AMERICAN MARKETER

Business at its best

Voting, politics and mobile

November 8, 2012

By Shuli Lowy

With President Obama reelected, the 2012 elections will forever hold a landmark in mobile marketing history. It was the first elections where smartphones really played a central role in the campaigns' advertising.

While neither the Romney or Obama campaigns discussed how much of the roughly $159 million spent in online advertising was allocated to mobile, they both disclosed their involvement in advertising on mobile phones and tablets. Both ran ads on Google. The Romney campaign also ran ads on Apple's iAd.

And it was for good reason.

Making a push

A Ping Mobile survey found that 37.8 percent of mobile users looked up news and information about the elections on their phone during the 2012 elections.

Voters were clearly interacting with their phones quite a lot during this campaign and the marketing leaders in this election knew it.

One of the reasons that mobile ads were such a large component of this election is because of the ad-targeting mechanisms.

Candidates were able to target swing states as well as specific demographics, genders and age groups that they were trying to "win over."

The parties also alluded to using hyper-local advertising to zero-in on their target audience. This granularity made mobile ad placements particularly valuable to the nominees.

However, the mobile involvement extended far beyond just placing mobile ads. Both campaigns also featured easy-to-use mobile Web sites along with search-based ads attempting to divert traffic from voters searching for the opponent's mobile site.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of mobile marketing used in the elections has been the mobile applications.

Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate, made national headlines when he announced that he was going to release the name of his vice presidential pick via a push notification on an app built specifically for that purpose.

The strategic format of the release not only triggered numerous downloads of the app the exact number was not disclosed but encouraged people to allow push notifications to come from the app. That enabled the Romney campaign to push messages to users in subsequent weeks.

The Obama campaign had pulled a similar technique in the 2008 elections when it got 2.9 million voters to opt-in to receive a text message announcing then-candidate Mr. Obama's vice presidential pick.

The most current Obama campaign app has also received many accolades for its integration with Google Maps to help users find nearby fellow democrats.

The app displays a local map along with little flags notating the address, name, gender, age and party affiliation of fellow neighbors.

Some have criticized this function of the app as an invasion of privacy.

Friendly medium

Another point to note in the mobile election strategy was the massive focus on using mobile as a catalyst for social media sharing.

Nearly every campaign post, mobile Web site and mobile app asked viewers to share the news or announce their affiliations via Facebook or Twitter.

Currently, the average Facebook account has 190 friends and the average Twitter account user has 126 followers. Each social media share therefore was a great organic PR release for candidates.

One thing that is certain is that both the Obama and Romney campaigns really played the mobile battlefield on multiple fronts.

Mobile was valued not just as a standalone voter touch point but also as a full circle extension of other media channels. Voters often did fact checks on their phones while watching the debate or other commercials and subsequently posted their views on social media sites via their phones.

The 2012 elections have reaffirmed to us what we already know consumer mobile interactions are too powerful and too common to ignore.

Shuli Lowy is marketing director at Ping Mobile, Beverly Hills, CA. Reach her at shuli.lowy@pingmobile.com.