

2012

The number '0' in '2012' contains the Obama 2012 logo, which features a white silhouette of a person's head and shoulders above three red, curved stripes.

BARACKOBAMA.COM

Email Optimization: How A/B testing generated \$500 million in donations



Introduction



You've heard this story...

SET EDITION: **U.S.** | INTERNATIONAL | MÉXICO | ARABIC
TV: CNN | CNNi | CNN en Español | HLN

CNN Politics

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Part of complete coverage on
Election Center

AMERICA'S CHOICE 2012 **ELECTION**CEN

Analysis: Obama won with a better ground game

By **Rebecca Sinderbrand**, CNN

updated 7:00 AM EST, Wed November 7, 2012

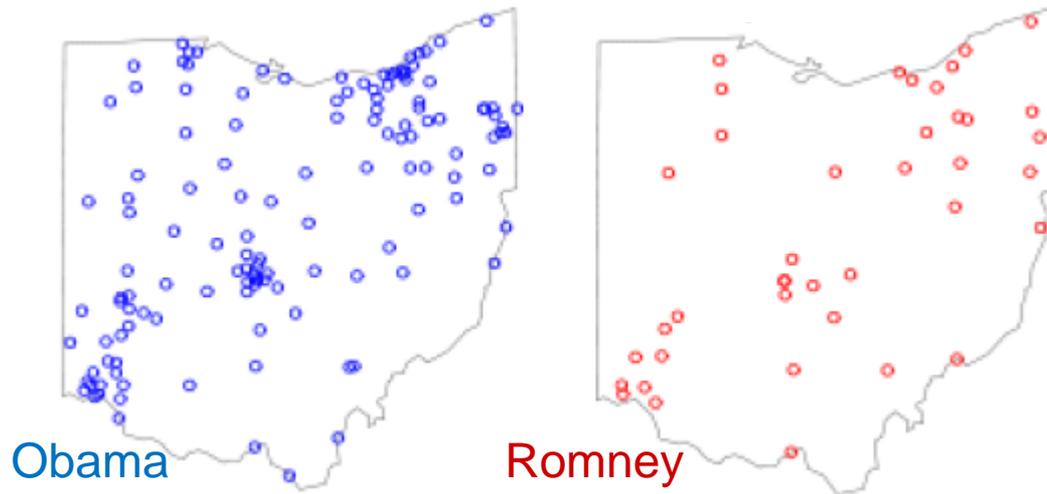


Fact check: TRUE

- The Ground Game

- ▣ 786 Obama field offices vs. 284 Romney offices

- ▣ In Ohio:



- Thousands of paid staffers organized 2 million volunteers to get voters registered and to the polls.

You've heard this story...

How Obama's data crunchers helped him win

TIME

By Michael Scherer

updated 11:45 AM EST, Thu November 8, 2012 | Filed under: [Web](#)

Built to win: Deep inside Obama's campaign tech

How Obama's tech team built a "force multiplier" with Amazon and a narwhal.

2012 ELECTION

Friended: How the Obama Campaign Connected with Young Voters

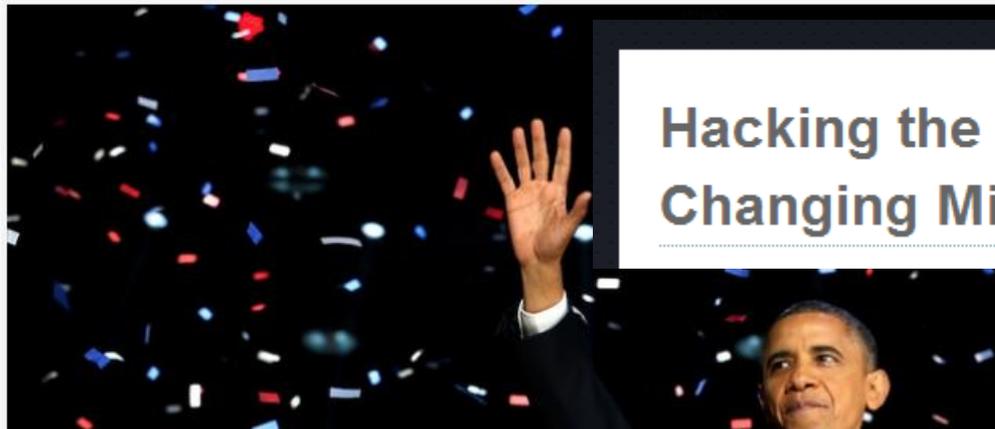
By Michael Scherer | Nov. 20, 2012 | 168 Comments

