

6 *My.BarackObama.com*

KEEP IT LOCAL, KEEP IT REAL



OBAMA'S OFFICIAL SOCIAL NETWORK, my.barackobama.com, was at the heart of the campaign's new media strategy. Affectionately referred to internally as MyBO, the site allowed users to create events, exchange information, raise funds, and connect with voters in their area. MyBO was the digital home base from which the campaign could mobilize its army of supporters. Creating an account required an email address and a password. Users didn't even have to confirm their email address. This was done to make the sign-up process as fast and easy as possible.

The drawback of this technique was that people could create accounts using fake email addresses with the sole intent of posting negative comments, a frequent occurrence requiring constant monitoring by the MyBO team. Online trolls, people who joined the community only to disrupt and insult members, were usually reported to online community managers within minutes and removed from the site. Over the course of the campaign, over three million people would create an account on MyBO and use the site's tools to organize for Obama.

Chris Hughes, Director of Online Organizing, was fascinated by the challenge of building a political social network. *"As great as Barack is, if the campaign hadn't been constituted in this idea of investing in our everyday supporters and helping them organize among themselves, I wouldn't have been as excited about the job,"* he said. One of Facebook's co-founders, Hughes left his role leading product development to join the campaign in Chicago. Armed with Facebook's community-building expertise, he applied the same principles to grow MyBO: Keep it real and keep it local. MyBO was built to strengthen existing connections with neighbors. Hughes understood that the primary function of MyBO was to enable supporters to reach each other and form their own connections. The MyBO team wanted to ensure that the online infrastructure would translate into an on-the-ground army that would help solicit votes.

Creating a sense of community was essential to MyBO's success, and campaign staff made a consistent effort to foster a supportive online atmosphere by providing plenty of resources to help users get the most out of the site. Videos offered a step-by-step tutorial on how to use each of the online tools, and a downloadable host guide helped organizers plan the perfect event from beginning to end. Campaign staff hosted weekly conference calls with MyBO members to exchange tips and insights about using the online tools. The team phoned hosts who had used MyBO to organize an event to offer support and advice. They often called back after the event as well, to make sure that everything had gone smoothly and to ask for feedback. This was one of the most rewarding parts of my own volunteer responsibilities. I loved connecting with real people and hearing the excitement in their voices when they heard that I was calling from National Headquarters to thank them for their efforts. *"We're fired up and ready to go,"* was an oft-repeated phrase. Their enthusiasm often buoyed my own spirits, especially when working twelve-hour days.

This chapter will look at the strategies that made MyBO an inviting and welcoming environment and some of the creative ways in which supporters used the site to organize for change.

FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS — We'll examine the way the profile, action center, and personal fundraising pages were used to keep the communities focused on the most important goal: getting Obama elected.

INCITE THE RIGHT ACTIONS — The campaign's activity index was refined to reward supporters who were using online tools to effectively organize offline.

LEVERAGE CREATIVITY — The Obama team left enough flexibility in the events, group listings, and user blogs to give supporters an opportunity to create an intimate connection with the campaign through personal expression.

Focus on What Matters

The MyBO interface was carefully designed with usability in mind. The Obama team made sure it was easy for users to participate, raise funds, and stay updated with the campaign. Each MyBO account had the following components: dashboard, profile, action center, fundraising, network, and sidebar.

DASHBOARD

The dashboard was the user's homepage, a place to get an overview of all the action happening on MyBO. It provided easy shortcuts to quickly access the organizing tools, including personal fundraising and events. This kept the tools in sight—and foremost in the user's mind—whenever he or she logged on.

