Winning Elections in 2020:
Knowledge is Power, and Data is Knowledge
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Data makes a difference when it comes to elections. This isn’t a new revelation, but data’s role at the center of campaign strategy is a moving target that changes as fast as technology itself.

The good news: Data and tech have made it easier than ever to communicate policies, values, and skills to a large audience on a consistent and trackable basis. You can have real-time visibility into who you’re reaching, on what platform, at what time, and what messages speak to that audience and drive the highest engagement.

The challenge: The political arena is noisier than ever, the rules of engagement keep changing, audiences want their messages delivered in different ways, information about people is deep but not necessarily useful, and it’s easy for a message to hit a wrong note and result in a widely-disseminated gaffe.

In short, while data is key, human capital—creativity and strategy—remains the driver of successful races. This paper mines expertise from top strategists in the field and highlights the must-know areas for a successful digital campaign.
The Three M’s

Experts in political strategy know the “three M’s” as the backbone of any political strategy. They stand for:

1. **Money**
2. **Messaging**
3. **Mobilization**

**Money** is, well, the source of everything. Available funds and fundraising effectiveness will dictate your ability to deploy resources and manpower and reach a wide audience, period. There is no digital campaign without funds—and likewise, there is less opportunity for fundraising without digital.

**Messaging** comes down to effectively communicating your candidate’s story, values, policies, and positions in a way that speaks powerfully to a strong base. Here’s where the interplay between machines and humans becomes critical. Data can guide you to your base, help you meet people where they are, and let you know in real time how messages are landing. But it can’t create messaging, guide creative decisions, or steer responses to criticism and participation in the digital conversation.

**Mobilization** is the brass tacks of getting people to take actions, from opening their wallets during the campaign to traveling to the polls on Election Day. A strong digital strategy will give you power to mobilize your base on a grassroots level and at scale.

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**Campaign Tip:**

**Be Nimble: The Best Political Campaign Starts with One Plan and Often Ends with Another**

During a campaign’s duration it should be optimized to best-performing tactics, creatives, sites, and targets, i.e., the best laid plans are subject to change and that’s a good thing! This is how you achieve goals and drive mobilization. Digital is adaptable, so use insights to inform how targets are interacting with messaging and shift tactics accordingly.

This is especially important for political campaigns, due to the timeliness and need to ensure campaign performance.

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**On Social, It’s All About Starting Early**

Step one of a strong social media strategy is establishing your presence long before the race begins. While posting on social early on may sound like busywork, it’s actually a chance to hone messaging, test wording, and define North Star values. Once a race is underway, reacting and conversing, it can be easy to lose your core message in the 24/7 cycle. If you’ve built strong habits grounding your identity on social, you’ll be in a stronger position once things get hectic.
1. Money:
Set Goals, Use Data, ‘Be Normal’

When it comes to a fundraising strategy, the first rule is be sure to know your goal. How much you’re looking to raise will determine the extent of efforts across all digital channels.

Next comes deployment, which requires a smart ask and a strong story. Your ability to persuade people to open their wallets early on, and throughout the campaign, is tied to the effectiveness of your messaging and engagement with supporters.

Money and Campaigns: The Numbers Keep Rising

In the 2018 midterms, candidates spent over $5 billion, making it the costliest congressional election cycle in U.S. history.

Source: Opensecrets.org

Respect Your Donors’ Time

Inspiring people to reach into their pocketbooks and donate to your campaign is a delicate task, and getting it wrong carries a high cost.

Success lies in identifying and speaking to your base’s key values. “You have limited space you can occupy in [your supporters’] psyche so you want to make sure you’re giving them topics they really care about,” says Mindy Finn, Executive Director of Stand Up Republic and a former digital media executive and GOP strategist.

Respecting people’s time is also crucial. Call banks to data-driven lists and constant texts or emails can quickly become a nuisance and sour your less-enthusiastic supporters. Likewise, daily emails to your list may be welcome, or they may turn people off—especially if you end with an appeal for a donation every time. Data will give you insight into whether you’re engaging or annoying people, but common sense and evoking the adage “treat others as you would like to be treated,” aka the Golden Rule, is the better alternative to finding out after-the-fact that you’ve alienated members of your base.

“You have to treat people like you’re a normal person,” says Michael Slaby, Chief Strategist at Harmony Labs, a nonprofit that decodes the effects of media on society, and former CTO of Barack Obama’s 2008 and 2012 presidential campaign.
Know Your Brand

When it comes to messaging, there are lessons that candidates can take from the corporate world. Establishing a strong brand identity and narrative is where it all begins.

“All digital campaigning, be it marketing or politics, is telling stories as a means of building support and driving behavior,” says Slaby. “The mechanics and tactics of building support are the same.”

As such, the branding rules that work for giants like Nike or Patagonia can work for political campaigns. From identifying your public-speaking persona to your clothing style to your favorite books and movies—not to mention your policy agenda and stance on key issues—each element of your candidacy should cohere into a unique and identifiable brand that is clearly communicated from the outset, and never altered.

People consume a political candidate’s digital content on the same platforms and in the same ways that they consume any other content, meaning that the rules for successful engagement apply whether you’re Wal-Mart or a Congressional incumbent.

Pro Tip: Fundraising vs. Base Support

Be aware of the difference between community building and fundraising. For example, getting someone to join your email list and give $50 is not a direct line to an ask for a $1,000 donation. You may have ardent supporters who want to organize events and build your social media base, but who are unable or unwilling to donate cash.

