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**Targeting young voters in a political campaign: Empirical insights into an interactive digital marketing campaign in the 2007 Finnish general election**

## **Abstract**

At general elections across Europe, turnout among young people tends to be significantly lower than among older voters. Therefore, this paper examines a digital marketing campaign that was targeted at young voters in the 2007 Finnish general election. More specifically, this paper aims to provide insights into the creative development process of a political marketing campaign and the nature of the client-agency relationship in political campaigns. The methodology adopted in this paper consisted of in-depth interviews with key informants involved in the campaign planning and implementation. The results provide new empirical insights into the challenges that political campaigners may face when they target political marketing at young voters. In addition, the results suggest that there are differences between commercial and political marketing also in a digital marketing context. Finally, the results support the view that marketing professionals have a strong role in a creative development process of a political marketing campaign. The ideas put forth herein can certainly help advertising professionals to plan political marketing campaigns that engage young people in future elections and therefore aid candidates in their quest to achieve electoral success.

**Keywords** Political marketing, young voters, digital marketing, Internet, general election, case study

## **Introduction**

The use of marketing professionals and the emergent trend towards personality and image politics are changing the expression of modern democratic parties all over the globe (e.g. Scammell, 1995; Sparrow and Turner, 2001; Peng and Hackley, 2007). According to Kavanagh (1995, p.10), this increased reliance on specialized practitioners, i.e. “professionalization”, can be characterized as a greater emphasis on media campaigns, a more demanding and professionalized role for the candidate and a tendency towards explaining election outcomes with regard to the performance of the media and the responsible campaign manager. Thus, “having savvy [political] consultants on board no longer is perceived as just a distinctive advantage; rather, it is perceived as a necessity” (Kinsey, 1999, p.113). Even though the presence of marketing professionals in the political campaign process is well established in existing literature, deficiencies persist in our understanding of the creative development process of a political campaign (Gertner, 2004; Peng and Hackley, 2007; Kinsey, 1999).

At present, political marketing is defined primarily from the relationship marketing (e.g. Grönroos, 1994; 1997) perspective (see, e.g. O’Shaughnessy, 2001; Scammell, 1999). Thus, political marketing practitioners and academics are increasingly focusing on the exchange relationship, the long-term perspective, voter orientation and mutual benefits for all parties involved (O’Cass, 1996; 2001). This approach, however, has not been too successful among young people. It has been suggested that the election advertising campaigns employed have failed to engage the disinterested young electorate (e.g. Dermody and Scullion, 2004). Therefore, this study focuses on a political marketing campaign that was planned to attract young voters and, more importantly, implemented in media that are particular to this age group. More

specifically, besides using traditional media, electronic media – such as email, campaign webpages and Short Message Service (SMS) – were utilized for producing interactive word-of-mouth advertising, i.e. viral marketing (see, e.g. Phelps et al., 2004), in order to reach young voters.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine a senior candidate's marketing campaign in the 2007 Finnish National Elections in order to provide usable insights into political advertising campaign planning and implementation process and the nature of the client-agency relationships in political advertising campaigns. To that end, we propose the following research questions:

1. What are the inherent challenges of developing and implementing a digital marketing campaign targeted at young voters?
2. What kind of role practitioners may have in a creative planning process of political campaign targeted at young audience?
3. What are the differences between commercial and political marketing?

Before presenting the findings of this study, this paper presents the theoretical foundation and methodology.

## **Literature review**

### **Young voters**

Turnout at general elections is declining in most established democracies (see, e.g. Blais, 2000, Blais et al., 2004; Blondel et al., 1998; Franklin, 2004). A particular cause for concern is that the proportion of young people who vote is smaller than the overall voting percentage of the adult population (see, e.g., Lutz, 1991; Crewe et al., 1992; Topf, 1995; Franklin, 1996; Blais, 2000; Whiteley et al., 2001; Wattenberg, 2002; Phelps, 2004). More specifically, evidence presented by Fieldhouse et al. (2007), based on national election results and the 2002-2003 European Social Survey, illustrates that the overall turnout rate for 22 European countries in elections between 1999 and 2002 was 69.8 percent. However, the authors further noted that there is a clear tendency towards significantly lower rates for young voters (i.e., those aged 18 to 24 years). According to the equivalent data, the rate for voters aged less than 25 years was 50.9 per cent – an average difference of nearly 20 percentage points.

