

Know How to Use On-Line Voter File System But You Also Must Remember It's Just a Tool

By **BOB BLAEMIRE**

Every aspect of political campaigning has seemed to progress substantially over the past few decades. From buying television time to producing direct mail, campaigners' level of professionalism has grown with the advance of new technologies and modern techniques.

The explosion of the internet has, strangely, affected one aspect of campaigning in a negative manner. For those of us who build voter files in campaigns and work with databases of all types, the emphasis in campaigns is increasingly not on the data but on the on-line interface that is used to process the data.

The various web-based tools for manipulating voter files has become democratized in a way, in that you don't have to be a computer geek or a paid vendor to use a

campaign's voter file for targeting and voter contact.

This has been, for the most part, a positive development. Campaigns with extensive field organizations have the ability to ensure their field staff and volunteers are operating off the same database and the results of their ID work is appended to the common database in a highly efficient and accurate manner. The process for manipulating data has been simplified in that all manners of campaigners with limited expertise are using voter data effectively because of these on-line tools.

We have developed an on-line voter file system, known as Leverage, and it has changed our political lives dramatically. But where we used to spend the lion's share of our time talking with campaigns

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about the nature of the data, about the phone match or the inconsistency of various data items, for instance, we now spend most of our time fielding questions and comments about what it does do, doesn't do and should do.

But what about the data? The emphasis that used to dominate our lives, to make sure the data is current, populated with necessary data items and created with methodology that the client understands has disappeared. But our Leverage, like other on-line systems, is just a tool.

I often remind people that just because the tool is easy to use it doesn't make you smart. Just because the computer system is easy on the eye doesn't mean the data is easy on the budget, or has what you need.

The demands of clients have been what has caused this process to get better. But now the demand on clients is to make the tool better, with few concerns expressed about the data. And the data is everything.

Inaccurate householding can waste thousand of dollars in direct mail costs. A poor phone match can miss important targets and waste precious dollars incurred by phone banks. And volunteers walking to the homes of dead people quickly saps the enthusiasm of those volunteers.

Getting the data right is critical to efficient and effective direct voter contact. Good tools for in-house data management are increasingly important but less important and a bit more dangerous if the database is not what it should be.

Secondly, this dependence on the staffer who manages the web-based voter file has ended up meaning that same staffer, regardless of voter contact experience or targeting expertise, is producing the data for voter contact - to mail houses, phone banks and field operation.

Direct mail consultants we have worked

with for many years, who understand targeting and how you play with databases to reach quantities of targets which the budget can handle, began expressing concerns about the fact that they were getting their mailing data from inexperienced computer operators in the campaigns who may know nothing about targeting and about the data. The more we had these conversations, the more worried we became that database expertise and political expertise were being replaced by internet familiarity.

Shouldn't it matter that the person handling the voter contact products have an understanding of individual versus precinct targeting, how to look at household make-up yet to be able to select individual voters based on the households they live in? Shouldn't the person manipulating the data be fully versed on its gaps and inconsistencies?

This is what vendors like us and others in the field have been doing for clients for years, to create high quality databases and to manipulate them with an understanding of the contents.

It seemed incongruous then, and does now, that the final processes to create targeted universes for phones and mail were managed by staff people who had never worked in a campaign before and know little about the voter file. Their web surfing expertise has replaced political experience in running voter contact programs. It's just a tool.

Would we ever allow someone to build a room on our homes whose sole qualification is the ability to expertly use a workman's tools, pound in nails evenly or saw a straight line? I suggest we would rather have those hammers and saws handled by someone who has also learned how to build a house. An expert carpenter should be preferred over a novice handy man.

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Yet this emphasis on the tools for managing data has led to a diminution of attention about the data itself as well as foolish decisions that internet expertise has more value than political or database expertise.

Any campaign that intends to make direct voter contact a priority needs to focus on the existence of a high quality voter file. Questions should be asked of the vendor about how and when the data was compiled, what are its imperfections and how should they be dealt with. References for the vendor are important just as they are for any consultant hired by the campaign.

Those same kinds of interrogations should take place when a database is made available through another source, like the state party. Just because it is free or inexpensive has no bearing on whether it is any good or not.

Once those questions are solved to the satisfaction of the campaign is the question

about the on-line interface important. Any campaign these days that wants to have an extensive field operation can benefit by a web-based tool for managing the voter file. A good tool, with good data, can save the campaign money throughout the course of the voter contact effort. And those who implement the targeting schemes in the production of mailing or phoning data need to understand more than just how to click on the right buttons in the right screens.

But all campaigns need to look at the entire process – the big picture so to speak – and not just the portion of it represented by the on-line system.

After all – it's just a tool.

Bob Blaemire is the president of Blaemire Communications, a Democratic voter file company. He has been developing voter files for Democratic State Parties, candidates and affiliated organizations for over 25 years.

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