

(Micro)Targeted

BY VICKI HODDER

140

Tweet

When small is the new campaign trend

Think “election,” and chances are big issues and important posts come to mind. Election Day 2012 would seem to have been no exception. President, U.S. senator, governor: These and a host of other statewide and local posts were up for grabs on last year’s ballot.

But it was the 2012 election trend toward the very small — micro-size, in fact — that is causing a stir among political and media observers. Microtargeted political ads came into their own in the 2012 election, analysts say, and changed the campaign landscape.

Microtargeted advertising is, to an extent, what it sounds like: advertising customized to appeal to very small groups of people. What makes this a 21st-century political trend is a campaign’s ability to match increasingly specific information on a voter’s Internet and other media habits with external characteristics to produce more personalized ads.

Microtargeted political ads are most visible online and in social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. But cable television began jumping on the trend last year with the help of technological advances in set-top boxes, devices that decode digital signals and display them on televisions and now also have the ability to precisely track viewing habits, says Tim Kay, director of political strategy for NCC Media, a sales and marketing company for the cable industry headquartered in New York.

“It’s evolving,” Kay says. “Campaigns are matching it with their information to determine what their targets are actually watching.”

Microtargeting in Missouri

Area political consultants predict Columbia voters will increasingly see microtargeted political campaign ads. The ability to aim political ads at small voter subsets makes a campaign more efficient and effective in communicating with particular groups of voters, says Richard Martin, founder and principal of Kansas City-based Martin Communication Group. “The more targeted you can make your messages, the more effective they are.”

In practice, that means political campaigns are increasingly turning to social media and online advertising. The 2012 presidential campaign serves as a high-profile example of the influence social media can have, but analysts say the trend is visible on myriad political levels. A single statistic goes far to explain why: About 60 percent of American adults use Facebook, Twitter or other social media, according to a February 2013 whitepaper published by the Interactive Advertising Bureau, a New York-based trade association representing online advertisers.

“I think it [political advertising] will go more and more to better targeting, and I think that means it will go more and more to online advertising,” says David Barklage, president of Barklage & Knodell, a Missouri political consulting firm.

Moves in traditional media

Possibly it will go to traditional media that find a way to microtarget their ads. Barklage says newspapers and magazines are under pressure to more finely aim their ads, while radio and cable television are coming up with new methods and technology enabling them to microtarget. Despite the upheaval, Barklage believes traditional media will find ways to compete in the campaign ad market. Take local newspapers, for instance. “There’s a constituency there that I’m not sure will ever be replaced,” he says. And traditional media also can provide online political ads, reaching voters in the format that many have adopted to replace other media.

That’s what the *Columbia Daily Tribune* newspaper is doing. Political candidates in recent years have begun buying online advertising on the newspaper’s website as a complement to their print ads, allowing them to reach four out of five Boone County adults, writes *Tribune* publisher Vicki Russell in an email interview on the trend. “Right now, we can help advertisers microtarget to some extent, and our capabilities will be even greater in the coming months.”

“The more targeted and diffused the messaging gets, the more difficult it is to hold a candidate accountable.” — Vicki Russell, publisher, *Columbia Daily Tribune*

Despite that nod to the trend, Russell stops far short of the microtargeted political ad bandwagon in her comments. Microtargeting is troubling on a number of levels, she writes, particularly when it comes to candidate transparency and accountability. It’s difficult for the media as well as voters to monitor what a candidate is telling other voters. “The more targeted and diffused the messaging gets, the more difficult it is to hold a candidate accountable.”

Russell’s comments reflect a national discussion on the significance of microtargeted political ads that covers a lot of ground. Analysts debate the trend’s pros and cons, but all agree that at its core is technology that continues to evolve.

As NCC Media’s Kay says, “Now they [campaigns] have a little bit more intel.” **CBT**

