands, and political candidates occurs the "old fashioned" way: face to face. Another one-fifth occurs through voice communications on the telephone, while just 6% is totally through the Internet. The data is based on online interviews among 1,500 consumers thirteen to sixty-nine years of age in April 2006, involving 11,000 conversations and 6,200 conversational mentions of brands, companies, and candidates.

Word of Mouth: Modes of Communication



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Source: Talk Track™, the Keller Fay Group, LLC
April, 2006

Because so much of the action in word of mouth marketing is based on face-to-face and voice-to-voice communication, messages must be compact and memorable, so they can be transmitted at the water cooler and at cocktail parties, as well as through forwarded e-mails.

The Internet's Public Square as Campaign Listening Posts

Not all Internet communications are the same. Of the 6% of word of mouth conversations that occur online, TalkTrack™ finds that half that proportion, 3%, happen through e-mail, while 2% of conversations are via instant or text message, and 1% occur on blogs and in Internet chatrooms.

Although blogs and chatrooms represent just a small sliver of conversation, they are the most accessible to researchers, journalists, marketers, and campaigns for the simple reason that they are public. Blogs are the Internet's public square, and it is therefore vital for campaigns to be listening to what is being said in these places. Systematically listening to blogs serves several purposes at once. Blogs are an early warning system for new issues, rumors, or opposition tactics; they can help you identify your most passionate supporters or detractors; and they can give you a heads up on topics likely to be faced by your media team, as blogs are widely read by journalists.

A number of companies have formed to monitor and measure conversations that are happening in the public spaces of the Internet, such as blogs, chatrooms and customer review sites. These companies include Nielsen BuzzMetrics, Umbria, Branddimensions,

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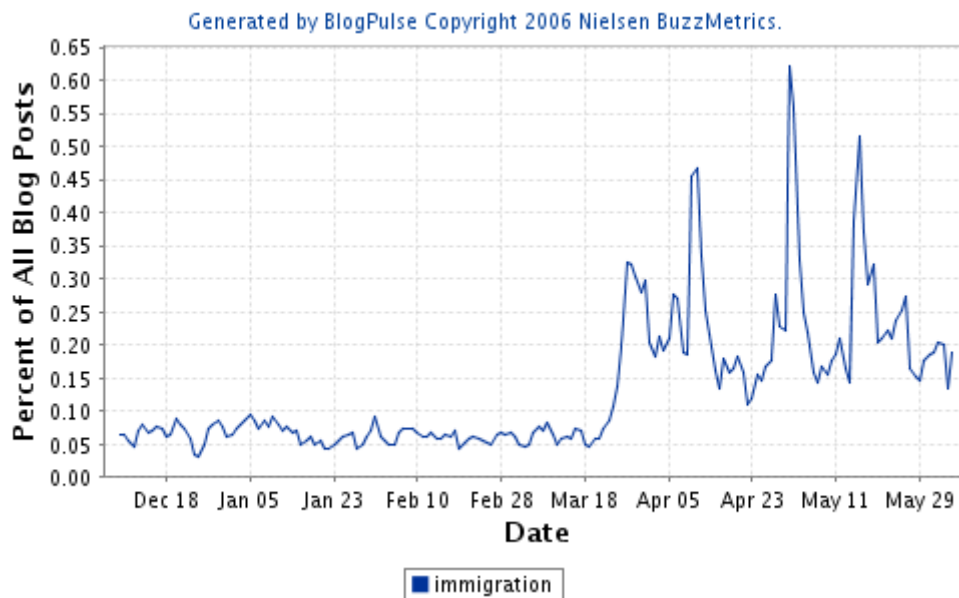
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and Technorati, and, for some people, the data they produce has increasingly become synonymous with “word of mouth.” These companies monitor public spaces on the Internet for postings related to their clients, or the topics their clients are concerned about. They use sophisticated artificial intelligence software to evaluate the kinds of people making the postings, and whether the comments are positive, negative, neutral, or mixed, among other metrics.

The accompanying chart provides one example of how easily and efficiently these blog measurement companies can serve as political “listening posts.” Public online talk about the topic of “immigration” first skyrocketed in late March as Congress took up the President’s immigration bill in earnest. Online talk spiked at even higher levels during the street rallies and “day without immigrants” protest that followed in April.

Free Blog Monitoring from Nielsen BuzzMetrics: Recent Trend for “Immigration”
Available at www.blogpulse.com



The role of these companies is particularly important, not only because of the demand for “measurement” among marketers and communications professionals, but also because word of mouth marketing is as much about listening as it is about talking.

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“Bottom-up media” is a term that has come into popularity for describing the opinions and commentary produced by average Americans in these public Internet spaces. The impact of such grassroots commentary on our politics has been profound. Bloggers provide quick and public feedback on campaigns, political reporting, and policy issues. They are being widely quoted in the mainstream media, and some elite blogs are finding such large audiences that some—such as DailyKos, with an audience of 3-5 million visits per week—might now be better considered Internet publications rather than “bottom-up media.”

Nielsen BuzzMetrics estimates that there were 15 million blogs by the end of 2005, up from merely 3 million a year earlier. They also estimate 600,000 daily blog postings, up from 150,000 in that same span. The firm estimates both of these numbers will increase dramatically over the course of 2006, and it is safe to say an increasing percentage will relate to politics as the 2006 Congressional campaigns heat up.

