

Turning North Carolina from Red to Blue

Careful media buys targeted young Adults and African American 18-30 voters to make the difference in tough races...

By Ondine Fortune

One of the most difficult challenges of any campaign is targeting younger voters. Distracted by a zillion media options—from the Internet to iPods and video games—consumed by busy social schedules and fledgling careers, young voters can be tough to reach.

Direct mail has little or no impact with this age group. Radio, the old choice, has been shattered by satellite service and iPods. Network television audiences have dramatically slipped away. Enter cable television: a medium that now delivers strong and consistent target audiences for campaigns.

This is the story of how we at Fortune Media Inc. developed and executed a micro-targeted media plan to deliver the right North Carolina audiences on behalf of EMILY's List, a PAC committed to electing more pro-choice Democratic women to office.

The organization wanted to boost voting by targeting the 18- to 30-year-old voters, including African-Americans. There were several important races for the Democrats and EMILY's List in North Carolina in 2008, including Bev Perdue running for governor and Kay Hagan running for Senate. EMILY'S List hoped to encourage young voters to look beyond the presidential race and vote down-ticket for these female candidates for statewide offices.

All indications were that the Obama campaign had energized younger voters. However, no assumptions could be made; in 2004, polls indicated a lot of younger voter excitement for Kerry but in the end their turnout was a great disappointment. The first challenge was to ensure whatever youth support existed would widen to include the high-profile Senate and gubernatorial campaigns and other female candidates running for statewide offices.

The Numbers

The candidates faced long battles at the outset. Hagan, unknown outside her state Senate district, began with virtually no name recognition. She had to start from scratch and run a very aggressive campaign. Perdue, meanwhile, was struggling for every vote she could get. Holding younger voters would be crucial to her victory.

“Historically in North Carolina, Democratic candidates for governor have had a much easier time than Democratic candidates for U.S. Senate or president,” explains North Carolina media consultant Thomas Mills, who consulted on the SEIU's independent expenditure for Purdue. In 2004, the Republican gubernatorial candidate received 25 percent fewer votes than President George Bush while Democratic Gov. Mike Easley received almost 21 percent more than John Kerry did.

Mills says most political observers expected the same pattern this election cycle. But while Obama and even Hagan had growing momentum, Perdue was struggling to fight for the governor's mansion. Ultimately, Perdue received the same number of votes as Obama, while Republican Pat McCrory received only 6 percent less than McCain.

“As a two-term lieutenant governor and former Senate Appropriations chair, Perdue was saddled with the ‘insider’ and ‘establishment’ labels while McCrory fashioned himself as an agent of change,” Mills says. Ironically, that allowed the Republican to piggyback on Obama’s message of change, helping particularly with suburban voters in the Research Triangle and in Charlotte.

Our Strategy

Reaching 18–30 in today’s market is not an easy task. Broadcast viewing continues to decline, and Scarborough and Nielsen research proved it was not a cost-efficient method to reach young voters. We also had to consider that male African-Americans historically have a very low voting turnout. Extensive research determined that carefully chosen spot cable programming and targeted radio in concert with a coordinated web campaign was the key to reaching the demographic.

We also had to be sure to isolate this demographic since our focus groups had shown that tying the candidates to Obama and his agenda was an effective way to get our target voters to continue voting down ticket for EMILY’s List candidates. However, there was also concern that white, older, non-college women were actually more likely to vote for the EMILY’s List candidates than they were for Obama and, indeed, that too close of an association with Obama may decrease support in this demographic for the North Carolina candidates.

Tactical Challenges

The challenge, then, was to find programming that isolated younger voters and avoided the white, older, non-college women.

Typically, political media buyers buy a “run of station,” unaware of the resources and advantages of the micro-targeting available through cable networks. Many buyers only look to lift overall reach and frequency using low-cost rotators instead of specific programming. Unlike network television, where overall audience is 25 to 54, one cable network can offer a variety of programming targeting very specific demographics.

Media Plan: Cable

We pulled both network rankers and program rankers for each market and for women 35 and older (to be sure we bought around them) and for African-Americans and then again for adults 18 to 30 (A18–30). We focused on fixed programming on selected networks—BET, Discovery Channel, Comedy Central, E!, ESPN, ESPN2, ABC Family, FX, TBS and USA, for the most part—which gave us the best ratings and ensured that our target audience would see and hear the message and not get lost in programs that did not execute our goal.

For instance, ESPN does well for A18–54 but spikes for A18–30 on “Monday Night Football”—so we only bought “Monday Night Football.” Discovery Channel overall does not do well for A18–30, the exception being “Mythbusters” and “Dirty Jobs.” So we only bought these programs. Cartoon Network is known for reaching kids, but their late-night programming, “Adult Swim,” features animation for adults. According to preliminary data from Nielsen Media Research, the programming currently claims the No. 1 position among basic cable networks for October 2008 total day delivery of A18–34 and A18–24.

TBS and USA programming crosses all demographics. We bought “Frank TV” and “Tyler Perry’s House of Payne” on TBS and broadcasts of WWE events on USA. The no-brainers were BET, MTV and VH1, so we bought a mix of rotators along with our fixed programs to boost the reach and frequency of the total buy on these networks only.

In addition, we included high-profile programming, such as BET’s Hip Hop Awards (where Barack Obama’s team also bought) and “The Sarah Silverman Program” and “The Daily Show” on Comedy Central.

Media Plan: Radio

We included urban radio in all the major TV markets, targeting the A18–30 group and African-Americans. Our experience in prior campaigns taught us that African-American women 35 and older are more likely to vote, and the older they get the more likely they are to vote. Knowing this, we also recommended gospel radio for the last three weeks of the buy. Gospel radio has a listening audience of mature African-American women. We believed we could convince them to vote down-ballot and that they would have influence on those around them; sociological research shows they can influence up to seven males in their circle. Since African-American voters often take their cues from parents and grandparents, EMILY’s List featured a spot with a grandmother talking about why it is important for her children and grandchildren to vote.

Results

The governor, senate, secretary of state and treasurer races all went to women Democrats. And, of course, Barack Obama won the state by an extremely narrow margin. *The Greensboro News & Record* called Hagan’s victory “an upset virtually unthinkable just a year ago, when Democrats scrambled to find a challenger to take on Dole.”

Did the 18–30 voters make a difference? The state board of elections’ early estimates show that 32 percent of new voters between January and November 2008 were 18- to 24-year-olds. In lieu of the yet-to-be-published voter tallies, it is fair to assume that a good majority went to the polls. In addition, 28 percent of the first-time voters who voted during the early voting period were under 26 years old.

The governor’s race was won by 3.3 percent, or 145,000 votes. Our estimates show there were just shy of 900,000 A18–24 registered voters, which is a boost of 4 percent over 2004.

These voters initially got involved over their excitement for Barack Obama. EMILY's List made sure to capture these voters for races down ballot. In Perdue's case, this was the closest race in the country and these younger voters very likely made the difference in this historic victory.

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