Rahaf Harfoush Logged | Account/Password

MY PROFILE [Edit Profile](#) (2)

Display Name: Rahaf Harfoush
Location: Chicago, IL
[View Full Profile](#)

MY BLOG [Manage Blog](#) (2)

Share your thoughts and experiences with other Obama supporters. Whether it's a photo, personal story, or simply your opinion on the campaign, you can share it through a personal blog.
[Manage Your Blog](#)

MAKING A DIFFERENCE [What's This?](#)

MY ACTIVITIES
All | 7 Days | 30 Days

My Activity Index: Obama	
Events Hosted	1
Events Attended	0
Calls made	0
Doors Knocked	0
Number of blog posts	0
Donors to your personal fundraising	0
Amount raised	\$0.00
Groups joined	5

FACEBOOK
Connect your Facebook account to your MyBO Account
[Connect with Facebook](#)

MY NETWORK [Manage My Network](#) (2)

Invite your friends and family to join the network. Or find friends already on MyBarackObama.
[Read old messages!](#)
[Compose a Message](#)
Invite your friends to join

My Home

Community
[My Neighborhood](#)
[My Groups](#)
[My Friends](#)
[Find Friends](#)

Events
[Find Events](#)
[Host an Event](#)
[Manage my Events](#)

Contact voters

Fundraising

Messages

Blog
[View All Blogs](#)
[Search All Blogs](#)

Action Center

Resources

PROFILE

The profile allowed the user to upload a picture, create a user name, and state his or her location. Instead of listing favorite movies, TV shows, or music, a MyBO profile featured the answer two questions: “Why do you support Barack Obama?” and “Are you registered to vote?” The profiles allowed the user to customize content that was relevant to the mandate of the community: electing Obama.

ACTION CENTER

In August 2007, Chris Hughes introduced the MyBO action center on the official blog. *“What we must do now is channel all the enthusiasm and energy that you in this community have toward the completion of discrete goals that will help meet the campaign’s objectives,”* he wrote. *“The Action Center is a place where you can go to find out exactly what the campaign needs from you today.”*



Supporters were given a new task to complete every two weeks and encouraged to recruit new members from their circle of friends. Actions focused on priority items including voter registration drives, phonebank campaigns, and canvassing efforts.

FUNDRAISING

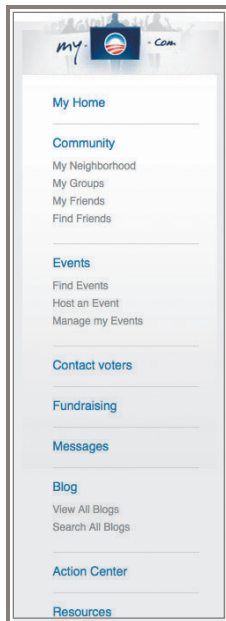
Each MyBO user could create a personal fundraising page, which included a thermometer graphic that tracked his or her progress. The page was customizable: users could articulate in their own words why supporting Barack was important to them. The personal fundraising page also came with a customized URL and embed code that could be placed in webpages and emails. This created a new way for the campaign to raise money because it didn’t focus on supporting a candidate, but created an opportunity for friends and family



to support each other in order to reach personal fundraising goals. Instead of a stranger cold-calling to ask for a donation of five or ten dollars, it was your neighbor or friend who was raising money because she believed Barack would end the war in Iraq and bring her son back home. This made donating more personal and meaningful because in addition to supporting the campaign, your funds were providing a direct benefit to someone you know. Over the course of the campaign, 70,000 MyBO personal fundraising pages collected more than \$35 million for the campaign.

NETWORK

MyBO users could exchange messages with each other much like an internal email account. The network feature allowed users to easily upload contacts from an Outlook or Gmail address book, encouraging members to invite their extended social network to join MyBO as well.



SIDEBAR

The sidebar was always visible, even when users navigated away from their dashboard to explore other areas of the Barack Obama site. This made sure that an online member's inbox, groups, and event information were always one click away.

