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Liberal leadership candidates are failing to harness the power of the web

By ALAN BONNER

The Liberals have just lost a fleeting opportunity to renew, grow and attract significant voter attention. The sale of memberships has closed and the eleven leadership candidates' stone-age web sites have done little to bring new, young liberals into the tent.

Most sites have serious navigation challenges which often mask where things are and what a user can find. Ken Dryden and Gerard Kennedy's are particularly busy, and Kennedy's has such conflicting colours that it's hard to access new pages and information.

Amazingly, Scott Brison, Joe Volpe, Stéphane Dion and Maurizio Bevilacqua don't have blogs. Bob Rae has some kind of virtual community that you have to go through hoops to access, and Michael Ignatieff has others blogging for him. Only Ignatieff and Martha Hall Findlay have video on their sites and only Ignatieff offers podcasts or audio.

What a waste. In the last election, just five months ago, the NDP got good mileage out of their viral ads on their site, probably gaining as much free publicity from news reports about them as they paid to shoot them. The Liberals had an entertaining blog and the Tories had good video streaming and podcasting.

How these eleven candidates thought they could run a modern campaign without at least demonstrating they could manage new media is a mystery. Whoever leads the party will need to employ all these techniques if he or she hopes to beat Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservatives, but none is demonstrating an adequate proficiency in these areas.

This marks one of the first leadership campaigns to a delegated convention where web technology exists to engage young people, voters in remote communities and those who have not participated in politics before. All these groups and seasoned Liberals could be more motivated by web access to candidates than by media reports. At least the web is at the touch of a keyboard—when the candidate is usually thousands of miles away.

Political research shows that there have traditionally been three distinct uses of mainstream news media: campaigning for nomination, campaigning for general election, and governing. News media is almost irrelevant in a delegated convention. News reports remind potential delegates of your fame and voter appeal, but signing up delegates is mainly done door to door, in basements and kitchens. This research pre-dates the web, which is an ideal tool to reinforce this kind of person-to-person wooing.

Why do Carolyn Bennett, Dion, Bevilacqua, Hedy Fry and Volpe have dark, odd or out of focus pictures on their web sites? Why does Ignatieff's picture look as if someone is standing on his toe or there's a funny smell in the room? Why on earth would Kennedy borrow former Conservative prime minister Kim Campbell's old phrase "doing politics differently"?

For whatever reason, most candidates either don't have speeches posted on their sites or make them hard to find. You can find speeches by Rae, Brison, Kennedy, Volpe and Findlay. Rae's appear to have been written in sentence fragments, imitating ad copy. Volpe's speeches feature a bold word every line or so, as if he suspects we can't be bothered to read the whole thing.

Kennedy's features two sentences that look as if they are rejects from an early Bob Dylan lyric for his song, Desolation Row: "Mr. Harper is a street vendor selling imitation Rolex's while he's selling a vision of a Canada with successful immigrants, educational advantage and a turnaround of poverty. Mr. Harper shops at the Republican store but the day of the leader-king is gone. I'm here to be a catalyst." Really?

Part of the purpose of web presence is easy interaction with voters. In a riding, a candidate moves heaven and earth to meet a few voters going door to door. I've worked with candidates who've knocked on 30,000 doors to get elected. They also work the phone banks, making thousands of calls just to get a few dozen people out to a coffee party.

On the web, you can get a thousand hits in a day, but only if you give people a reason to visit. Policy, speeches, fascinating facts, sound, pictures and even games can do the trick. But once you have voters interacting with you, you must hold on to them for dear life. The Liberals do not.

I sent an email request for information to all campaigns and was completely ignored by Dryden, Ignatieff, Rae, Volpe, Brison and Bennett. I had a researcher send a letter requesting campaign information and that was ignored by every candidate who wants to lead the great Liberal Party except Ignatieff. What we received from Ignatieff was an unsigned letter from "Ignatieff Volunteers."

Calls to each campaign were almost as unproductive. All my researcher asked for was a list of supporters and a hard copy of a speech. Findlay and Bennett's campaigns were preoccupied with whether the caller was a reporter. Who cares? Send out a speech.

Dion's staffer didn't take a name or number and referred the caller to the Elections' Canada site. The person who answers Volpe's phone seemed annoyed and also didn't take a name or number. She told us to call the Toronto office but wouldn't give out the number.

Kennedy and Volpe promised to return calls, but that didn't happen. We were on hold with Ignatieff's campaign for 15 minutes before we gave up and disconnected the call. Amazingly, Dryden's site doesn't seem to list a phone number. Dion at least has someone who read us a list of supporters from *The Hill Times*, the political weekly in Ottawa. Bevilacqua had someone call back, but just referred us to *The Hill Times* and wouldn't read the list over the phone.

To be fair, Dion's use of the word "Buzz" draws attention. Rae and Bennett have someone who calls back in less than two minutes.

So is all this dirty pool? Is whether a candidate can put up a good web site or answer emails, letters and phone calls really a decent litmus test of whether she or he can run the country? Two important researchers would say yes.

In Timothy Crouse's classic study of the campaign trail, *The Boys on the Bus*, the author makes the relevant comment that a well-run bus is a well-run country. This means that reporters (and by extension voters) judge that the candidate who makes the bus run on time is also competent to run the country, if elected.

Superficial? Well, eminent sociologist Herbert Gans wrote another classic study called *Deciding What's News*. I asked Gans whether Crouse's criteria means that democracy is going to Hell in a hand basket. He replied with a question of his own. First, he pointed out that the bus and candidates' public events are all that reporters and most of the electorate see of a candidate. They are entitled to judge a politician accordingly. Second, if you can't attract a bunch of young, keen kids to run a bus, how are you going to run the country?

All eleven Liberal candidates have the dead zone of the summer to get their metaphorical buses in order. This includes using web sites and all the new technology available. In the fall, we'll see if any of them have earned a second look.

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