Scholars of political science have provided several explanations for this ‘generation gap’ phenomenon. The explanation based on an individual’s life cycle (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960) suggests that low turnout among young age groups is a transitory phenomenon as the turnout usually rises when a person grows older and adopts several ‘adult roles’ (see, e.g. Highton and Wolfinger, 2001, p.202–3). More recently, however, it has been pointed out that there is a clear generational effect along with the life cycle and period effects (Perea, 1999; Lyons and Alexander, 2000; Blais et al., 2004; Franklin, 2004; Franklin et al., 2004; Martikainen and Wass, 2002). Thus, unlike the life cycle approach, the generational explanation argues that abstention

from the vote has, to a certain extent, become a permanent feature in the political orientation of young age groups (Wass, 2007). This would imply that as these people grow older they may never reach the levels of participation of their predecessors (e.g. Franklin, 2004; Norris, 1997).

Even though low electoral turnout is just one piece of evidence of a crisis in democracy, it matters because it is an obvious indicator of political participation; voting may be regarded as a democratic health check and it is the most comprehensive form of political activity (Topf, 1995; Fieldhouse et al., 2007). Thus, some authors have stated that “with turnout at British elections in decline, particularly among young people, British democracy appears to be facing a crisis” (Dermony and Scullion, 2004, p.361). Therefore, it should be self-evident to political actors that they need to find new, innovative ways to reach young people and encourage them to participate in politics.

### **Digital media in a political context**

Although not without its critics (see, e.g. Davis, 1999; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Norris, 1999; 2001), the mobilization theory argues that the Internet has the potential to “inform, organize and engage those who are currently marginalized from the existing political system [...] so that these groups will gradually become drawn into public life and civic communities” (Norris, 2001, p.218). This view is advocated by authors who suggest that the Internet is becoming an increasingly important source of political information for young people, a group of citizens that is normally less politically active off-line (e.g. Boogers and Voerman, 2003, p.25; Gibson et al., 2005, p.578; Norris, 2003, p.39-40). This view is also supported by empirical evidence from the 2004 presidential election in the United States. Even though television remained the most

prominent source of campaign information overall, the younger generation of voters clearly preferred the Internet over the TV (Kaid and Postelnicu, 2005). More specifically, 60 percent of voters younger than age 30 cited the Internet as a source of campaign news, and 40 percent said it was their main source of campaign information (Williams and Trammell, 2005). This development is not overlooked by political actors. In fact, political parties have consistently adopted the latest communication technologies and actively responded to new modes of communication in order to reach the goal of vote maximization on the electoral arena (e.g. Carlson and Strandberg, 2007; Rothschild, 1978; Norris, 2000). In regard to the Internet, political parties around the world have been moving into cyberspace since the mid-1990s (Gibson, 2004). Consequently, this has resulted in a situation where the 2004 presidential election in the United States is widely recognized as the first major Internet election (e.g. Williams and Trammell, 2005).

With the increasing adoption of the Internet in political organizations during the past ten years, a large body of literature has focused on the content of candidate and party websites (e.g. Margolis et al., 1997; Ward and Gibson, 1998; 2003; Gibson et al., 2003a; Gibson et al., 2003b; Carlson and Djupsund, 2001; Jankowskia et al., 2005; Schweitzer, 2005; Ward, 2005) as well as the adoption and diffusion of the Internet among parties and candidates (e.g. D'Alessio, 2000; Norris, 2001; Foot and Schneider, 2002; Dulio et al., 1999; Jackson, 2003; 2007). However, the candidate's use of digital direct marketing such as e-mail and SMS messages has been relatively neglected in academic research (see, e.g. Williams and Trammel, 2005; Jackson, 2007). As websites have become an established and integral part of election campaign communications in many nations (e.g. Gibson, 2004; Kluver et al., 2007), new modes of Internet campaigning have generated increasing interest among academics and politicians. For instance, campaign

organizations are increasingly utilizing blogs for interacting with citizens (e.g. Lawson-Borders and Kirk, 2005; Trammel, 2007). In addition, a hybrid online-offline community-building phenomenon, Meetup.com, was actively utilized in the 2004 presidential elections in the United States (see, e.g. Williams et al., 2004; Weinberg and Williams, 2006; Panagopoulos and Bergan, 2007). According to Weinberg and Williams (2006), the use of Meetup.com was, along with other innovative online marketing vehicles such as blogs, at the heart of Howard Dean's campaign strategy, which effectively utilized the Internet to attract and activate customers (i.e. supporters), organize marketing/campaign activities, communicate his message and raise money in the 2004 Democratic Party presidential nomination in the United states. Moreover, e-mail has been an untapped opportunity – albeit not a new one – in electoral campaigning (e.g. Jackson, 2007; Williams and Trammel, 2005).