Incite the Right Actions: The Activity Index

To keep supporters motivated and engaged, the Obama team had to make sure MyBO users felt they were making a difference in the campaign. Originally, MyBO contained a point system that assigned a value for various activities; a phone call was worth three points, making a donation was worth fifteen. A single cumulative score was calculated and displayed on a user's profile, reflecting their rank within

the site. Members were ranked against each other and could lose their standing if another member accumulated more points. The idea was to mobilize voters by allowing them to directly measure their impact on the campaign through their organizing efforts. However, it quickly became evident to Chris Hughes, Director of Online Organizing, that certain people were trying to take advantage of the system. *“From the start, the emphasis was on quantifying an activist’s contribution to the campaign, not on encouraging people to rack up points for the sake of racking up points,”* he wrote on the Obama official blog in August 2008. *“For some people, this wasn’t always clear.”* That same month, MyBO rolled out a simpler way for users to track their involvement, a feature called the activity index.

Instead of listing a score, the index clearly specified the types of activities a user engaged in: how many people they phoned, how many events they attended, and so on. The index rated the user’s activity level on a scale of one to ten (one being least active, ten being most active), but there was a twist: it calculated the rating based only on recent activities.

This meant that users had to keep participating in order to maintain their rating. *“The more work you’ve done recently, the higher the number will be,”* Hughes explained on the Obama blog. This encouraged sustained behavior, ensuring a

continued stream of activity. In addition, the activity breakdown was publicly visible to other members in the community, further motivating people to participate. By placing more value on offline activities (hosting an event was worth fifteen points compared to three points for joining a group), the campaign also acted on its strategy of “offline action,” rewarding people for mobilizing in the real world.

KEEPING SCORE

15 POINTS for every event hosted

15 POINTS for a donation made to the personal fundraising page

10 POINTS for every door knocked on using the online canvassing tool

5 POINTS for every call made using the online call tool

3 POINTS for every event attended

3 POINTS for every blog post

3 POINTS for every group joined

The index became an accurate and efficient way of segmenting the community based on activity level. Users who achieved a certain rating out of ten were given access to special resources, such as training videos on how to maximize the use of the online tools. It also helped state field organizers spot highly motivated users in their area who could be recruited to join the campaign in a more formal capacity, such as becoming a neighborhood leader or phonebank organizer. It made it easy to identify supporters who were more willing to engage with the campaign, without excluding those who wanted to get involved on a lesser scale. Membership became a continuum on which every supporter could find his or her own sweet spot. The index was also applied to entire groups, so that anyone could see how active an entire membership was at a glance.

Leverage Creativity

GROUPS

MyBO groups allowed users to quickly and easily connect with other voters who shared similar interests. Groups ranged from people with the same occupations (Electricians for Obama), to location (Texas for Obama), to demographics (Women for Obama). Groups were given their own homepage, complete with a blog, directory, electronic mailing list, a collective activity index, and a group fundraising meter. By the end of the campaign over 35,000 groups were created by volunteers.

Not all groups were focused solely on fundraising or organizing; some were used as a way to send a message to the Obama campaign. The most notable of these was one of the largest MyBO groups, made up of members who opposed the senator's stance on an amendment to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). The bill would grant the president more leeway to spy on citizens' private communications and would grant immunity to telephone companies who were accused of illegal surveillance. Obama had originally stated that he opposed modernizing FISA. In June 2008, he released a statement saying that he would support the FISA Amendments Act of 2008 being considered by the House of Representatives, but that he would try to remove the retroactive legal immunity part before it

came to the Senate floor. A few months later he changed his stance and supported the modernization of the bill, including the retroactive legal immunity.

His support of the bill angered many community members on MyBO and a group was formed in June 2008 called “*Senator Obama, Please Vote NO on Telecom Immunity—Get FISA Right.*” It grew to several thousand people and quickly became one of the largest groups on MyBO. Many speculated about what the official response would be, if any, and how the senator’s progressive campaign would respond to voices of dissent within their own community.

