

MoveOn's 'Betray Us' ad a smart move

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We could be wrong, but here's a prediction about the power of viral campaigns: By the time the dust settles on the storm kicked up by MoveOn.org's highly provocative "[Petraeus/Betray Us](#)" ad in The New York Times on Sept. 10, the online group will have seen its 3.2-million-strong e-mail membership list grow substantially.

That's because MoveOn understands the way messages move in our new Internet-driven media environment. It's not enough to make a speech or issue a press release or buy a newspaper ad. Nor does it matter if you have a great press list, or ins with all the top political bloggers on the planet or a blog of your own.

You have to do something "remark"-able that individuals will want to talk about and share with others. (Even if that means a lot of those individuals will be criticizing you, as the Republicans have been attacking MoveOn's rhetoric.)

See Also:

- **Video: Orrin Hatch on MoveOn: 'These People Are Nuts' (courtesy of Breitbart)**

A recent study by Jupiter Research concluded that only about 15 percent of viral campaigns succeed in convincing consumers to promote the marketer's message.

The Jupiter study noted that most marketers aim their campaigns at so-called influentials — the people in a target group to whom their peers turn for guidance — as if those people can somehow, by force of will, get their peers to pay attention to something.

Commenting on this study, messaging maven Seth Godin wrote on his blog, "True viral marketing happens not when the marketer plans for it or targets bloggers or skateboarders or pirates with goatees, but when the item/service/event is worth talking about."

With rare exceptions, the 2008 presidential campaigns have ignored this basic rule, which was true even before the Internet, and which matters even more now. That's because more and more, voters can determine what messages they will listen to, what messages they will ignore and what messages they will share with others.

About 20 percent of the TV-owning population has a digital video recorder like TiVo, which means they can tune out campaign ads to their heart's delight. At least 60 million adults went online in 2006 to find political information, a number that will surely be much larger in 2008.

Surveys show that as people have gotten overwhelmed with paid advertising, their trust in such messages has declined, while their trust in word-of-mouth (and word-of-Web) from friends and acquaintances has soared.

Yet what have the major presidential campaigns done that has generated significant viral traction? The only really successful example is Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign song contest and the "Sopranos" spoof video that she did with her husband, Bill.

That generated a huge spike in her Web traffic, blog mentions and, we're sure, e-mail signups. It's also worth mentioning Mitt Romney's "Create Your Own Ad" contest, which has gotten many of his supporters engaged, and John Edwards' quick response to Ann Coulter's vitriolic attack on his

wife, Elizabeth.

The fact is, it's a very short list. The presidential campaigns just aren't giving their supporters, or the wider public, very much to do or talk about. Yes, most of the campaigns are embracing the bells and whistles of the social Web.

Every presidential candidate has a blog and a presence on the major social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook. Many of them have created platforms where their supporters can create their own mini-campaign on the candidate's behalf, with tools for raising money, organizing events and writing their own blog posts.

But if you look for bottom-up dynamism on these sites — the kind that gave the Howard Dean campaign its energy in 2003 — you won't find it. The official campaign blogs are written by the equivalent of digital press secretaries.

While the blog posts written by grass-roots supporters may show some spontaneity and genuine passion, all the campaigns — even Obama's, which has the largest base of grass-roots supporters — keep those tightly under wraps.

None of the campaign websites devote consistent space on their home pages to independent efforts on the candidate's behalf; every inch of their online real estate is devoted to pushing their message, as opposed to trusting others to spread that for them.

It's obviously still early to draw final conclusions about the Net and the 2008 presidential campaign. But the way things are going right now, it looks as though the whole field — not just the Republicans — has retreated from the high-water mark of bold online politicking set by Dean last cycle.

They're all playing it safe, using the new tools of the Web at a fraction of their real capacity. It's no wonder they've given us so little to talk about.

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