Besides Web communications, politicians around the globe are increasingly using mobile phone technology for political purposes (see e.g. Prete, 2007; Hermanns, 2008). Campaigners have realized the potential of text messaging and are using targeted SMS messages with information about candidates and their programmes in order to reach more citizens, mobilize support and encourage supporters to cast their votes to elections. In the US presidential election 2008 candidates are increasingly going mobile. For instance, in an effort to get out young voters, Barack Obama has a mobile page that allows supporters to download ringtones and wallpaper, sign up for Twitter updates, and receive text messages about policy and campaign events (Verclas, 2008).

## **Viral marketing**

At the core of e-mail and SMS marketing is the phenomenon of word of mouth (WOM), the process by which an individual influences the actions or attitudes of others. According to Mohr (2007, p.397), “viral marketing, a high-tech and ‘impersonal’ variation of WOM, is an Internet-driven strategy that enables and encourages people to pass along a marketing message and engage in word of mouth, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence.” Thus, viral marketing is like a virus in the sense that it multiplies explosively, delivering a message to an increasing number of recipients. Viral marketing depends on a high pass-along rate to create a snowball effect (Mohr, 2007). Indeed, Garret LoPorto, a viral marketing campaign consultant, agreed: “The Internet makes possible a whole new level of viral marketing – putting out targeted messages to a group of like-minded individuals and creating a snowball effect – for political campaigns” (Richards, 2004, p.6).

Dobele et al. (2005, p.144) have suggested that viral marketing has three advantages: (1) it generates very little expense since the individual passing on the referral carries the cost of forwarding the message, (2) the act of forwarding electronic messages containing advertising is voluntary rather than a paid testimonial or a mass advertising campaign and thus may be viewed more favorably by the recipient, (3) those forwarding the messages will be more likely to know which of their friends, family members and work colleagues have similar interests and are therefore more likely to read the message; thus, more effective targeting. In the political world, this means having an electorate who will invite and pass along positive e-mail or SMS text messages concerning a candidate or a party. In fact, it has been argued that one of the most significant advances in the Internet campaigning of the 2004 presidential election was the use of

viral marketing (Williams and Trammell, 2005). More specifically, almost all e-mail messages in George W. Bush's campaign provided recipients a way to forward the content simultaneously to five other people. In contrast, John F. Kerry's e-mail messages did not provide any mechanism to forward messages, thereby putting the responsibility on the reader to do so. In US presidential elections 2008 viral marketing campaigns are extensively used in fund-raising. All candidates focused more on small donors and new ways of reaching them (Tumulty, 2007), and it seems that online raffles and divergent special events have been in a heart of viral marketing campaigns in the elections.

### **Context of the study**

Research questions are scrutinized using empirical data from a campaign in the 2007 Finnish general election. The rationale for studying political marketing in Finland relates to the characteristics inherent to Finnish political and social contexts. Recent statistics have revealed that Finland has one of the highest levels of Internet and mobile phone penetration in the world with 62.3 percent of the country's population online (Internet World Stats, 2007) and 114 percent connected to wireless network. In addition, Finland is among the world's leading countries in terms of Internet usage by political actors (Gibson and Römmele, 2005). More specifically, the proportion of candidates who are campaigning independently online in national elections rose from 23 percent in 1999 to 37 percent in 2003 and then again to 62 percent in 2007 (Strandberg and Carlson, 2007).

What also makes the Finnish case interesting is a proportional electoral system based on open lists (e.g. Grönlund, 2007). Elections are direct in that citizens vote for a particular

candidate rather than a party. The Finnish electoral system consists of multi-member constituencies. In the 2007 elections, the size of a constituency varied from 8 to 32 MPs. The MP seats are allocated to the party list according to the d'Hondt formula within the constituencies (Sundberg, 1997; Taagapera and Shugart, 1989). This results in candidate-driven campaigns in which the candidates heavily invest in personal campaigns and typically have support groups that organize campaign activities, raise money and generate publicity (e.g. Strandberg and Carlson, 2007; Ruostetsaari and Mattila, 2002). Given this situation in which a candidate-centered rather than party-centered system dominates, individualized uses of the Internet for electioneering purposes inevitably predominate (Gibson 2004).

Moreover, the Finnish multiparty system is relatively fragmented (cf. Ruostetsaari and Mattila, 2002). At present, three parties, namely the Finnish Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party of Finland and the National Coalition Party, constitute the dominant political grouping. These three parties capture the majority of the votes (around 60–70 per cent) in a general election (Carlson and Strandberg, 2005). In addition to the three largest parties, there is a group of minor parties and a number of fringe parties (cf. Soikkanen, 2003). This kind of multiparty system could have implications for the online activity of political actors: *“in party systems that are highly competitive [...] parties will be more active in exploiting the technology in an attempt to enhance citizen political involvement than are parties in less competitive systems where, by definition, victories are on larger margins and the distribution of strength among parties is uneven”* (Cunha et al., 2003, p.70).

