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Page last updated at 02:06 GMT, Thursday, 22 May 2008 03:06 UK

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Internet key to Obama victories

By Steve Schifferes
BBC News

With Barack Obama moving close to victory in the Democratic presidential primary campaign, the internet has proved one of the key tools to his success. And it may well give the Democrats a big advantage during the Presidential race itself.



From early on, Mr Obama adopted the internet to reach his supporters

The internet has been moving to the mainstream of political life in the US for some years.

But in this presidential cycle it has been particularly important for the Obama campaign, which was starting from scratch with few resources and little name recognition.

The internet favours the outsider, and gives them the ability to quickly mobilise supporters and money online.

And the more nimble use of the internet by the Obama campaign in its early stages helped him overcome the huge initial lead of Hillary Clinton in the presidential nominating race.

Ready to go

Mr Obama's internet strategy was at the heart of his plan to win the Democratic nomination, according to expert Phil Noble, who tracks trends in relation to the internet and politics.

When Senator Obama announced his campaign, his internet site was already fully developed and ready to go - with a set of tools which allowed supporters to meet and organise as well as contribute money.

According to Michael Turk, the e-campaign director for the Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign, the Democrats had learned the lessons of 2004 very well in an "arms race" between rival teams of developers.

Mr Noble says he expects Mr Obama to raise \$1 billion online during the 2008 campaign, 12 times as much as John Kerry raised through online fundraising in 2004.

And he says that two million Obama activists have already been mobilised to become volunteer workers for the campaign - a key advance in the "ground war" of getting out the vote.

And some key internet stunts - including the independently developed "Obama girl" mock ad on YouTube - helped increase Mr Obama's public profile early on.

Primary advantage

Both the fundraising and the mobilising potential of the internet proved key advantages for Mr Obama during the primary season.



John Kerry depended on online fundraising in the 2004 campaign

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Key role

The Democrats seem to have a decisive advantage in their use of the internet.

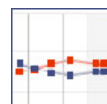
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He was able to get more local volunteers on the ground in key states earlier than the Clinton campaign, which was especially important in smaller states and caucus states. And his early success soon generated a wave of small-size campaign contributions that have continued to roll in.



Senator Clinton took more time to see the full potential of the internet

This gave him a crucial advantage in campaign organisation and advertising over the Clinton campaign, which had raised a large sum of money, mainly from larger donors.

Funding shortages forced Mrs Clinton to dip into her own pockets, and limited the number of states she could campaign in.

New tools

One of the unique features of the Obama campaign has been its ability to embrace social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook.

Indeed Mr Obama's decision to run was influenced by the fact that a page created on MySpace by supporters not connected to any official campaign quickly signed up 160,000 supporters.



Mr McCain has invested less in internet tools despite being an early pioneer

According Paul Zube and Rebecca Hayes of Michigan State University, Mr Obama is far more popular on Facebook - the social networking site most widely used by college students - than any other candidate.

And joining Mr Obama's Facebook site - unlike responding to an email message of support - is a public expression of support which can have a broader political impact.

As such, it may be a more powerful mobilising tool to gain new supporters than sending out emails or expecting activists to come to your website.

Youth vote

His use of social networking sites has helped Mr Obama to mobilise young people, a group which has traditionally been uninterested in politics, according to Professor Thomas Patterson of Harvard University.

"Since the start of this campaign in early 2007, I think what we've seen is a second source of energy for young voters and that's the Obama campaign. They were attracted to him in the first instance by his early opposition to the war in Iraq. At the same time, he happened to have the kind of personality, the kind of message that appealed to them," he says.

Mr Obama has consistently performed extremely strong among younger and highly educated voters, whose increased turnout could be critical to the general election.

Lessons of recent history

In some ways, Mr Obama has drawn the lessons of the failed Howard Dean campaign in the 2004 primaries.

Mr Dean was the first Democratic presidential candidate to use the internet - through his Blog for America - to mobilise his supporters.

But he failed to connect with the voting public in Iowa and crashed out of the race.

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Mr Obama has therefore also drawn lessons from the very successful Republican internet campaign that helped re-elect President Bush in 2004

As Michael Turk, the Bush-Cheney e-campaign director in 2004 explained, the Republicans were able to mobilise their supporters through a combination of email lists and internet 'data mining'.

They identified potential Republican supporters in every precinct around the country, using technology which predicts voter preferences on the basis of commercial data on car ownership, magazine subscriptions, and the like.

And then they sent their campaign volunteers detailed instructions on who to visit, including local maps of the area and walking routes, and issues that each potential voter was likely to be most concerned about.

Mr Obama has been utilising similar data to target primary voters - where turnout is crucial - through both telephone banks of volunteers and personal contacts.

Looking forward

Mr Noble believes that the Democrats will continue to enjoy an enormous advantage over their opponents in the use of the internet for campaigning in this election cycle.

Ironically, the McCain campaign in 2000 - when he unsuccessfully challenged George Bush for the Republican presidential nomination - was an early example of using the internet to raise money online.

But according to Phil Noble, this time round, Republicans are far behind in resources and investment in internet tools, and that Mr McCain is having difficulty appealing to the traditional Republican base.

The most important advantage could be in fundraising.

If Mr Noble's predictions are right, then Mr Obama could have a massive lead in the money needed to carry his message to the American electorate.

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