How the Obama Campaign's Data-Miners Knew What You Watched On TV

Share 34  Send to Kindle

BIG DATA CLOUD DEVELOPMENT 189

Hacking the Electorate: Data's role in Changing Minds



Fact check: TRUE

- Sophisticated technology and targeting
 - ▣ Giant data & micro-targeting operation
 - ▣ Fully integrated databases
 - ▣ Smarter new methods of targeting TV ads
 - ▣ New technology developed in-house for social sharing, polling place lookup, phone banking, volunteer mobilization, vote tracking, election day rapid response

What you didn't hear

A LOT OF

All of that costs money

The fundraising challenge

- In 2008, Obama campaign raised \$750 million
 - ▣ Would not be enough in 2012



\$750 million?

Not impressed.

The fundraising challenge

- But fundraising was proving more difficult in 2012 than in 2008
 - ▣ President less available for fundraising events
 - ▣ In early campaign, we saw average online donation was half of what it had been in 2008
 - ▣ People were giving less, and less often
- We had to be smarter, and more tenacious

The fundraising challenge

- The real game-changer? It's something most of you already do everyday.

A / B

- More A/B testing than any campaign ever

First, the results:

- Raised more than

half a billion dollars

online

- 4.5 million donors
- \$53 average gift

How did we do it?

Lessons Learned:

1. Content matters (...and so do subject lines).
2. Don't trust your gut.
3. Being pretty isn't everything.
4. Incentives work.
5. Invest in your team.
6. Foster a culture of testing.



Winning with A/B Testing

What impact can testing have?

THE SUBJECT LINE

The team tested numerous subject lines by sending fundraising e-mails to small groups of supporters

THE HAUL

Based on the donations those e-mails raised, the team projected how much the pitches would bring in if sent to the full Obama list

THE DIFFERENCE

They then projected how much less money the campaign would collect if they used anything other than the most successful e-mail

THE SUBJECT LINE	THE HAUL	THE DIFFERENCE
I will be outspent	\$2,540,866	n/a
Some scary numbers	\$1,941,379	\$599,487
If you believe in what we're doing...	\$911,806	\$1,629,060
Last call: Join Michelle and me	\$894,644	\$1,646,222
Would love to meet you	\$755,425	\$1,785,441
Do this for Michelle	\$714,147	\$1,826,719
Change	\$711,543	\$1,829,323
The most popular Obama	\$659,554	\$1,881,312
Michelle time	\$604,813	\$1,936,053
Deadline: Join Michelle and me	\$604,517	\$1,936,349
Thankful every day	\$545,486	\$1,995,380
The one thing the polls got right...	\$403,603	\$2,137,263

THE WINNER!

The winning subject line wound up beating the projections: It raised

\$2,673,278

Subject: I will be outspent

... to be outspent ... have so

Testing = constant improvement

- Little improvements add up
 - ▣ Improving 1% here and 2% there isn't a lot at first, but over time it adds up

CONTROL

OBAMA BIDEN

OBAMA CLASSIC

You could be there

Contribution

Select amount

Credit card

Employment

DONATE TO NOW

"SEQUENTIAL"

OBAMA BIDEN

OBAMA CLASSIC

You could be there

How much would you like to donate today?

