Why Grassroots Political Organizations Rely on Facebook

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Facebook has been criticized for its policies on political ads as the 2020 presidential race heats up, but its robust targeting capabilities have proven to be vital for grassroots organizations focused not on promoting candidates, but on finding them, as well as getting people to the polls.

“When we think about get-out-the-vote efforts, back in the day it was really flyers and door-to-door,” said Rob Leathern, Facebook’s director of product management for business integrity. “This is a great new way for people to learn about the ability to participate in the democratic process.”

The production costs for advertising on television, radio and print are prohibitive for many smaller advertisers and nonprofits, Leathern pointed out, while Facebook’s targeting capabilities provide “reach and cost-efficient access to be able to target the right people for get-out-the-vote or voter education efforts.”

The social network highlighted the work of three grassroots political organizations that used its ad targeting capabilities to get people to the polls and, in one case, to ensure those voters had more candidates to choose between.

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Nonpartisan voter-engagement campaign NYC Votes used

Facebook’s language targeting features to reach communities in New York who speak different languages and to raise awareness of early voting.

NYC Votes said its campaign tallied more than 5.4 million impressions via ads on Facebook and Instagram, yielding 69,046 clicks for more information and 8,544 views of campaign videos that it posted.

Meanwhile, national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization VoteRiders used Facebook ads to share information on the necessary identification to vote in each state, as well as to offer assistance to potential voters who needed to obtain ID.

VoteRiders said Facebook ads enabled it to reach 9,549 additional people from Jan. 1 through Nov. 6 of this year.

However, perhaps the most intriguing example was EmpowerLA, the primary support agency for the city of Los Angeles’ Neighborhood Council system, because of the unique challenges it faces.

EmpowerLA’s task for 2019 was to recruit unpaid volunteer candidates and drive voters to the polls for 81 individual Neighborhood Council elections on 13 different dates over a six-month period, across a broad metropolitan area.

With some 1,800 seats up for election in 2019, EmpowerLA used Facebook ads to drive 17,284 potential candidates to the city clerk’s election registration portal.

“The specificity—to be able to hone in on the right people—is very helpful for smaller candidates or efforts like EmpowerLA,” Leathern said. “Being efficient with their spending is a crucial value that they get out of this.”

EmpowerLA public information officer Ann-Marie Holman agreed. “There is no way the city of Los Angeles could have sustained six months of traditional political ads,” she said.

Holman’s organization tried various social media channels, experiencing some organic success on NextDoor—tallying over 550,000 followers for its citywide account and sharing roughly 400 pieces of content over the course of the elections. But when it came to advertising, “Facebook was by far the best fit for what we were doing and the most valuable partner for the targeted, hyperlocal, extremely granular outreach we were trying to do.”

EmpowerLA also came up with a creative way to use Facebook’s custom audiences targeting tool to combat the difficulties of dealing with 81 elections, each with its own unique set of rules, as well as Neighborhood Council boundaries that aren’t aligned with either ZIP codes or the predefined neighborhoods in the social network’s Ads Manager.

Jens Midthun, the organization’s digital marketing specialist, used custom audiences to recreate the city’s Neighborhood Council boundaries by combining address targeting with a 1- to 3-mile radius, crafting overlapping circles to approximate a district.

“We were forced to be groundbreaking because there was no precedent,” Holman said.

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