On July 3, 2008, New Media Director Joe Rospars posted an official response from Obama on the site’s official blog. In a demonstration of the site’s effectiveness in getting Obama’s attention, an official statement was released addressed directly to those who had taken issue with his stance. Obama took the time to explain the reasoning behind his position and acknowledged the impact of the MyBO community, saying, “*Now, I understand why some of you feel differently about the current bill, and I’m happy to take my lumps on this site and elsewhere. For the truth is that your organizing, your activism and your passion is an important reason why this bill is better than previous versions.*” He wrote, “*No tool has been more important in focusing peoples’ attention on the abuses of executive power in this Administration than the active and sustained engagement of American citizens. That holds true not just on wiretapping, but on a range of issues where Washington has let the American people down.*”

Obama set the tone for future communications and interactions with community members saying, “*I cannot promise to agree with you on every issue. But I do promise to listen to your concerns, take them seriously, and seek to earn your ongoing support to change the country.*” He also outlined what he intended regarding FISA if he was elected, promising to have his attorney general “*conduct a comprehensive review of all our surveillance programs, and to make further recommendations on any steps needed to preserve civil liberties and to prevent executive branch abuse in the future.*” Once again, his actions reaffirmed the campaign’s message of hope and change, while maintaining transparency about why he was voting for the bill.

The new media team took an extra step. Joe Rospars announced that for thirty minutes following the post, three members of the policy

team would be monitoring the comment sections to respond to any questions or concerns that readers might have. Deputy National Policy Director Danielle Gray, Senior Foreign Policy Advisor Denis McDonough, and Foreign Policy Advisor and Senior Speechwriter Ben Rhodes spent ninety minutes wading through over six hundred comments and participating in a dialogue with concerned supporters. The campaign made it clear that they were both listening to their supporters and willing to talk with them regarding any feedback they might have. This also shifted the conversation from complaining or protesting to constructively discussing the issue and learning about Obama's reasons for voting the way that he did. Supporters who participated would then share this information with other members of the community who might have similar concerns.

SENATOR OBAMA, PLEASE VOTE NO ON TELECOM IMMUNITY- GET FISA RIGHT

23,211 members
4,919 Events hosted
35,744 Events attended
215,090 Calls made
5,263 Doors knocked
94,826 Blog posts
\$726,977.³² Raised

FLORIDA WOMEN FOR OBAMA CAMPAIGN FOR CHANGE

39,102 members
4,831 Events hosted
37,180 Events attended
127,874 Calls made
12,549 Doors knocked
42,364 Blog posts
\$349,885.³⁰ Raised

MACS FOR BARACK

314 members
1,740 events hosted
6,690 events attended
17,723 calls made
681 doors knocked
28,004 blog posts
\$236,290.⁸⁷ raised

ENVIRONMENTALISTS FOR OBAMA

36,285 members
14,953 Events hosted
92,338 Events attended
740,731 Calls made
12,610 Doors knocked
162,897 Blog posts
\$2,066,717.⁵⁴ Raised

AUDACITY OF HOPE**BOOK DONATIONS FOR OBAMA**

161 members
2,012 Events hosted
8,667 Events attended
16,042 Calls made
373 Doors knocked
30,634 Blog posts
\$58,127.06 Raised

POSTCARDS FOR OBAMA**(POSTCARDS FOR VOTES)**

124 members
530 Events hosted
3,200 Events attended
17,251 Calls made
415 Doors knocked
4,965 Blog posts
\$40,196.79 Raised

STUDENTS FOR BARACK OBAMA

36,719 members
19,635 Events hosted
79,161 Events attended
405,629 Calls made
4,531 Doors knocked
174,259 Blog posts
\$1,737,475.70 Raised

EVENTS

The real spirit of the community could be seen in the more than 200,000 offline events organized through MyBO. The events feature gave community members a way to incorporate the qualities that Obama represented into their daily lives and to inject a personal touch to the campaign. In addition to traditional events such as phonebanks or neighborhood canvassing, MyBO members invented thousands of other creative ways to express their support. Events included everything from dinner parties and themed biking tours to art and fashion shows, comedy nights, and local movie premiers. The community's actions embodied the Obama brand in a way that transcended marketing and public relations initiatives.

