

IS YOUR BRAND
SOCIALLY AWKWARD?

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Lessons in Social Media from the Obama and McCain Campaigns



Each day, more and more brands are jumping into social media. The problem is that some brands aren't doing themselves any favors. They present themselves with all the grace of one swimming in jeans and a polo shirt, or one unaware that his suit is down around his ankles. And that begs the question of just how a brand should behave when it chooses to dip its toe (or cannonball) into, say, Facebook or Twitter. Just as we cringe and recoil when we encounter people with poor social skills offline, so our instincts are to avoid and, the ugly truth be told, sometimes make fun of socially awkward people (and brands) online. The recent use of social media by the Obama and McCain campaigns sheds light on this matter and underscores that the basic precepts of socially acceptable behavior apply online as much as off. Besides keeping your suit on at all times, here's a list of other things to keep in mind:

■ Be the same you today and tomorrow.

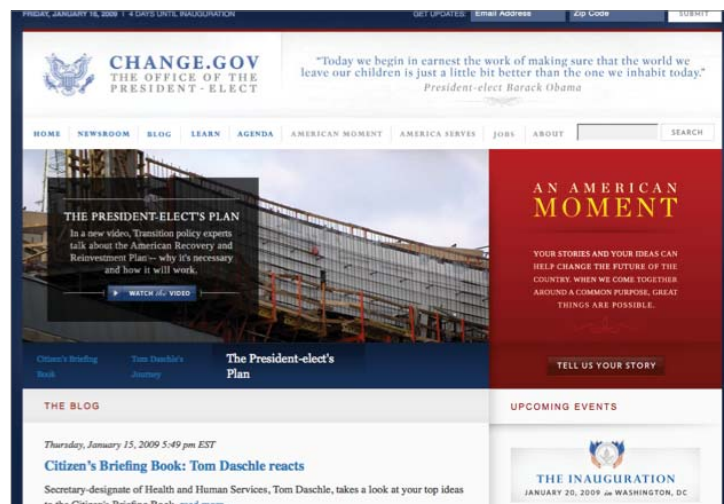
Some people seem to undergo more personality changes than Liberace did costumes. One moment they're sweet and kind, the next, they're angry and mean-spirited. One moment they're calm and levelheaded, the next they're confused and hyperactive. These people are not easy to befriend because you never know which personality you're going to encounter at any one moment. The McCain campaign was a bit schizophrenic with their website, which is most definitely part of a brand's overall social media "presentation." During the campaign, McCain changed the look of his website no less than three times. Even his banner ads, which ultimately also serve to engage people more deeply and, therefore, "socially," were inconsistent in both tone and look. Brands need to be true to themselves, and that truth, however defined, can't change every other day, week, month or year. Choose a zebra skin cape, a feathered one, a sequined one. It doesn't matter. But once you walk onto the stage, don't walk off and put on a red leather one.

■ Don't talk like somebody else.

This is another piece of the “Be you” equation. So much of our personality is based on our words, be they spoken or written. Our way (or lack thereof) with words is another type of fingerprint, a unique, distinguishing mark that further identifies who we are as one-of-a-kind people. We all despise the phonies who talk differently when, say, the boss is in the room. You know the type: all of a sudden their voice deepens and words like “umbrage” and “post-haste” pepper every sentence¹. Brands need to be true to their character, of course, but their online speech (tone and cadence) must not only be consistent, but also authentic and inviting. On McCain’s Facebook page, he (actually, his ghostwriter) presented himself in the third person. If I said to you, “Steve Kissing would like to buy you a beer,” you would likely ask me to repeat myself. Or you would laugh. Or both. Speaking about yourself in the third-person is an awkward approach that offends our ears and invites ridicule online as much as it does off. Just ask Bob Dole. Remember: He didn’t win either.

■ Be clear why you’re asking for something.

A friend asks for a \$100 loan, but isn’t forthcoming about why he needs it in the first place. A boss asks you to prepare a report summarizing five years of billings, but you have no clue what he intends to do with the data. A spouse asks if she can get away for the weekend while you watch the kids, but she doesn’t say where she’s going or with whom. This all violates what most of us would consider socially acceptable behavior. So it goes when brands ask for information or consumer generated content of one sort or another and aren’t clear about why they’re asking for it in the first place or what they intend to do with it. In the Obama campaign’s post-election transition site, change.gov, visitors were asked to share their visions of America and express what they would like the new administration to focus on. However, there was no indication about what was going to happen with those thoughts and ideas. There was no reference or posting of what others may have already contributed. It felt like a content black hole. And there’s nothing inviting or friendly about that.