Given the estimations of the increased use of Internet-related marketing activities by politicians – especially electoral candidates – as well as the low turnout of youth electorates, a study of a Finnish senior candidate's interactive digital marketing campaign provides interesting

insights, especially since the candidate that offers the empirical data for this study has been a member of parliament since the 1970s.

### **Description of the case campaign**

In the 2007 Finnish general election a senior candidate who has been a member of parliament since the 1970s decided to attempt to reach new audience from young voters. Therefore, the campaign organization made a decision to organize two totally separate campaigns. More specifically, there was the main campaign targeted at the loyal supporters and older, conventional voters with a more traditional message in a more traditional media, and then another campaign that was targeted at the young voters. This study examines the latter campaign.

The campaign targeting young voters consisted of three main elements: (1) several different call-to-action messages in media that invited the voters to visit the campaign website, (2) the campaign website including an interactive competition and a viral mechanism, and (3) a campaign event at a local nightclub. The main goal of the campaign was to invite young voters to visit the campaign website and finally to get them to participate in the campaign event at the popular nightclub.

The campaign website was promoted in a number of traditional and digital media. More specifically, there were call-to-action ads in billboards, public transport, flyers and election badges which invited electorates to the campaign website. Larger print ads were used in the local free delivery papers and in the customer loyalty magazine of the nightclub chain.

The campaign website had two main functions. First, the website presented the candidate and selected celebrities' endorsements. Lengthy political mission statements and other political arguments were avoided, and the candidate's message was presented by the celebrities with a few carefully selected key points targeted at young people.

The other function of the website was to be a platform for the online raffle in which those who expressed their willingness to participate in the event had a chance to win a VIP service at the event for them and their four friends. All the participants received an invitation to this event. The invitation was sent as an SMS message. The SMS message also acted as a reminder to visit the campaign event at the nightclub.

In addition, supporters of the candidate received an SMS message suggesting that they visit the campaign website and enter the competition in order to receive an invitation to the campaign event at the nightclub. Also an e-mail invitation promoting the website was sent to the permission-based, opt-in digital marketing list of the nightclub chain. Thus, thousands of regular customers of the night club also received an invitation to the event.

The participants of the online raffle were encouraged to send a viral invitation to their friends. The more friends the participant invited the better chances she got for winning the main prize. The invited friends received an e-mail that invited them to visit the campaign website and to enter the competition in order to win a prize and receive an invitation to the election campaign event. The viral message did not include any political message or promotion of the candidate. It was merely aimed to encourage the receiver to visit the campaign website.

The election event at the nightclub gave the candidate a chance to meet his supporters, sponsors, competition participants and other nightclub guests. The event was not branded as a traditional political event; speeches, posters with political messages etc. were missing.

## **Research methodology**

It has been argued that a case study strategy is particularly strong in providing a comprehensive view of a situation in its contemporary context (Yin, 1989), but also in offering new insights into a phenomenon of which little is known (Eisenhardt, 1989). Because of these reasons, a case study strategy was adopted in this study.

The semi-structured theme interview was the main method used in the data collection. The choice of informants was based on the principle that information is best gained from the people involved in the campaign under investigation. Due to this reason, a total of four interviews were conducted. First, the campaign manager who had the overall responsibility for the candidate's campaigning was interviewed. The second interviewee was the director of the advertising agency which planned the whole campaign. Third, the digital marketing specialist was interviewed. The specialist worked for the digital marketing agency which planned the digital part of the campaign. That is, the viral marketing and digital direct marketing elements of the campaign were developed by the digital marketing agency. The campaign was executed in cooperation with the advertising agency and digital marketing agency. Finally, the executive vice president of the night club chain who sponsored the campaign as well as provided important insights into the target group and creative ideas to the campaign planning was interviewed. It was agreed with all the interviewees that the names of the candidate and the informants would remain confidential.

The discussion proceeded around themes that covered the creative planning and execution process of the campaign and the divergent roles the interviewees played during the campaign. The interviewees were first encouraged to tell the story of the campaign in their own

words, and were then asked to give an overview of their role in the creative planning and execution process of the campaign. Following, the interviewees were asked to provide more detailed information about the activities they were involved in the campaign, and finally were requested to compare political marketing with commercial marketing. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

The data was analyzed with the help of theme-based categorizing and content coding. The data analysis began with a pre-analysis, i.e. multiple reading of transcribed interviews to get an initial understanding on the themes emerging from the data. The analysis continued by categorizing the interview data based on the identified themes. The themes and concepts were further refined by the analyzing and coding the data. Thus, a multi-authored coding was conducted to analyse and reorganize the data. To facilitate the data analysis, the interview data were coded with the aid of QSR NVivo software.