As important as it is to monitor these public comments on the Internet, campaigns will find that the most powerful tool for motivating action is still private online communication. What makes word of mouth powerful is the personal relationship between the “sender” and the “receiver.” The most powerful online “word of mouth” comes in the form of e-mails written between friends, and even commercial or political content that is *forwarded* from one friend to another, particularly when accompanied by a personal endorsement or comment.

The Internet has the ability to accelerate peer-to-peer communications, both in terms of speed and reach. But power to influence is decidedly old fashioned—a message to you, from a person you know and trust.

Integrating Online and Offline Word of Mouth Tools

The best word of mouth strategy is one that integrates both public and private Internet tools with off-line communication. Monitor the public spaces of the Internet to listen to changes in the political conversation. Use your website and outgoing e-mails to core supporters to distribute your messages through social networks. Mobilize volunteers to read and respond to incoming e-mails to individually bond with and motivate your

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advocates. Meanwhile, understand that the overwhelming portion of the political conversation—not to mention the volunteering and voting—is going on offline, but can be supported by the content you have disseminated through the Internet.

Thus the Internet becomes the glue that holds the word of mouth campaign together, but never at the expense of the personal touch, which is the greatest asset of word of mouth.

This is, in effect, what the Bush/Cheney campaign did in 2004, when it used the Internet to organize far-flung networks of local core supporters who turned out the vote. It is a strategy that stands in contrast to the less authentic word of mouth that the Kerry campaign employed in busing out-of-state supporters into swing states to try to turn out the vote. The method that worked best was the one that used authentic, local grassroots leaders linked through the Internet, rather than one that imported supporters from other locations.

Another example of using the Internet to stimulate authentic off-line political action was pioneered by the Howard Dean campaign. MeetUps were organized through the Internet very efficiently and effectively, but ultimately the result was face-to-face encounters in gathering places around the country, not to mention a powerful “DFA” network that continues today.

Some Key Elements of a Successful WOM Online Political Campaign

Political campaigns are particularly well suited to word of mouth techniques. Political campaigns, even more than consumer brands, have high salience during the political season. Politics is normally a big topic of conversation and voters have a stake in the decisions made by other voters. Despite these favorable conditions, political campaigns are largely not innovating in this area and can learn from what is happening in consumer marketing, where newer techniques are being developed. This is particularly true about new web-based techniques. What follows are half a dozen ideas about how to improve your word of mouth practices:

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1. **Use the website as campaign hub:** To execute a successful word of mouth campaign, you need a strong website early in the campaign. The campaign site is your key interface with core supporters—and an essential tool for recruiting, educating, organizing, communicating with, and motivating your core supporters and evangelists. Your campaign’s web team needs to be integrated into everything the campaign is doing in order to maximize the impact.
2. **Make it easy to spread the word:** Provide core supporters with messages, Internet links, fact sheets, and talking points they can easily share with others at the push of a button. Give them phone numbers, addresses, and public relations tips that will help them get on talk radio programs and in the letters to the editor section. In effect, give your supporters online media training.
3. **Build your two-way network with a “personal touch”:** A leading commercial word of mouth agency, BzzAgent, declares that their commitment to writing a personal response to every e-mail received from a member of their community is the “secret sauce” that activates their agents as brand advocates. An “Advisory Network” of advocates is very different from a mailing or fundraising list. A campaign network requires a two-way, multi-dimensional relationship, with listening as well as talking. Smart campaigns will mobilize and train dozens of volunteers to read and personally respond to every incoming e-mail from supporters, and encourage supporters to engage in peer-to-peer advocacy.
4. **Tone down the overt political messaging:** Campaigns have perfected the art of the “sound byte”, but now they must learn to speak in “talk bytes,” or phrases that are at once memorable and worth passing to a friend. In addition, e-mail communications need to be written thoughtfully so that supporters will feel comfortable forwarding them to their undecided friends and family members. Strident, partisan rhetoric is less likely to be passed along than interesting local or national news, and concisely articulated solutions to problems. While political humor can be particularly “viral,” it should be used by supportive activist groups rather than by campaigns themselves.

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5. **Forge alliances with “non-political” networks:** One of the best commercial examples of forging alliances with other networks is the introduction of *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren. His marketing agency deliberately seeded the book among influential church congregations who helped to literally “evangelize” for the book. Democratic campaigns should also be identifying groups who may be receptive to their messages—whether or not these groups are currently engaged in political discourse. These alliances can be formed from the top down, or even from the bottom-up, by finding and emphasizing areas of common ground.
6. **Track your success:** In your tracking polls, ask respondents what they are hearing from other voters about your candidate and the competition. In addition to asking about their personal voting intention, also ask about the likelihood that they will share their opinions with others. Recruiting voters is only a first step; your goal should be to recruit and motivate advocates.

Some of these ideas will sound simple—but they are rarely done well by campaigns at any level. A study in 2004 by the Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet found that many political websites offer little more than “brochure-ware” and visitors “were neither invited nor encouraged to join the campaign team.”

That will increasingly shift for successful candidates in the 2006 elections and future campaigns in the next decade. The most effective word of mouth campaign strategies will use the power of new online tools and take politics to the next level in the years ahead.