

Microtargetting: Streamlining the Search for Potential Foster Parents

Using business intelligence technology to gather and analyze data about consumer concerns and media preferences, marketers can fine-tune their efforts to reach prospective child welfare participants.

IF YOU'VE EVER FELT THAT SEARCHING FOR potential foster parents is like looking for a four-leaf clover in a field of tall grass, microtargetting may be the technique for you.

Long used by big business, microtargetting is widely credited with transforming the campaign ground game for President-elect Barack Obama. It relies on computers and mathematical models to analyze dozens of pieces of information about individuals: the cars they drive, the homes they live in, the groups they've joined, their online and offline media habits and more. Microtargetters use this information to build relational databases and identify like minded clusters of individuals, enabling outreach tailored to each cluster's specific interests, concerns and media preferences (phone calls versus visits, television versus radio, direct mail versus e-mail or text messaging).

Strategists for Obama deployed the technique to identify potential clusters of support and to craft dozens of message variations. In the process, they created a significantly larger swath of battleground states. Vijay Ravindran, chief technology officer at microtargetter Catalyst, told the New York Times in early November, "No one would have predicted that thirty states would be in play. It's been a very pragmatic approach."

As a result, Democrats forced Republicans to compete and spend in many more states—even states Republicans had easily carried in the past.

Microtargetting shaped volunteer efforts during the recent campaign as well. Phone drives to get out the vote were tailored to voters' most critical concerns. Plotting out on a map, house by house, where still-undecided voters lived made it possible to design the shortest routes for volunteer visits. Armed with answers to each voter's most likely questions, volunteer canvassers greatly improved their odds of persuading those on the fence to join Obama's camp.

Now, even organizations like the Sierra Club and the AFL-CIO are getting into the microtargetting game. Up-front costs can be steep, but these organizations find the efficiency of laser-focused spending on people open to their messages means little waste. And the ability to persuade through customized messaging means better bottom-line results.

"Imagine if you had enough foster care recruiters with enough time to talk individually with those likely to be most interested in foster parenting," says Daniel Stein of Stewards of Change. "And imagine if those recruiters actually knew, ahead of time, what each individual's most likely concerns would be. Do you think you might be able to build a larger stable of foster parents? That's what microtargetting, aided by new media, can do for foster care, but in a way that's more affordable, more efficient and, potentially, more persuasive over time. It's a great use of technology to fix one of the most important and most vexing problems we face."