In January 2008, two Yale University students launched a venture called Obama Works. In a column in the *Yale Daily News*, Justin Kosslyn and David Manners-Weber asked, “*What if a portion of the grassroots campaign were dedicated to visible public service projects?*” In other words, how could MyBO users demonstrate through actions the values of the Obama brand within communities across America? Their answer: organized community service where Obama supporters could do good while taking part in events that represented the campaign's values. The activities would have to be simple enough to be easily implemented anywhere. They suggested three types of events: Neighborhood cleanups, charity runs, and various small-scale local projects. “*Residents driving through town squares and walking through local parks would find groups of enthusiastic Obama volunteers picking up cigarette butts and candy wrappers,*” they wrote. They also suggested a five-kilometer charity run to support local families and projects ranging from “*re-tiling the bathroom in a local women's shelter to distributing children's books from the local book bank.*”

The goal was to rebuild the American public's trust in politicians through reputation and a track record of civic service and to demonstrate that through grassroots organizing, big changes can take place. Kosslyn and Manners-Weber called their community service acts “Obama Works.” News of their work quickly spread on MyBO and soon supporters in other areas started organizing their own events. Local chapters were soon established across the country. The Minneapolis chapter boasted over forty members who organized clean-ups of local parks and streets. The story was picked up by the media, giving excellent press coverage to the campaign.

BARACKFEST (BREAKFAST)

Since March 2007, Dan of Ft. Collins, Colorado, has been using the power of breakfast to bring people together. During the campaign, on the first Sunday of the month he served fresh omelets, crepes, stratas, and pancakes to supporters who gathered to trade campaign experiences and personal stories. Each event raised between \$200 and \$500.

BARACK BIRTHDAY BASHES

In Montara, California, eighty people gathered to celebrate Barack's birthday. Festivities included a birthday cake, a huge cardboard cutout for photos, a large birthday card, and a list of forty-seven reasons to vote for Senator Obama. They also screened A&E's Biography channel episode on Barack Obama. After the fun, party-goers recruited local volunteers and canvassed Spanish-speaking voters in New Mexico.

SOUL LINE DANCERS

Over 60 dancers wearing "Soul Line Dancers for Obama" shirts busted out their best dance moves on the streets of Oakland, California. Many residents out for a stroll past the Lake Merritt Columns joined in the fun. The group also set up a table for donations and new voter registrations.

BASEMENT BHANGRA

South Asians for Obama in co-operation with Obama NYC, Latinos for Obama, Asian Americans for Obama, Queens County for Obama, and Generation Obama sponsored "Basement Bhangra," an Indian dance party that educated voters about Obama's positions on various key issues. Over 400 people showed up for the event in New York City and danced the night away.

USER BLOGS

Each MyBO account included a blog where supporters could post about their experiences and thoughts throughout the race. The blogs were a great way to share information and personal stories, and helped connect Obama supporters to each other. It gave supporters like Maria from Missoula, Montana, a platform to have their voices heard. Maria had become an Obama supporter in 2005, after stumbling on a keynote made by the senator to Citizens United for Research in Epilepsy (CURE). Having recently lost her daughter to the medical condition, she used her MyBO blog in early 2007 to express how Obama's words had *"comforted me during a most painful time in my life."*

Maria had already knocked on doors and made phone calls on behalf of Barack but she wanted to do more. She came up with an innovative idea that combined her love of food with her belief in hope, change, and action. She spent the month of April 2008 connecting with Obama supporters on MyBO and compiling 160 stories and recipes, which she assembled into an online cookbook. She posted the entire collection on her MyBO blog and called it "The Obama Family Cookbook," as a reflection of the camaraderie and friendship that was felt on the site. Anyone could access the content for free, but Maria asked voters to donate what they could. She raised \$2,000 through online donations but didn't stop there.

"This is a real grassroots cookbook, like the old-fashioned-but-fun church and school cookbooks of yore," she posted on her blog. She collected recipes from all fifty states, as well as England, the Virgin Islands, and the Netherlands. The cookbook would be a great keepsake of *"the experience we've had in creating our Obama family."* The cookbook is dedicated to her daughter, Carrie.

