



Our pols will learn from Obama campaign

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With Parliament set to open next week, both major parties will continue to fine tune their election machines for a vote that could come as early as fall 2009 or sometime in 2010. The Conservatives will gather for a policy convention this weekend in Winnipeg while Liberal partisans are busy sizing up their "horses" for next May's leadership convention in Vancouver. The party that best emulates the lessons learned from the recent U.S. presidential election will have the inside track when we next march off to the polls.

Lesson 1: The leader is the brand, and with apologies to Marshall McLuhan acolytes, the message (think Obama/Change/Obama) is the medium. On the leadership side, the Tories understood this in 2008 while the Liberals did not. As for the message, with multiple media through which you can communicate to voters, all of our political parties have work to do in this sphere.

Lesson 2: Words and speeches matter, attack ads, not so much. Conventional war-room politicians will roll their eyes at this one but network coverage of Barack Obama and John McCain speeches -- live feeds and analysis -- was off the charts. Of course Obama's platform presence and gift of gab drove some of this, but it also raised the Republican game, and Sarah Palin's speaking style -- legitimate substance concerns notwithstanding -- also resonated with many voters. The lesson for our parties is simple: Fewer photo ops, more speeches.

Lesson 3: Controlling your message is dead; liberating your message is the path to power. This is the counterintuitive lesson from the American campaign, specifically the Obama victory. While the Republicans went online with McCainSpace (a cross between MySpace and YouTube), the Democrats went viral with my.BarackObama.com or myBO (pronounced like bow).

MyBO was akin to Facebook on steroids. You could join a discussion thread, meet with other supporters -- virtually or in person -- in your own neighbourhood, download flyers, circulate speeches, blog away, donate, fundraise, recruit voters, etc. By the end of the campaign, over 20,000 groups were working through myBO. And according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, almost 50% of all Americans used the Internet to get political news and share their thoughts about the campaign.

Lesson 4: YouTube packs punch. In four years it has gone from quirky quasi-gotcha journalism to rivalling CNN and FoxNews. According to Newsweek, an average of 13 hours of new footage is uploaded to YouTube every minute of every day. And the Obama camp out-posted McCain by a factor of six to one. YouTube can be used instead of network TV, before network TV or to go deeper than network TV.

Lesson 5: Treat the blogosphere with the same deference as the mainstream media. Anonymous bloggers -- who skirt libel and slander laws -- are usually unreliable and malicious, but real people who sign their names to their blogs can be legit. On this front, Canadian political parties are on par with the Americans in courting the blogosphere.

Lesson 6: Today's youth are not apathetic. They will engage politically if (a big if) your message is compelling and you communicate through their media such as Twitter, SMS, Facebook, MSN, Skype and other programs. Indeed many young Americans did most of their campaign work -- reading speeches, arranging lifts to go vote, donating 20 bucks, or watching commercials -- online. Our political parties were online in 2008 but their efforts paled in comparison and ambition to our stateside friends.

Yes our campaign is much shorter than the U.S. presidential marathon, but the lessons learned are relevant considering the fact election readiness is the preoccupation of political parties, especially in a minority Parliament situation.

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