

Political Campaign's E-Mail Gaffe Provides Marketing Lessons

Joyce W. Graff, French Caldwell

The mistake made by a political campaign demonstrates some of the pitfalls of using e-mail as a marketing tool. Enterprises must ensure that their messages target the appropriate recipients and are not viewed as spam.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 4 March 2002, the Web-hosting service for the campaign Internet site of California gubernatorial candidate Bill Jones placed the site back online after shutting it down in protest over a mass e-mailing that some recipients compared to spam. The campaign to elect Jones involved sending hundreds of thousands of unsolicited e-mails to in- and out-of-state residents through a third-party marketer. The site was down until Jones' campaign hired an alternate company to restore its Internet connection just days before the state's Republican primary.

Analysis

This incident reveals that political campaigns need to become savvier when targeting voters. After all, a fine line separates Internet marketing and spam. The Jones campaign made some innocent but very important mistakes, and it will pay for them — with much anger from outraged recipients in the short run.

The Jones campaign's problems stemmed first from the marketing vendor chosen for his e-mail campaign. The Jones campaign intended to e-mail Californians who expressed interest in politics. However, the vendor sent the e-mail to an unqualified list that included out-of-state and overseas e-mail addresses. Furthermore, the vendor sent the message by an overseas source. This common practice among spam senders produces spam-like headers. For example, if the messages were sent from Korea, the header might be "From Bill Jones in California, posted from abc123xyz@somedomain.kr." That kind of header rarely escapes any antispam e-mail filtering engine. Many recipients likely didn't receive the message at all.

The Jones campaign incorrectly assumed that this e-mail effort didn't result in spam because the messages weren't commercial. The e-mail may not have fit California's spam law, which defines spam as unsolicited commercial e-mail. However, in the eyes of many recipients, it was spam because recipients:

- Didn't ask for the mail
- Didn't know the sender
- Couldn't vote in California in many cases so that the information communicated wasn't applicable

Legislators continue to try to protect enterprises from spam (e.g., with laws in California and a dozen other states). Some groups also try to verify that ethical sources send e-mail — e.g., certification initiatives from nonprofit organizations, such as Truste and the American Marketing Association. For a high-volume, legitimate sender, adding a "seal of approval" costs little. However, it may be costly for spam senders because they often operate on a low budget.

For their part, political campaigns can best use the Internet by building communities with common interests and conducting small-scale campaigns around those particular interests.

Analytical Source: Joyce Graff, *Intranets & Electronic Workplace*, and French Caldwell, *Knowledge Management*

Need to Know: Recommended Reading and Related Research

- "Keeping Spam Out of Your E-mail" (TU-15-0487). A comprehensive overview on the four forms of spam and the tools that provide relief in blocking some forms. **By Joyce Graff**
- "Truste Can Help Solve the Growing Problem of Spam" (TU-15-0487). Details on Truste's new service for detecting spam and blocking it from e-mailboxes. **By Joyce Graff**

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REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS

Corporate Headquarters
56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
U.S.A.
+1 203 964 0096

European Headquarters
Tamesis
The Glanty
Egham
Surrey, TW20 9AW
UNITED KINGDOM
+44 1784 431611

Asia/Pacific Headquarters
Level 7, 40 Miller Street
North Sydney
New South Wales 2060
AUSTRALIA
+61 2 9459 4600

Latin America Headquarters
Av. das Nações Unidas 12.551
9 andar—WTC
04578-903 São Paulo SP
BRAZIL
+55 11 3443 1509