Several methods of validation were used to ensure accurate representation and reliability of the data: triangulation, constant comparative method, respondent validation and comprehensive data treatment. Investigator triangulation was incorporated in the data analysis. The authors coded the data individually and then discussed their findings and interpretations. Based on the common understanding about the interpretations, one author continued the analysis. In the final step of the analysis, the authors developed an interpretive description of each category in the light of existing political marketing literature, attempting to capture meaningful aspects of campaign planning and implementation as they relate to larger theoretical considerations. Using constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the investigators examined and compared all the data parts (whether pieces of a transcript or entire transcript) within the phenomenon under investigation. To achieve respondent validation, one of the

researchers went back to informants with tentative results to refine and confirm the findings. Finally, the researchers achieved comprehensive data treatment by ensuring that the findings of this study applied to every category. Stated differently, every code fit into a category and every category fit into a theme. Thus, it was ensured that no part of the data is left unaccounted. Next, the results of the data analysis are presented.

### **Main findings**

The discussion below first considers divergent challenges which campaigner may face in targeting political marketing at young voters, before focusing on the role practitioners may have in campaign planning process and the differences between commercial and political advertising in a digital marketing context.

### **Challenges of targeting young voters in a political campaign**

The informants discussed several challenges of targeting political marketing at young voters. Extant literature on political marketing was used to frame the interpretation of the data. The authors structured the responses into the three categories: lack of understanding of the target audience, the risk of mixed messages and lack of understanding of digital marketing and new modes marketing.

### *Lack of understanding of the young audience*

The turnout among young people is at an alarming low compared to the older voters. It is therefore a commonly voiced worry that if young people cannot be politically engaged, they will be lost from the electoral process for the whole of their lives. Although one can identify several factors that affect young people's political inactivity, election advertising has also failed to pique the interest of young people (e.g. Dermody and Scallion, 2004; Parmelee et al., 2007; Trammell, 2007). Therefore, after having studied political advertising campaigns in the 2001 general elections in Great Britain, Dermody and Scallion (2004, p.375) stated that "given the relatively low youth turnout at elections, perhaps it is time for ad agencies to target young people directly with some of their advertising, as they do for commercial advertising, in terms of both ad style and more importantly, pertinent political issues.

There is no question of ignoring this situation by parties and candidates. In Finland, for instance, all parties claim that young people (18-34 years) fall within the target group of their campaigns (Moring, 2003). Despite this, the political campaigns targeted solely at young voters are more the rule than the exception. This is due, in large part, to the fact that a profound understanding of the young audience is lacking among campaign organizations. Thus, almost all campaigners are eager to curry favour with young voters, but they do not have means of communication to reach the target audience. This became evident also in this case. The campaign manager articulated that the main purpose of the case campaign was to:

*"...target the youth segment. Our aim was to reach those young voters who surf the Web and like to go out... We also intended to make our candidate's image younger in the eyes*

*of the target group and tell that the candidate provides an exclusive campaign for the target group.”*

However, it was soon realized by the campaign manager that the young voters could not be reached with the traditional arguments targeted at the older, conventional voters in traditional media such TV, radio or newspaper. Due to this reason, candidate’s campaign group contacted practitioners who were familiar with the target audience. In cooperation with advertising professionals and campaign consultant from night club business, campaign manager started a creative campaign planning process in order to end up with an innovative strategy to catch attention among young people.

#### *The risk of mixed messages*

Broadly speaking, a party can adopt three different approaches – product, sales and market orientations – in achieving campaign success (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Whatever approach is adopted, the candidate as well as the party should recognize the risks in the neglect of their existing core supporters, i.e. the loyalty voters that normally vote for the party or candidate. If the needs and expectations of the core voters are constantly not met, voter dissatisfaction will easily follow. Dissatisfaction causes changes in behaviour, and behavioural change denotes that certain beneficial activities (votes, resources, donations) are withheld or reallocated to other actors (sometimes out of the electoral market) (Henneberg, 2004; O’Shaughnessy and Wring, 1994).