I asked Maria about her experiences with the campaign. *"I was a part of the campaign—as were millions of others just like me,"* she said. *"I had never worked on a political campaign or donated any money to one. I felt that it was my campaign, our campaign, and that I was (and still am) working for the common good. I felt 'empowered' for the first time in my life."* Obama's message of being our brother's keeper resonated with her. *"That is the kind of world I want for my children."*

SWEET POTATO PIE RECIPE

SUBMITTED BY CARLA B FROM WALDORF, MARYLAND

My name is Carla and I received this recipe from a single Air Force active duty member about 19 years ago. I have been married to an Air Force member for almost 20 years. I would often host a dinner at our home for active duty members who had no place to have Thanksgiving dinner. The troops didn't have to bring anything but themselves for dinner, but one troop brought sweet potato pies with him and they were the BEST sweet potato pies I've ever had. I begged him for the recipe and about two weeks later he brought the recipe. I must say that I've served the best sweet potato pie for Thanksgiving dinners ever since. I get kudos every year from Thanksgiving dinner guests and many of them have requested the recipe. This recipe is even more special to me now because the Air Force member who gave me this recipe 19 years ago, died while serving in Iraq two years ago, leaving behind a wife and two beautiful children. This sweet potato pie Ba-racks!

1 8" frozen piecrust or 1 Pillsbury ready-made rolled refrigerated piecrust

1 medium sweet potato (boiled with skin on until done)

1/2 cup of granulated sugar

1/2 stick of butter (softened)

1/2 tsp. of pure vanilla flavoring

1/2 tsp. of lemon flavoring

1/2 tsp. of orange flavoring

1/2 tsp. of maple flavoring

1/2 tsp. of butter flavoring

1/4 tsp. of nutmeg

1/4 tsp. of cinnamon

1/8 tsp. of cream of tartar

1/2 cup Carnation evaporated canned milk or 1/2 cup of Borden's sweetened condensed milk

1 tbs. flour

1 egg

Peel boiled sweet potato and place in mixing bowl. Add sugar, softened butter to bowl and mix together with sweet potato. Add vanilla, lemon, orange, maple, and butter flavorings. Mix slightly. Add cream of tartar, flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, and milk, and mix together. If mix is too thick, you can add a little more milk; if mix is too thin, you can add a little more flour. Once mixed together, you can taste test and add any additional flavoring you desire. In a separate bowl, beat egg and add to mix and mix it all together. Add mix to piecrust and bake in an oven at 350 degrees for one hour. Remove pie from oven and let cool. Serve with whipped cream and enjoy! Yields one 8-inch pie, approximately 6 servings.

SOCIAL MEDIA LESSONS

FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS — Within MyBO, the mandate was very clear: use the online tools to organize offline action. From the profile that asked you to describe why you supported Obama to the action center that directed users to areas of priority, offline action was constantly reinforced. When building an online community it is often helpful to spell out in a few lines what the goals and mandates are. Is the mandate clear? Does it make sense? More importantly, does it resonate with what your members are already trying to do? If you answered “no” to any of the above questions, then it’s probably a good idea to step back and refine the purpose of your community. Establishing the mandate is only part one of this exercise. The second part involves making sure that all of the features and activities of the community reinforce the mandate. Examine everything from the interface and design to the ways that you envision member interaction. Be sure everything is designed to push your mandate forward.

INCITE THE RIGHT ACTIONS — Building incentives that reward the right type of action is an important part of community building. The activity index helped reward those who were organizing offline by assigning a higher point value to offline activities. It also encouraged frequent and continual support by factoring in the frequency of activities in the algorithm. This ensured that members of the community were not only going out and organizing for Obama, but that they were doing so on a regular basis.

LEVERAGE CREATIVITY — The events, group listings, and user blogs allowed supporters to engage with the campaign on their own terms. Successful communities are flexible and allow members to express themselves and have a role in shaping the community. Thanks to the creativity of users, new event categories and groups were formed in an innovative way without straying from the community’s mandate.