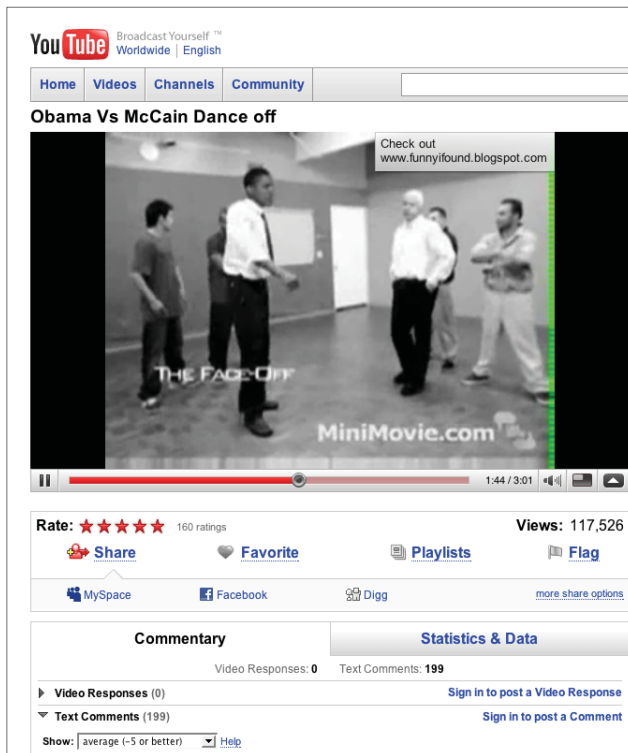
■ Don't ask for gifts.

We all know people who seem to engage with us only when they need something. They interact with us not to get to know us better, but instead to extract something from us that they find of value. The Obama campaign, otherwise brilliant social media practitioners, initially behaved this way when they required people to cough up their email and zip code before being allowed to enter the campaign's website. In Obama's defense, the campaign later changed this and provided a means to skip over the request. Brands need to remember to put consumers and their needs, interests and opinions first even if they arrive at your doorstep not with the sweet wine of compliments, but the flaming dog poop of complaint or criticism.



■ Don't take yourself too seriously.

When people can't laugh at themselves, it's a sure sign that they somehow believe they live on a plane above the rest of us. How else could you explain their inability to laugh at themselves when they do something stupid, which, of course, we all do? None of us want to hang with someone who can't laugh at something funny, especially if that something funny is him or her. The Obama campaign didn't run away from funny YouTube videos such as "Obama Girl," and instead laughed right along with the silliness. (Much as McCain laughed, at his own expense, when he finally got around to appearing on The David Letterman Show after standing him up weeks earlier.) The point isn't that all brands must make humor a core part of their brand character. Rather, the point is: no matter how serious your brand may be, if it does something stupid and embarrassing (and most brands eventually do), it best laugh along with everyone else.



■ It's not just about you.

The most irritating (and typically short-lived) friendships are those with the self-absorbed. These people who put themselves at the center of the solar system forget that Copernicus settled this issue long, long ago. The habitually self-centered are draining to be around. And given how much they think of themselves, you wonder why they even bother to interact with others at all. The Obama campaign got this. They just didn't ask people to support their candidate and send money, they made it easy and rather fun to do so. For instance, the campaign didn't just ask you to go knock on the doors of neighbors who may be undecided voters. No, the campaign provided an easy means to download the names and addresses of those neighbors, along with talking points and materials to share with them. Not only that, but the campaign provided a means of reporting back what you learned about these voters' intentions. This not only provided valuable political insight to the campaign, but just as importantly, it made the volunteers feel like their work really mattered, which of course it did. The moral of the story: It's OK for brands to ask for something, but you better be willing to meet the consumer half-way, at least, and give a little something yourself. Online consumers are accustomed to evaluating things through a "value exchange" lens, meaning the more you ask for, the more they'll expect in return. There are no free lunches online either.



Get Local | Create Your MyBO Account (or Login) | Email Address | Zip Code | Get Started

ORGANIZING FOR AMERICA

"I'M ASKING YOU TO BELIEVE.
Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington ... I'm asking you to believe in yours."
-BARACK OBAMA

GET INVOLVED NOW

FIND AN EVENT NEAR YOU **GO**

BECAUSE IT'S ABOUT **YOU**

Our online tools make local organizing easy

Join My.BarackObama, our online community with over a million members. Get access to the tools you need to effectively organize for Barack Obama and build this movement for change.

- **Find** local events and groups
- **Contact** undecided voters near you

Create Your Account

Your First Name:

Your Last Name:

Zip Code:

Email Address:

Password:

Password (again):

Signup

■ Make an effort to get to know others.

I bet you, too, have had experiences like this at, say, a cocktail party: You walk up to a stranger and introduce yourself. You begin asking questions about what he does for a living, where he lives, what hobbies he embraces, etc. Twenty minutes later, you're still asking him questions which he's all too happy to answer but he hasn't asked you a single question. It's as if he thinks he's a celebrity and you're some (lowly) reporter from *Entertainment Weekly*. These socially inept people make us want to drop our drink just for an excuse to disengage. Once again, the Obama campaign worked really hard to get to know its supporters. Here's but one example how: At a political rally on the campus of the University of Nevada, the crowd of mostly students was asked to text the state's abbreviation, "NV," to a specific number. This not only added thousands of mobile numbers to the campaign's database, it provided some helpful insights into their supporters. For instance, even though a wireless number may have had an area code from an out-of-state city from which a student hailed, the campaign still knew to reach out to that person for get-out-the-vote initiatives in Nevada where the student was living. Now that's paying attention and going the extra mile to get to know the other person.²

■ Friends stick together.