In this case, the campaign organization was fully aware of the risks embodied in organizing a campaign targeted at young people. Therefore, the campaign organization decided to organize two totally separate campaigns. The main campaign was targeted at the loyal supporters and older, conventional voters with a more traditional message in a more traditional media, and then another campaign that was targeted at the young voters with fresh ideas and messages in new media. The campaign manager discusses this dual-strategy:

*“Broadly speaking, the 2007 campaign was in line with previous campaigns. We had the campaign ads in the television and newspapers. We also used direct mails and the candidate had a campaign webpage and so on. Since the 1970s all this has proven to be effective. There was no need to change these old and good habits. However, we also had something very special. We had a supporting campaign targeted at the young people. The campaign was totally separate from the main campaign. It had its own campaign webpage, newspaper and outdoor ads. This was the first time in Finland, as far as I know, that a candidate used this kind of dual-strategy in a general election.”*

Clearly, having the dual-strategy approach to political marketing is a key to reducing the risk of mixed method. Tailoring the messages to fit the target audience and communicating them in the right channels minimizes the risk that the messages are received by unexpected audience.

### *Lack of understanding of digital media and new modes of marketing*

In Finland, candidates are increasingly utilizing Internet in their campaigns. According to Strandberg and Carlson (2007), the number of candidates who had their own campaign webpage during the general election rose from 37 percent in 2003 to 62 percent in 2007. Despite the fact that the candidates' use of the Internet in the 2007 general election dramatically increased, the campaign web pages were mainly used for information dissemination, and only to some extent to interact with voters by trying out with, for instance, discussion forums and blogs with features available for commenting (Strandberg and Carlson, 2007). Although one could argue that candidates' campaign websites were a visible part of their campaign communication and were used for a wide variety of purposes, creative cross-media campaigns were not widely utilized. It is hardly an innovative way of doing campaign communication to convert traditional messages, such as television advertising, press releases, posters and brochures, into a digital format and make these available for supporters and other interested people through the candidate's website. In fact, used in this way, the Internet does not provide any competitive advantage for candidates.

At its best, the Internet not only acts as an important source of information, but also provides something attractive and engaging to the target group. However, it is especially challenging to organize a successful digital marketing campaign targeted at young voters because of many of the concepts have proved to be effective in a commercial marketing are not yet tested or successfully used in a political context. Therefore, a digital marketing specialist was invited to join the creative development process of the campaign. In the case campaign a viral marketing element was involved in the campaign. The digital marketing specialist expresses the advantages of viral marketing:

*”We’ve been using viral mechanisms together with competitions in several commercial campaigns. Outcomes have varied a lot, but viral campaigns still appear to be successful and especially cost-effective. Also, the negative feedback on viral campaigns has always been minimal, so we saw it as a rather lucrative idea to make a viral campaign with competition a part of a political campaign.”*

Moreover, all the informants emphasized that digital media is personal by nature and digital direct marketing is regulated by laws, and therefore a message, especially a political message in the digital media, might be received with prejudice. Due to these reasons, consumers seem to be more cautious of forwarding the viral marketing message in a political context as discussed by the campaign consultant:

*“Based on this campaign and my previous experience, I suggest that viral marketing works also for political purposes, but the results from the commercial campaigns have been a little bit better. It seems that people are more hesitant to forward political messages compared to commercial messages. For instance, in a commercial promotion, if a lucky draw or any other competition is organized in such a way that the entrant gets a better chance to win every time the message is forwarded, people may forward the message to others in their address book at a moment’s notice. Instead, in a political marketing campaign, even if a nonpolitical reward is included, it seems that people are not so willing to pass along the message. Thus, I suppose that they feel that by*

*forwarding the message they take an attitude toward the candidate, and therefore viral marketing is not as successful as it otherwise could be in political marketing.”*

Today’s young people spend several hours per day consuming digital media – from the Internet to mobile phones to video games. Therefore, in order to communicate with young voters, the political campaigners need to understand how they consume digital media and how does they response to the new, innovative marketing concepts such as viral marketing. Thus, understanding of the basic fundamentals of digital media is a key ingredient for the potential success of political campaign among young voters.

### **The role of advertising professionals in campaign planning process**

There is a long history of political parties engaging advertising agencies to assist with election campaigns (e.g. Wring, 1996; Peng and Hackley, 2007). Initially agencies were carrying out technical tasks, such as laying out copies or booking and placing advertising (Ward, 1999). At present, it is commonly agreed that advertng professionals are central advisers and strategists in election campaigns. The campaign manager discusses the current situation:

*“We [the campaign organization] pretty much gave the advertising agency free hands in creating the campaign. Of course, we provided the needed material, such as images and texts, as well as suggested some ideas for the campaign planning, but it was the advertising agency that created the campaign. Without a question, they did a great job. There was no need to advise professionals. In fact, I didn’t even have the competence to*

*comment on the outcome. It looked good and seemed to fit very well with the target group, young people, I mean.”*

The above comment supports the view that political marketing is professionalized and it is almost impossible to develop campaigns without external expertise. Help of practitioners was invaluable also in the case campaign. Although the campaign organization provided needed material to the campaign development process, it was the digital media knowledge, creative ideas, overall campaign design and understanding about the target audience which breathe life into the campaign.

