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BUSINESS & LOBBYING

Building a better list

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A technique forged to boost voter turnout in tight political campaigns is now pumping up grassroots lobbying efforts on major public policy fights over labor organizing, healthcare reform and climate change.

Until recently, microtargeting referred to the practice of leveraging the growing store of personal data to tailor campaign messages to specific segments of the population, from snowmobilers in Michigan to union members in Akron.

The practice first gained prominence during President Bush's reelection campaign in 2004. President Obama's campaign fine-tuned the technique to raise historic amounts of money from online donors.

Veterans of Bush and Obama presidential campaigns are now driving the evolution of microtargeting as an advocacy tool.

Combining basic data like party affiliation and age with more details like whether someone is a member of the Sierra Club or subscribes to GQ magazine enables microtargeters to more accurately predict the pool of potential supporters, said Thomas Gensemer, managing partner at Blue State Digital, which managed online fundraising, constituency building and issue advocacy efforts for the Obama campaign.

"Everyone involved in advocacy efforts has better tools to merge data," Gensemer said. Blue State Digital has used microtargeting to win support for healthcare reform and the Employee Free Choice Act, which would make it easier for workers to organize.

Alexander Gage helped President George Bush win reelection in 2004 by employing techniques that allowed the campaign to target its messaging to a few key groups. Now Gage, the CEO of TargetPoint Consulting in Alexandria, Va., says he is working on "four or five" public advocacy campaigns, a relatively new line of business for the firm.

His clients include a business group, which he declined to name, that is using microtargeting to find opponents of the Employee Free Choice Act, also known as card-check.

Technological advances and basic trial and error in past campaigns have improved microtargeting modeling, Gage said, enabling firms like his to better determine “what sequence of information is the most indicative of who is going to support you.”

Grassroots lobbying has always been about the quality of lists — that is, names of potential advocates who, when contacted, will be likely to support the cause and, equally importantly, take the time to actually do something about it.

Grassroots advocacy firms used to rely on telemarketing calls, direct mail and general advertising to attract potential supporters, but the percentage of respondents was fairly low.

Because of the difficulty and expense of compiling lists, some interest groups turned to so-called AstroTurf lobbying efforts, in which public-relations firms and other specialists pay people to participate. But staffers say they can generally snuff out when a grassroots campaign is real or bought.

Microtargeting modeling provides more bang for the buck, its proponents say. By cross-referencing hundreds of pieces of information, issue advocates can draw a clearer picture of likely supporters. That means it costs less per person to build a grassroots base of advocates.

Steve Bouchard, campaign manager of Repower America, which is pushing climate change legislation, said his network is sophisticated enough that he can activate “a couple million people in short order” to weigh in on a particular fight in Congress.

“It’s a brave new world,” he said.

Bouchard said his group focused on one wavering member on the Energy and Commerce Committee in the days before a critical panel vote on a cap-and-trade bill. Repower America was able to call on members who actually live in the member’s district to contact the congressional office. Bouchard declined to name the member, who he said eventually supported the climate bill.

“We’re at a place now where eight years ago, you couldn’t dream about,” Bouchard said.

Using targeted advertising through search engines like Google has increased the efficiency of grassroots campaigns, said Gensemer of Blue State Digital, which is helping to identify Wal-Mart employees for Wal-Mart Watch, a campaign designed to build support for unionizing the retail chain.

Campaigns can tie Internet search terms to links to information on organizing meetings or letters and petitions to Congress.

Gensemer said he usually links information on organizing efforts or other grassroots activities to 3,000 search words in targeted geographical areas — the Cleveland suburbs,

for example. Personal e-mail addresses are sometimes all that are needed to build a base of support, but until recently they were fairly hard to come by.

To some government watchdog groups, the increase in the level of sophistication of grassroots lobbying underscores the need to update lobbying disclosure rules to keep pace. Lobbyists have to register with Congress, but grassroots campaigns are required to release little information about their origin.

Groups like Public Citizen pushed for requiring the disclosure of expenditures of grassroots campaigns when Congress updated ethics laws in response to the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal. But the provision was taken out due to wariness that the government would have access to membership lists of private groups.

But that means there are billions of dollars being spent to influence public opinion that are largely unreported, Holman said.

“It’s a real dark hole we’ve got here when it comes with these types of lobbying efforts,” he said. He estimates companies spend two to three times as much on grassroots campaigns as they do on direct lobbying.

And yet the effectiveness of such efforts remains an open question.

Success on the campaign trail is easily measured by whether a candidate wins. Passing legislation, particularly on big issues like healthcare reform and climate change, is often a much slower process with more variables determining the ultimate outcome.

Gensemer said one of the main strategies is generating media coverage of a particular issue, because it is a way members weigh how much their constituents worry about that issue.

Gage said more empirical data show the results of microtargeting can be promising. His firm ran a campaign in North Carolina for a drug company concerned about a proposed move to have the government take on a larger role in healthcare coverage. He said the company’s legislative consultant told the firm to concentrate its grassroots efforts on Republicans older than 65.

The pool of candidates his firm created using microtargeting techniques had a respondent rate of 13 percent. That compared favorably to the 2 percent success rate yielded by contacting a pool of potential supporters who were identified only by their Republican Party membership, Gage said.

“This is a market we are trying to get more involved in,” Gage said.