Obama didn't build a strong social media presence and then turn his back on it. To the contrary, he not only asked something of the online community, he gave in return. When it came time to select a media outlet to give exclusive photo rights of him and his family on election eve, he turned not to the Associated Press, CNN or even Oprah. Instead, he reached out to social media pic site Flickr, and they shared the images of the candidate throughout the evening. Brands who really want to embrace social media can't half-ass it. If you expect it to do something for you, you must do something for it in return. That could be making great content available or offering a one-of-a-kind experience only available to those in the community you participate in. Leeches are not tolerated for long online.



The screenshot shows a Flickr page for a photo titled "Election Night 11.4.08 - The Obama Family". The photo depicts a large crowd of people at a night rally, many holding American flags. The Flickr interface includes a navigation bar with "Home", "The Tour", "Sign Up", and "Explore". A search bar is visible at the top right. Below the main photo, there is a "Would you like to comment?" prompt. To the right of the photo, there is a metadata section indicating the photo was uploaded on November 6, 2008, by user "mgm444". Below this, there are two related items: "mgm444's photostream" with 1,928 uploads and "Election Night Obama Rally 11.4.08 (Set)" with 57 items. A "Tags" section at the bottom right lists "obama rally" and "election night".

■ Don't just talk, listen.

Some people just can't seem to shut up. When they call, we send them directly to voicemail, thankful that there's a finite amount of time in which they are permitted to explain to us in excruciating detail some inconsequential detail in their life. If a brand is going to twitter, blog or otherwise share its "take" on issues, news, events, et cetera, than you must allow others to comment upon your posts. Some argue, and I concur, that a blog really isn't a blog unless you allow others to comment. Once again, the Obama campaign tripped here when on change.gov their blog did not allow for comments. Such blogs often just come off sounding and feeling like what they really are: PR crapola. It's as if a brand were saying, "You should care what we think even though we don't care what you think."

■ Expect some kooks.

The world is one big, big place. But most of us don't even need to walk out of our own homes or places of employment to encounter an oddball or two. Whether endearingly odd or creepily so, there's no escaping such people. When a brand enters the realm of social media, it must be prepared to encounter kooks of all stripes. This is not to suggest that brands tolerate unethical or offensive behavior, but you can't expect that you will be able to handpick every one of your "friends." The director of field video operations for the Obama campaign told *The New York Observer* that much of the video content sent to the campaign was "a little strange." My hunch is that she was being rather kind. Kooks get even kookier when politics is thrown into the mix. The same goes when you toss branding into the fray. These kooks aren't new to your brand. It's just that, in the past, they sat in their living rooms and talked back to your TV spots or your customer service reps. You didn't have to deal with them spouting off or otherwise sharing their whacky points of view in a public arena. But now you do. Deal.

■ Be the friend a friend would like to have.

When we treat others with genuine respect and kindness it seems to attract other people to us. A good friend or colleague begets other good friends and colleagues. When brands behave well online, it dramatically increases the likelihood that someone will pass along its content or invite others to engage with it. The Obama campaign made it very easy for people to forward videos, event details and donation requests to other people, which only served to bring even more people into the fold. In fact, those enrolled in MyBarackObama.com could upload their entire email address book to make such sharing even easier.

■ Be grateful.

One tenant of civilized discourse is the need to say “thanks” whenever someone shares something of value with you, be that a “thing,” money, or time. Thankless bastards are never fun to be around. Brands don’t have to blow the smoke of gratuitous gratitude up the proverbial skirts of their consumers, another social faux pas; but by all means don’t follow the McCain campaign’s lead. When the election was over, they didn’t even thank their Facebook supporters. The little things do matter online and off. On a more positive note, the Obama campaign rewarded those who had signed up for their text message alerts, by first announcing their choice of Joe Biden for VP to those on the text alert list.

In summary: If your brand behaves online just as you would expect a rationale, smart, kind and easy-to-be-around person to behave in virtually any social setting, you’re likely to find the social media waters both rewarding and refreshing. Otherwise, it will be a very lonely experience indeed.

1 Of course, the same principle works in reverse. Some people naturally talk using words like “umbrage” and “post-haste.” We are equally put off when these people, perhaps in an attempt to fit in, start peppering their sentences with words like “yo” and “sweet.”

2 The singular “person” is used deliberately here. Brands must see their social media activities as engagement with many different persons, not as communication to some homogenous group of people. While we all aim to treat everyone the same in an ethical sense, when it comes to engaging with people in a meaningful way via social media, we must treat everyone differently.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Kissing is a creative director at Barefoot Proximity, and was an independent candidate for president of the United States in 2008. In case you didn’t hear, he didn’t win. You can reach Steve at skissing@thinkbarefoot.com.