Select amount

CONTINUE

↑ +5%

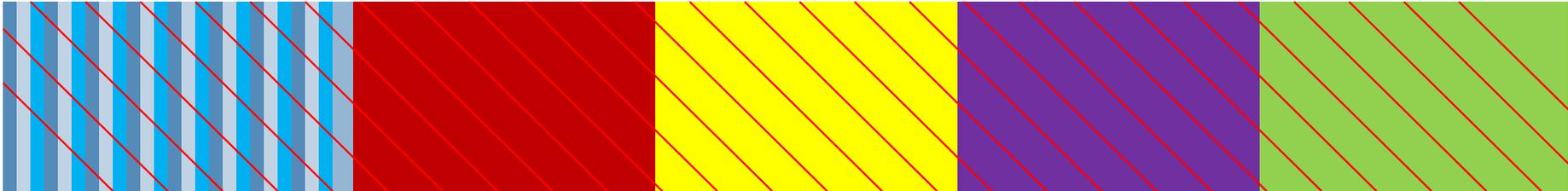
Test every element

- Question: what footer language should we use to reduce unsubscribes?

Variation	Recips	Unsubs	Unsubs per recipient	Significant differences in unsubs per recipient
<p>This email was sent to: bwonch@barackobama.com Update address Unsubscribe</p>	578,994	105	0.018%	None
<p>This email was sent to: bwonch@barackobama.com. Update your email address here. If you'd like to unsubscribe from these messages, click here. Click here to contact the campaign with any questions or concerns.</p>	578,814	79	0.014%	Smaller than D4
<p>This email was sent to: bwonch@barackobama.com. Update address Unsubscribe Contact us</p>	578,620	86	0.015%	Smaller than D4
<p>This email was sent to: bwonch@barackobama.com. Update your email address here. If you'd like to receive less email or to unsubscribe from these messages, click here. Click here to contact the campaign with any questions or concerns.</p>	580,507	115	0.020%	Larger than D3 and D4

Tests upon tests upon tests

- Every piece of communication is an opportunity to test
- A single email can have many tests attached



- Subject & draft tests
- Full-list tests
- Background personalization tests

No, really. Test every element.

- Running tests in the background via personalized content

From: Barack Obama <info@barackobama.com>

Subject: My last campaign

David --

In a few days, I'll be hitting the trail for my last campaign.

Everything we've accomplished in the past three years -- and our chance to do so much more -- is on the line.

What we do today will be a measure of whether or not we're ready to fight for it.

[Donate \\$61 or whatever you can before tonight's fundraising deadline.](#)

By pitching in before midnight, you'll automatically be in the running to join me and George Clooney at his place on May 10th.

It's not often I can get away from work, so I look forward to spending a fun evening in L.A. with a couple supporters like you.

In the meantime, let's close out this deadline strong:

Longitudinal tests

- Example: how much email should we send?
- Experiment: gave sample audience higher volume of email for an extended time, and compared to control
- Results: More email = more donations
 - ▣ People may say they get too much email
 - ▣ But mild annoyance proved to be the worst result
 - ▣ Unsubscribes accrued linearly
 - ▣ Donations did, too.
- Implementing a “more email” policy probably led to \$20-30 million in additional revenue for the

So we made shirts.



Lessons

Lesson #1

Drafts and Subject Lines Matter

Example: Draft language

Amelia --

If every supporter of this campaign steps up when it counts, we will win this election.

From now until November 6th, every single day is going to count.

We have an important fundraising deadline at midnight, and we saw this week how much is at stake in this election.

Will you step up?

<https://donate.barackobama.com/Midnight-Deadline>

Let's win.

Barack

Example: Subject lines

Test sends

version	Subject line
v1s1	Hey
v1s2	Two things:
v1s3	Your turn
v2s1	Hey
v2s2	My opponent
v2s3	You decide
v3s1	Hey
v3s2	Last night
v3s3	Stand with me today
v4s1	Hey
v4s2	This is my last campaign
v4s3	[NAME]
v5s1	Hey
v5s2	There won't be many more of these deadlines
v5s3	What you saw this week
v6s1	Hey
v6s2	Let's win.
v6s3	Midnight deadline

