

Discover Your Base of Influencers — and Put Them to Work

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The campaign: Ron Paul

The tactic: Outsourcing critical roles to grassroots organizers

The business takeaway: Connecting to the right influencers can quickly boost your brand, saving you time and marketing dollars.

The quirky campaign of Texas Congressman Ron Paul gave this election cycle a clever marketing ploy when supporters launched a Web-based, transparent “**Money Bomb**” fundraising strategy in late 2007. An affiliated advocacy site, RonPaulGraphs.com, posted donor names and hometowns, published an array of demographic analytics, and downloaded minute-by-minute donation totals.

This gave the self-styled Libertarian candidate **a breadth of information on his core supporters**: Men made up 83 percent of his donors in October 2007. His core donor was four times more likely to live in Nevada than Mississippi, for example, and Alaskans and Hawaiians were bigger donors than anyone in the Bible Belt.

But this group’s ability to mobilize and raise money for Paul was even more impressive. Paul announced that he wanted to raise \$12 million in Q4 ’07, challenging Web visitors to help him reach that goal. In December, **a grassroots money bomb donation event** raised an astonishing \$6 million in one day, besting the one-day record of \$5.7 million set by 2004 presidential hopeful John Kerry.

“Ron Paul’s campaign and its supporters were given free reign to experiment with how to define the campaign across the country with his money bomb,” says Ari Melber, who covers the 2008 election for *The Nation*. Fellow *Nation* contributor Micah Sifry noted that, like Howard Dean in 2004, “Paul is running a loosely-controlled campaign that freely shares attention with its base, and thus benefits from all kinds of self-organizing energies.”

Walter J. Carl, an assistant professor in Northeastern University’s Department of Communications Studies, estimates that today’s average consumer sees 30,000 ad messages a week — but acts on just four. Carl also notes that most people act on one in three recommendations from friends they trust — in other words, “influence” sells. “It’s really a distributed marketing model,” says Sara Holoubek, an independent marketing strategist. “You make the most fervent supporters, who create their own social networks. You find the influencers and let them run with it.”

Kerry Lange, vice president of operations and managing director of San Francisco’s Ammo Marketing, says that the secret to harnessing influencers for a brand’s success lies in understanding the customer, whether they are choosing a president or a pilsner. For example, Ammo’s work for Miller High Life included sending teams into bars to figure out who was drinking the beer and who

those customers respected. Miller drinkers' influencers, it turned out, are tattooed bartenders and independent musicians. So Ammo recruited local bar-scene rockers to be Miller ambassadors and marketed to them. The result? Beer drinkers who saw Miller in the hands of favorite rock stars joined the party with a bottle of their own.

Obama has capitalized on the influencer model, adds Tammy Erickson. "He's done a great job of allowing people at low levels of his organization to spread the word. He also really tried to leverage word of mouth. At the end of the campaign, his emphasis is on, 'Would you call a couple of people and talk to them?' The old model was that the guy at the top tells people what's happening. Now, people at the bottom tell everyone else."

Additional reporting by John Maas.