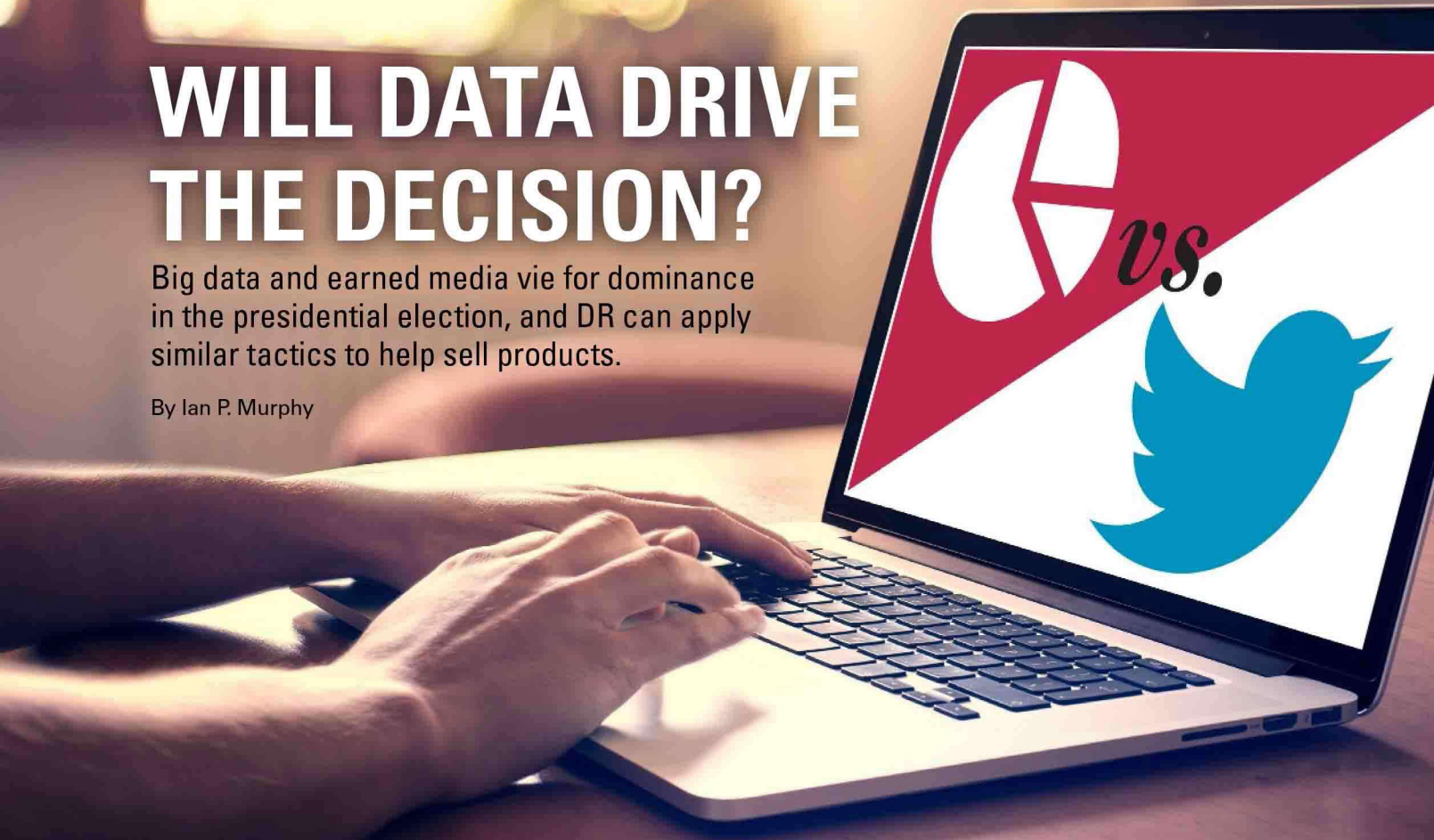


WILL DATA DRIVE THE DECISION?

Big data and earned media vie for dominance in the presidential election, and DR can apply similar tactics to help sell products.

By Ian P. Murphy



A U.S. presidential campaign is, in a sense, the biggest direct response initiative in existence. Lasting almost two years, the push ultimately delivers the next leader of the free world—the brand (er, *person*) who ostensibly can best deliver a range of policies that helps preserve and improve lives throughout the country.

With the stakes so high, candidates have stepped up their use of data in selling themselves. The most informed strategy will not only win a job for the person at the top of the ticket, it will give them the chance to have a lasting international effect. But this year, one candidate is using all the tools at her fingertips, and the other is building (destroying?) a brand almost entirely on social media.

In 2012, Obama for America (OFA) pioneered the use of big-data techniques to identify and segment voters who were sure to vote for him, those who would

turn out to vote if contacted, those who could be persuaded to switch their votes, and those who might be so annoyed by a campaign contact they would vote for GOP challenger Mitt Romney.

OFA tabulated more than 80 data fields to determine who was most likely to support Obama based upon demographics, voting histories, and media preferences. “It told us which were most likely to be won over to Obama’s side—and which we should avoid contacting entirely,” Rayid Ghani, chief data scientist for OFA 2012, told *The Fiscal Times* in 2013.