### **Differences between commercial and political marketing**

Nonetheless, there seem to be several similarities between the political marketing campaigns and commercial marketing campaigns. Kotler and Kotler (1981) have argued that election campaigning has an inherently marketing character and that the similarities of salesmanship in business and politics far outweigh the differences. The Director of the advertising agency agreed on this view:

*“Especially since it was the candidate not a party that was advertised in the campaign, I don’t see big differences between the political and commercial marketing campaign. In both cases the same facts are valid: you bring out the best features of the product and try to differentiate the product from the competitors in a most positive way. Thus, it is vital to communicate the benefits the consumer gains if voting for the candidate in question.”*

This view is to some extent supported also by the comment provided by the digital marketing specialist:

*“Even though it was a political advertising campaign in question, the campaign was quite similar to commercial digital marketing in terms of content and mechanism. Broadly speaking, digital marketing campaigns, especially in the Internet, are usually rich in content, involving a wide variety of activating elements such as campaign webpages, competitions and other entertainment, viral marketing and cross-media communication. This campaign was designed in line with commercial digital marketing, and therefore, I think, it succeeded quite well.”*

However, it is important to emphasize that informants also suggested that there are differences between political and commercial marketing campaigns. The digital marketing specialist explains those differences;

*“In the planning stage [of political marketing] there are, however, many more differences if compared to commercial marketing. Those differences relate to the number of people involved in the creative planning process. In the commercial marketing planning process, all the people involved have a common understanding about the campaign goals – a sales promotion, brand building or whatever the goals are – and therefore the planning process is typically fairly straightforward. Instead, in political marketing, the people have a common goal in mind, but the opinions on how to achieve that goal are diverse.*

*This inevitably results in a situation in which compromises and more hard work is needed during the planning process. This said, in political marketing campaigns the planning process is without question clearly laborious, because the planning stage includes more trade-off decisions to be made between the means and goals.”*

This last point supports, in part, the view that party ideology and policy should be separated from the campaign planning process (e.g. Peng and Hackley, 2007). In the case campaign the cooperation between party members and practitioners worked very well. The political campaign organization set the course and general principle what is the message they want to communicate. Advertising experts and the consult developed the campaign tactics and the best way to accurately deliver the message to the target audience. However, this is not always the case, and therefore politicians and practitioners should always carefully consider their respective roles in campaign planning process.

### **Discussion and practical implications**

As society becomes more digitalized and the turnout among young voters tends to decrease, political campaigners continue to search for new ways to reach young audience. Digital marketing provides one solution for political marketers. Without investing heavily on expensive mass marketing, political marketers have a chance to reach potential voters attractively over digital channels with messages that are specifically targeted to target audience needs and interests of target audience. However, political marketing targeted at young voters is not without its challenges. This research extends the political marketing research by providing empirical

insights into creative development process of a digital marketing campaign targeted at young voters in the 2007 Finnish general election. In addition, managerial implications are offered, proving political marketers fresh ideas of utilizing digital media in their campaigns.

In this study, informants discussed about the lack of understanding of young audience, the risk of mixed messages, and the lack of understanding of digital media and new modes of marketing as challenges for digital marketing campaign targeted at young voters. The young voters are increasingly difficult to reach with conventional messages in traditional media. Therefore, the campaign organization was facing the dilemma whether to modify the message and diversify the channel choice or continue campaigning as usual. After discussion with the advertising professional and campaign consultant, the campaign manager decided to try something new. They organized two separate campaigns; one for traditional supporters and another for potential young voters. The findings suggest that the dual-strategy is a very promising method for establishing political communication with young people. While providing a more 'traditional' campaign for the loyalty supporters to keep them satisfied, the campaigner also targets a more innovative campaign at young voters to invite them into political communication and finally to electoral participation. In addition, it has been suggested that young people use the Internet as a main source of political information. Thus, the Internet is an alluring channel choice for the political campaign targeted at young voters. However, the findings reiterate the notion from the commercial world that the Web is not a standalone media (Calisir, 2003). Instead, the Internet complements other media, and therefore the Internet should be used as an integral part of the campaigner's media mix.

