

'Howard who?'

BY WAYNE HALL

If asked this time last year to identify Democratic contenders in the current election cycle, the average person would have been forgiven for not knowing that the former governor of Vermont was campaigning for the White House. Indeed, Howard Dean's campaign may now only be a footnote in the history of the 2004 presidential season. But in one respect it did succeed where others failed.

The Dean campaign was the first to fully exploit the Web to organize a constituency on behalf of a political candidate. It will not be the last. In contrast to previous political campaigns, which in essence posted candidate glossies, position statements and an invitation to contribute time and money, the Dean campaign figured out how to tap this power by avoiding one key mistake: viewing the medium as a one-way forum like television or radio.

Instead, campaign managers used the Web as a way of reaching people who already believed in the message to get them to meet, discuss, debate and, more importantly to Dean, organize on behalf of his candidacy.

Edward Cone successfully makes this point in his December 2003 article, "The Marketing of the President 2004" in *Baseline* magazine, where he details efforts by Dean strategists to get supporters to walk out from behind their computer screens to exchange their "mouse pads for shoe leather."

The campaign enlisted users of personal Web publishing software, often referred to a "bloggers," sites such as Meetup.com and MoveOn.org, and collaborative Web applications to fashion a fresh political commons. Individual users of such "social software" could each enlist support, organize meetings and contribute his or her efforts in a way that campaigns in the past could never do using radio and television alone. There was an unprecedented dialog between ordinary people and a candidate for national office. The result was an exponential growth in support for the former governor.

Dean transformed this support into the most successful fundraising machine ever put together by a Democratic

candidate for president, raising more than \$5 million a month in the second half of 2003. Dean's fundraising was so successful in fact that he turned down federal matching funds, leaving him free to continue to raise as much cash as possible in an effort to expand his financial lead on party rivals, if not the incumbent.

One economic theory holds that the cost of organizing determines the size of the organization. If that is so, Dean's effort to use the Web to grow this support was good business. In dollars and cents, it was a bargain.

But there is another side to this story. Keen observers note that these same collaborative technologies seem to have the effect of making consumers of us all. While they turn up the volume they can also roughen the conversation. We want what we want.

Take the music industry for example. Collaborative technologies are in the process of balancing the lopsided arrangements that once prevailed by rearranging the interests of recording companies and the artists and consumers with whom they do business. Think recording labels charge outrageous sums for music CDs? Apple's iTunes has a deal for you. Similarly, designers and manufacturers can now tailor products in mid-production to meet changing consumer tastes.

The same ethic applies elsewhere. The Dean candidacy illustrates an emerging bottom-up economy where the buyer has unprecedented power in relationships. Like consumers, voters can now be heard long before entering the voting booth.

Regardless of what happens to Dean's candidacy, one thing is clear: people have something to say and a powerful new method for saying it. Unlike previous targets for television and radio advertising, the online audience can talk back.

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