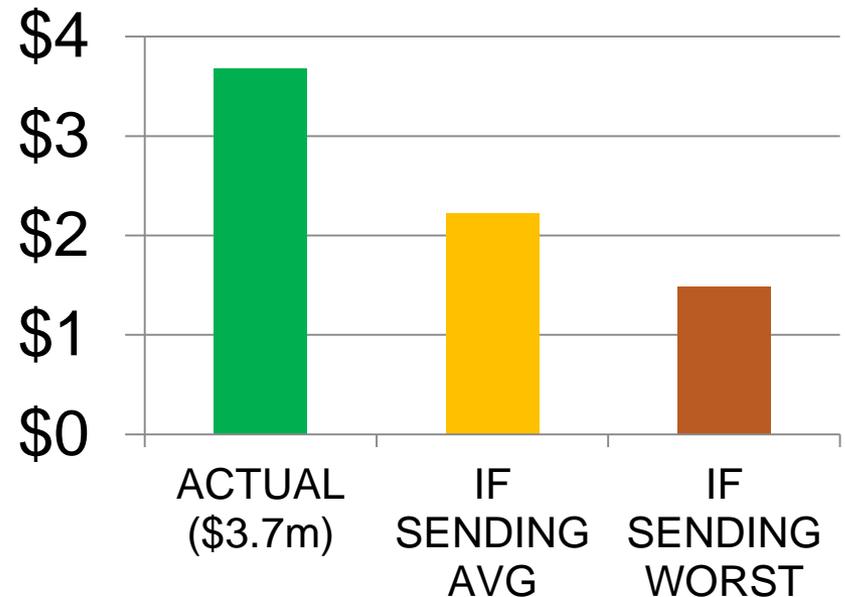
- Each draft was tested with three subject lines
- One subject line would usually be common across all drafts, to help make comparisons across messages

Example: Best vs. Worst Versions

Test sends

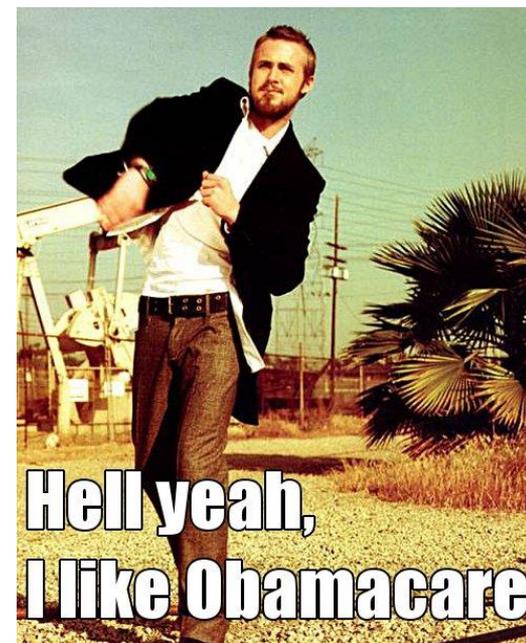
version	Subject line	donors	money
v1s1	Hey	263	\$17,646
v1s2	Two things:	268	\$18,830
v1s3	Your turn	276	\$22,380
v2s1	Hey	300	\$17,644
v2s2	My opponent	246	\$13,795
v2s3	You decide	222	\$27,185
v3s1	Hey	370	\$29,976
v3s2	Last night	307	\$16,945
v3s3	Stand with me today	381	\$25,881
v4s1	Hey	444	\$25,643
v4s2	This is my last campaign	369	\$24,759
v4s3	[NAME]	514	\$34,308
v5s1	Hey	353	\$22,190
v5s2	There won't be many more of these deadlines	273	\$22,405
v5s3	What you saw this week	263	\$21,014
v6s1	Hey	363	\$25,689
v6s2	Let's win.	237	\$17,154
v6s3	Midnight deadline	352	\$23,244

Full send (in millions)



- \$2.2 million additional revenue from sending best draft vs. worst, or \$1.5 million additional from sending best vs. average

Some of the best subject lines:





Lesson #2

Don't Trust Your Gut

Testing = data-driven decisions

- We don't have all the answers
 - ▣ Conventional wisdom is often wrong
 - ▣ Long-held best practices are often wrong
 - ▣ Going with things that had previously tested well was often wrong
- There was this thing called the Email Derby...

Lesson #3

The Prettiest Isn't Always the Best

Experiments: Ugly vs. Pretty

- We tested sleek and pretty
 - ▣ That failed, so we asked: what about ugly?