The findings also support the notion that while the new medium does not alter the underlying party and candidate goals, it does provide the political actors with an additional

means of achieving them (Norris, 2003, p.26). However, it should be emphasized that nowadays nearly all candidates have a web page and they are also increasingly utilizing other opportunities of Internet. Therefore, although Internet campaigning still has certain advantages, such as refreshing the senior candidate's image among young people, without a creative campaign the Internet would not provide a competitive advantage for any candidate. Thus, the famous "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p.7) conceptualization – i.e. the medium through which information is transmitted strongly influences how the information will be received, interpreted, and processed by its audience – does not work among young people anymore. Young people are using the Internet on a daily basis, and therefore campaigners must use creative messages and media combinations to attract young voters' attention. Due to these reasons, political campaigners need to rely heavily on advertising professionals who are familiar with digital media and new modes of marketing.

Other findings from this study support the view provided by the Kotler and Kotler (1981) that election campaigning has an inherently marketing character and the similarities of salesmanship in business and politics far outweigh the differences. In fact, political and commercial digital marketing campaigns are quite similar in terms of content and mechanism. However, in the planning stage some differences occur. In the commercial marketing planning process, all the people involved have a clear and common understanding about the campaign goals – sales promotion, brand building or whatever the goals are – and therefore the planning process typically flows more smoothly. In political marketing, there is typically a common goal – to win the election – but the planning process is packed with a wide variety of opinions on how to reach the goal. This results inevitably in contradictions and compromises, and therefore it is important to highlight the importance of separating party politics from the political campaign

planning process. As noted also by Peng and Hackley (2007), a party must set the course and a general principle on what the message they want to communicate is, and the role of an agency is to help to develop the campaign tactics and the best way to accurately deliver the message to the target audience.

It seems that political communication is received with caution among young people, and therefore the findings suggest that political marketers should consider digital marketing opportunities. In the case campaign the viral marketing was used. The idea behind the viral marketing was not only to enable the supporter to forward the message to other electorates. Instead, the key building block of successful viral marketing is the development of an engaging campaign that spurs voters to pass along the message. The lesson learned from commercial viral marketing suggests that successful campaigns engage potential viral marketers by using messages that spark strong emotion, such as humor, fear or sadness, or create inspiration (Phelps et al., 2004), interactivity and rewards (Dobele et al., 2005). Thus, campaign developers should consider these aspects while matching messages with voters' political motivations. This depicts the importance of understanding the target group well enough to create an interesting and relevant message. Despite the fact that a successful viral marketing campaign is difficult to develop, the findings from this study, in some extent, suggest that viral marketing can be used also in a political context. At the minimum, the current study depicts that a viral effect exists also in the political marketing campaign. Based on this notion it is further suggested that the campaign message is most likely read if it comes from a person that the receiver knows. Therefore, the viral marketing messages may overcome selective exposure, similar to the numerous findings about televised political commercials (Williams and Trammell, 2005). In this

way viral marketing may become more valuable in helping to invite untapped citizens, especially young voters, to political communication.

### **Limitations and future research**

A variety of limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings are from a single-case study only. However, focusing on a particular campaign allowed us to provide in-depth insights of the digital marketing campaign planning and implementation process in a political context. Nonetheless, having different campaigns in divergent political contexts would enhance the generalizability of this study. Thus, more studies replicating our case study are needed.

Second, the current study was conducted in Finland. The rationale for studying an interactive digital marketing campaign in the Finnish general election relates to the wide-spread use of the Internet and mobile phones among Finns as well as the special characteristics of the Finnish political environment, including a relatively fragmented multiparty system, candidate-driven campaigns and a proportional electoral system based on open lists. While these characteristics probably enriched the results of the study, they may also diminish the generalizability of this study. Thus, campaigns in divergent political contexts would further validate the findings of this study.

Third, the present study examined the creative development and implementation process of the campaign, and therefore the campaign effects and effectiveness were not measured in detail. Although some evidence of campaign success was provided, the overall success of the campaign cannot be judged based on the available data. Therefore, future studies might focus on the measurement of the effect and effectiveness of a political campaign targeted at young voters

so that political campaigners can more accurately weigh the success of the campaign and plan more engaging campaigns in the future.

Finally, future research might also be directed towards the use of interactive media, such as the Internet and mobile, in conjunction with more traditional media. Although it has been suggested that the Internet is the main source of political information among young people, this study provided some evidence that the Internet can be used as an integral part of the campaigner's media mix. Therefore, the studies examining the combined effect of interactive media and more traditional advertising media in a political context could clearly prove useful.

Obviously, many unanswered questions exist in regard to political marketing. While this paper only attempted to address some of the many knowledge needs related to political marketing, we believe that the ideas put forth herein contribute to understanding of the development process of digital marketing campaign in a political context, and the suggestions for future research point to intriguing avenues for investigation.

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