

# 10 QUESTIONS WITH



## BEN SELF

### *Social Media: 'A Good Thing for Democracy Overall'*

Blue State Digital worked with the Obama/Biden campaign on its Internet presence in the 2008 presidential election. Co-founder Ben Self of Lexington, Ky., offers insights and advice on how state officials and agencies can best leverage this new form of interaction with the people they serve.

**By Mary Branham**

#### 1 How is social media—Twitter, Facebook, YouTube—changing government?

“(The Internet and social media) allow for large groups of individuals to collectively exert their beliefs and kind of influence over a set of elected officials or politicians in a way that they hadn’t been able to organize before. While previously that influence was left to lobbyists or large fundraisers, now suddenly you have governments and elected officials who are responsible to a large number of constituents, which I think is a good thing for democracy overall.”

#### 2 What benefits do these new media have for government officials and the public?

“From a citizen standpoint, being able to be more in touch with what is going on statewide or with elected officials is a great thing. It all comes down to tearing down walls—walls that have stood for a long time between citizens and the government that is there to support and help them.”

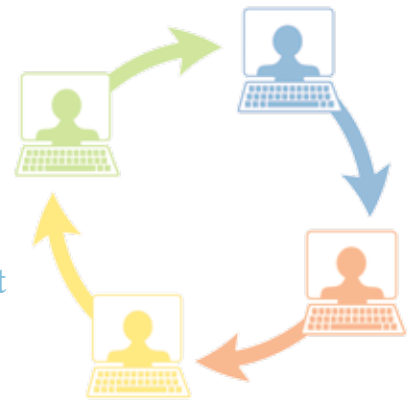
#### 3 What should officials consider when setting up a Facebook, Twitter or other social networking account?

“Number one is make sure you have real reason for doing it. There are plenty of people doing it just to check the box. At the end of the day that doesn’t really gain you anything. It kind of loses credibility with people who had hoped to have a better kind of interaction with you.”

#### 4 How do you achieve the goals you set for these networking sites?

“In most cases, that means you need to have a real, authentic interaction with people online. It’s not just a new place to push out press releases. It’s not just a new place to say the same sort of things you say or to link to media coverage or to link to new polls. It’s a place to help build support for you whether you are an organization or a state level politician. And you build that support the same way you build support from someone in person. It’s in some ways no different than a rally where you go around and shake a bunch of people’s hands and meet them and speak to them.”

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## 5 What does social networking hold for the future of politics and government?

“It is the wave of the future, maybe not necessarily Twitter or Facebook or any one of the individual tools, but people now have learned through the Obama campaign—and otherwise—to interact with their elected officials in a very different way. It doesn’t matter whether you’re running for city council, state house, state senate, governor, whatever it is you’re running for.”

## 6 Where do you start?

“... the basics are really important, so having a good Web site with a professional design and ability to interact and engage with people and to tweak and make changes to the Web site on a quick and efficient basis is incredibly important. ... And then you can reach out and do other things like YouTube and Twitter and Facebook, which you can use to help drive traffic to your Web site and to engage with people who might be on the sites themselves.”

## 7 How do you pick a networking site to use?

“You have to really start with goals. ... Then you go to the most trafficked site whether it’s YouTube, Facebook or Twitter and use those to build supporter lists and reach out to people through social networks to reach other individuals and then to drive them back to your Web site where you can ask them for the key things. It depends on what your goal is.”

## 8 Are there things officials should consider before launching these sites?

“From an image perspective, a lot of politicians have learned this, anything you do now is recordable and uploadable to the Internet in 20 minutes. ... So you have to remember that everything you’re doing is in public and treat it as a public medium. That said, you don’t want to have every word and every line you type vetted through 15 different lawyers, because then you lose not only your timeliness but also the authenticity and realness of the interaction. It’s a tough balance.”

## 9 Are there drawbacks for public officials using these sites?

“Obviously when you open up your area for feedback, you have to be prepared to get feedback. ... Communication is one-tenth of the work and nine-tenths is actually dealing with the results of that communication.”

## 10 What advice would you give to a legislator or governor’s office or agency for using new media?

“I think first I would not be distracted by the latest and greatest trends, and instead focus on the building blocks correctly. Make sure you have a Web site that looks like it’s new and modern ... and make sure you’re communicating. Have easy ways for people to join your e-mail list and communicate with that e-mail list regularly in an authentic, timely and engaging manner. Once you do those things and are doing those things regularly, then I think you can start looking at external sites ...”

## You CAN Use Social Media

Want to learn how to put social media to work for you? You can hear more from Ben Self at The Council of State Governments Annual Conference in La Quinta, Calif., Nov. 14, and then get into a new media lab to set it all up. Visit [www.csg.org](http://www.csg.org) and click on Meetings to register.