Ready to fight? Please donate \$19 or more today, ahead of the FEC deadline.

Because you've saved your payment information, your donation will go through immediately.

[QUICK DONATE: \\$19](#)

– [QUICK DONATE: \\$25](#)

– [QUICK DONATE: \\$50](#)

– [QUICK DONATE: \\$100](#)

– [QUICK DONATE: \\$250](#)

Or donate another amount:

<https://donate.barackobama.com/June-Deadline>

Ready to fight? Please donate \$19 or more today, ahead of the FEC deadline.

Because you've saved your payment information, your donation will go through immediately.

[QUICK DONATE: \\$19](#)

– [QUICK DONATE: \\$25](#)

– [QUICK DONATE: \\$50](#)

– [QUICK DONATE: \\$100](#)

– [QUICK DONATE: \\$250](#)

Or donate another amount:

<https://donate.barackobama.com/June-Deadline>

- Ugly yellow highlighting got us better results
 - ▣ But at some point it lost its novelty and stopped working – always important to re-test!



Lesson #4

Incentives Matter

People respond to incentives

- Offering a free bumper sticker for enrolling in our Quick Donate program increased conversions by 30%
 - ▣ Our Quick Donate program, in turn, raised donation rates by 50% or more
- Giving away bumper stickers and car magnets, then daisy-chaining to a donate page, yielded enough donations to pay for the freebies immediately



Lesson #5

Invest In Your Team

OFA Digital Department

- Grew from a small team in spring 2011 to a department of 200+ in 2012
 - Outbound (email, social, mobile, blog)
 - Ads
 - Front-End Development
 - Design
 - Video
 - Project management
 - Digital Analytics

More voices, more talents



The human element and our
voice



Honesty

Authenticity

Real people, real characters



Ann Marie Habershaw

Tough love

Rufus Gifford

An emotional roller coaster



Lesson #6

Foster a culture of testing

The culture of testing

- Check your ego at the door
- Use every opportunity to test something
- Compare against yourself, not against your competitors or “the industry”
 - ▣ Are you doing better this month than last month?
 - ▣ Are you doing better than you would have otherwise?

Keep a testing calendar

- On the Obama campaign we had short-term and long-term calendars for national emails
- We added a “tests” column to plan out which tests would be attached to which emails
- If we saw blank spaces, it would remind us to think of more tests to run!
 - ▣ Important to do frequent brainstorming sessions

Circulate your test results internally

- We had an internal listserv entirely for the express purpose of circulating test results
- Helped get buy-in and increased familiarity with the testing process
- Prompted discussions and generated new ideas for tests



The Big Picture

Testing wins.

- This mentality was applied across the board:
 - ▣ Helped recruit 2 million volunteers
 - ▣ Helped build for thousands of phone banks, rallies, and events
 - ▣ Got information and “the message” into the hands of our best messengers
- Did we mention raising half a billion dollars?
 - ▣ Testing resulted in about \$200 million in additional revenue
 - ...and that’s a conservative estimate

Big data ≠ big brother

- Testing allows you to listen to your user base
 - ▣ Let them tell you what they like
 - ▣ Optimization gives them a better experience
- Usually, the interactions that are the most human are the ones that win

Experiments: Personalization

- Adding “drop-in sentences” that reference people’s past behavior can increase conversion rates

- **Example: asking recent donors for more money**

...it's going to take a lot more of us to match them.

Will you donate \$25 or more today?

...it's going to take a lot more of us to match them.

You stepped up recently to help out -- thank you. We all need to dig a little deeper if we're going to win, so I'm asking you to pitch in again. Will you donate \$25 or more today?

- Added sentence significantly raised donation rate
 - Confirmed in several similar experiments

Final Conclusions

- Big groups of smart people working together can accomplish a lot, even in 18 months
- But you don't have to have a staff of hundreds to have a good testing program
 - ▣ Train existing staffers, hire more when you can
 - ▣ Foster a culture of testing: every piece of communication is an opportunity to test *something*
 - ▣ Even a small list can be split in two – do what you can