“Campaigns that fundraise badly drop people from a paid search page onto a donate page,” says Harmony Labs’ Slaby. “That is a huge strategic mistake, since the lifetime value of acquiring first and converting later is much higher.”

Respect is the name of the game, as is recognizing the high value of building lifetime relationships.

Campaign Tip: Get a Consensus of What Success Means

Only by knowing key objectives can a strategy be set. Is the goal awareness, site traffic, engagement, or donations? For each goal there may be a different strategy and KPI, so determine what’s important internally and from there work with agency partners to achieve it. If any pixeling/tagging is needed to track these KPIs ensure they’re in place prior to launch.
2. Messaging:
*Humans and Machines, Working Together*

**Data:**
*When and How to Deploy*

Once your brand is solidified, it's time to bring in data.

“Find a data partner who can help you target your messaging to specific groups of your supporters,” says Zac Moffatt, founder and CEO of Targeted Victory and former Digital Director of Mitt Romney for President.

At the outset, data will connect you with your existing base. “Data can help you find who is already on your side, where they are and how they spend their time,” says Slaby. “From there you can create an algorithm and a strategy for how to reach your supporters.”

Still, beware of over-reliance on data. It is a tool, not a guide.

For starters, data sets and algorithms may indicate past behavior, but they do not predict future trends or even accurately show how a group of people will react to certain messaging. “It’s true that the data is there to be used,” says Targeted Victory’s Moffatt. “But there’s a black box within the data.”

The right way to use your data, according to experts, is to cast a wide net and let the feedback loop work for you. That’s a better strategy than digging into the initial data to find individuals and groups that appear to match your target base and then building messaging to attract their attention.

Particularly on social, spreading a message broadly can put power in the hands of your supporters, who will rise to help you.

**Testing and Targeting:**
*Where to Focus*

Once you’ve established a base and a stream of messaging, then it’s time to deploy targeting, sub-targeting, and metrics reviews. Rapid A/B testing and analytics are a must. When choosing what to test, everything is fair game: subject lines, times of day, format within the message, and visuals within the message.

At this point, it’s also a good idea to send segmented campaigns to constituencies based on what they care about—a rule that applies to both values-based messaging and fundraising.

“Highly segmented messaging will educate and persuade—that is the mainstay of digital campaigning,” says Mindy Finn.

Microtargeting will let you distribute online ads to various segments and see what values and messages move specific constituencies.

**Pro Tip:**
*Hire an AI Pro*

Data and artificial intelligence can create profiles of voters that include hundreds and even thousands of data points. Still, AI is not a cure-all for winning elections. You need an experienced strategist who knows what AI can do and what it can’t—and the ethics of using it.

“Digital marketers who understand how to use robust data and AI are becoming the critical hires of a campaign,” says Finn. “They understand the importance of employing data well.”

**Pro Tip:**
*Honor Your Email List*

Once a seemingly antiquated tool, the email list has made a comeback as one of the most effective ways to establish a base and communicate with donors in a personal, authentic way.

“Your email list, plus a savvy and targeted data-driven fragmented email program, will maximize your online fundraising,” says StandUp Republic’s Finn.

For more information please go to mni.com, or email insight.lab@mni.com
3. Mobilization: The IRL Finish Line

While so much of a political campaign now happens online, there is one fixed variable: voting must occur in person.

Online Driving IRL (In Real Life)
Throughout the campaign, your digital strategy can be a powerful means of driving IRL behavior, bringing people together for everything from rallies to debates to public Q&As. Strengthening this muscle as you go will ensure that, come Election Day, you have systems and processes in place to mobilize your supporters in the real world.

Campaign Tip: Trust is important for data.

At the heart of any communications campaign is data. Data, especially when used in the context of political mobilization and fundraising, must be from a trusted source to safeguard quality and, by association, the best interests of the candidate. If you have data, you’re on your way. If you don’t, get some from a trusted resource. Data that is drawn carefully from selected sources, transformed in accordance with the data’s intended use, and delivered in formats and timeframes appropriate to specific consumers works best. These and other data properties assure that data is trustworthy from a technical viewpoint, as well as by users who consume the data through reports and applications.
The Votes Are In, and the Winner is...

...a successful digital campaign that has a strategy covering all three M’s.

“Campaigns that have been most successful online are not just good at organizing or fundraising but are firing on all cylinders, across all three areas, in a smart and effective way,” says Mindy Finn.

Bring in the right staff and the right partners, and you’ll be miles ahead. Know which communities gravitate to your message, what those communities care about, and how, when, and where they congregate to discuss. And of course, be sure you know how to reach them.

And when it comes to data, keep this rule in mind: it can give you the tools and materials to construct a house, but it can’t build you a home. Data is the foundation of any campaign.

Top Campaign Tips:

- Get a consensus of what success means.
- Define key objectives and set goals and tactics for each KPI.
- Establish a strong brand identity.
  - Use data insights to determine best prospects and the optimal platform with which to reach them.
- The combination of data, creativity and strategy is the driver of successful races.
  - Tailor messaging to your audience(s).
- Implementing a social campaign early will realize the best results and will give messaging time to rise organically.
  - Start posting early and hone your messaging, test wording, and shape your identity.
- Optimize best-performing tactics, creatives, sites, and targets to achieve goals and drive mobilization.
- Use analytics to determine how targets are interacting with messaging.
  - Shift tactics and refresh creative periodically to maintain engagement.

For more information please go to mni.com, or email insight.lab@mni.com
MNI Targeted Media is a new breed of data-centric advertising firm that prides itself on innovative digital strategies and thought leadership.

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