Using persuasion (a.k.a. “uplift” or “net lift”) modeling, OFA targeted small segments of swing voters in states that tend to decide the election, such as Ohio and Florida. It tested small batches of voters contacted by operatives against control groups, polled the groups to determine what worked, and expanded the best strategies to districts nationwide.

The results created lists of voters for volunteers to target block-by-block in person, by telephone, and by mail. The method is thought to have convinced more people to choose Obama than traditional targeting techniques. Big-data testing also reportedly helped the campaign make its \$400 million in television ad buys 18 percent more effective.

Clinton Crunches the Numbers

While the sauce behind a political campaign stays secret until the polls close, Democrat Hillary Clinton is assumed to be using the same strategies to target

voters in 2016, Daniel Porter, founder of the analytics firm BlueLabs and an OFA alumni, recently told *Scientific American*.

Again, persuasion modeling targets a small portion of the vote. But the definition of a swing voter is inexact—many professed “independents” have made up their minds, and some declared partisans are more open to changing their votes. Therefore, the Clinton campaign must microtarget the most persuadable voters—those who might be influenced by a call, visit, flyer, or ad.

Microtargeting delivers votes, Porter said. “Constant experimentation and uplift modeling is a worthwhile endeavor, since the types of people who are persuadable can vary based on the particular campaign, message, mode, and timing.”

Clinton’s team of more than 60 data analysts tests and retests messaging and strategy, looking at the effectiveness and efficiency of all advertising in all channels including TV, web, phone, and direct mail. It also looks at the *timing* of such messages to determine when specific mis- messages are best deployed to sway votes.

The Clinton campaign employs predictive modeling to assess the impact of its ads and voter contact to inform future buys and interactions. During the primaries, Clinton used a data-driven algorithm to calculate cost per “flippable” delegate, using it to target ad buys to specific districts in Texas and solidify her lead over Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders.

Trump Trusts Social

Republican candidate Donald Trump has called data “overrated,” and instead relies on word-of-mouth—largely via Twitter—to dominate the news cycle with his messages. And Trump has used this talent to build incredible recognition. “The louder and outlandish you are, the more you’re covered,” says Aljollynn Sperber, director of media relations and social media for Marketing Maven. “He’s very ‘the squeakiest wheel gets the oil.’”

Trump’s reluctance to build a data strategy may hurt the Republican Party in the long run, experts say, because they won’t

have a history of data to turn to for future elections. Still, he had produced more than \$2 billion in earned media through September, according to an estimate from *Direct Marketing News*, and routinely produces one-third more Google search results than his Democratic rival.

Clinton has dominated Trump in TV spend, launching TV buys sooner and consistently outspending him in national and battleground markets. In the last week of September, Clinton spent \$12 million—20 times Trump’s \$600,000—nationwide. The Republican nominee vanished from local media markets in battleground states by the end of September, while Clinton made substantial buys in Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina, and New Hampshire.

“While Trump’s social approach may cost less than Clinton’s tactics out-of-pocket, the opportunistic costs are far greater,” says Monica C. Smith, founder and CEO of MarketSmith, Inc. “This one-prong approach will not move the critical number of swing voters to his camp in battleground states, where one or two percentage points can make a difference in the electoral college.”

Together, the campaigns and associated groups had spent just over half what the Obama and Romney campaigns spent in 2012 by the end of September—\$222 million compared to \$435 million.

Lessons for DR

Applying predictive and persuasion modeling to a consumer product is typically much simpler, BlueLabs’ Porter indicated, because campaigns rely on self-reporting to determine ad effectiveness, whereas product marketers can take advantage of actual sales data to determine the effectiveness of one strategy or another. Still, campaigns offer lessons for marketers.

- **Drill down and define.** Should Clinton prevail by the time you read these words, big data will have contributed to the effort by helping streamline ad buys and informing her ground game from first voter contact through the voting booth. DR products can and

do benefit from similar targeting and messaging optimization.

- **Keep the conversation going.** Social media has been Trump’s ace-in-the-hole awareness-builder throughout the primaries and general election. While it’s unclear whether his lower ad spend is a direct result of his trust in Twitter, social media has been effective in maintaining support among the candidate’s diehard fans, and that’s an important aspect of building a brand.
- **Don’t alienate as you communicate.** While \$2 billion in earned media is nothing to scoff at, Trump’s downfall will likely be his willingness to use social media to snipe at enemies rather than expand his influence among supporters and build their numbers. Like a bad review, sometimes the most negative messages get the most attention.
- **Create content continuously.** While marketers can’t afford to alienate the public, they can learn from Trump’s ongoing branding, Sperber says. “Stay loud, stay proud. Trump isn’t only on the social media or traditional news, but he’s also made popular by his business and *The Apprentice*—which could be considered native advertising. DR marketers should not only consider the traditional DR model, but integrate brand marketing that can encompass organic content, native advertising, etc.”
While attribution is an inexact science, response, purchase, and indications of intent offer some proof of effectiveness. “DR marketers are already combining the fan-building of social media with geotargeting and purchase behavior modeling,” Smith says. “This approach not only reaches the right customers at the right times, it also optimizes media spend.”
The fate of the free world may not hang in the balance of DRTV success, but this election will likely prove just how important data (and influence) have become. ❧