

Campaigns & Elections

Movers & Shakers: Jim Messina

by Shane D'Aprile / Apr 11 2013

Obama's former campaign manager on data, partisan technology and the future of OFA

C&E: What's the focus at The Messina Group and how will you balance that with OFA?

Jim Messina: We are going to help campaigns, nonprofits and corporations learn the lessons of the Obama campaign, especially in regards to grassroots, new media and data. OFA is one of the most important things obviously. I'm also helping the Democratic National Committee think about their future and what they're doing. I'm doing some consulting work with some nonprofits who want to learn how to really reach out at a grassroots level and talk to folks.

C&E: How do you apply those Obama campaign lessons on a smaller scale?

Messina: The fundamental basis is that a lot of those campaign volunteers worked because they cared about Barack Obama and I don't think that's transferable. But the lessons are transferable. We did over 140 new pieces of technology and changed American politics. We changed the way we think polling and data is handled. And we had a commitment to the grassroots that generated a much bigger turnout than people were expecting, especially Mitt Romney. Those lessons are very transferable.

C&E: You and others call the 2012 campaign the greatest grassroots effort in the history of politics. How did you conceptualize and build that between 2008 and 2012?

Messina: The 2008 campaign was the most special campaign we've ever been involved in, but there were really two Obama campaigns [that year]. There was the online campaign that was driven early on by our supporters—that was everything from the Meetup stuff they were doing before the president got in the race to Will.i.am's song. Even the stuff we were doing in the general election on BarackObama.com wasn't really connected to the other piece, which was the grassroots. Our goal in 2012, and I'm proud to say that

we got there, was to burst the wall between those two and say to you, “I don’t care when you organize, what time of the day you organize or where you organize, as long as I can track it, measure it and use it to get you to organize your friends and family.” We were able to give you a host of tools that were used simply to organize you and your friends. The most successful and famous of all of them was targeted sharing on Facebook. Over 5.5 million people used it to match their friends with our lists. The campaign would give you a list of your friends who were undecided and say, “Go at it.” A large percentage of people, especially young people, used that to organize their friends. We were able to use data to make our volunteers’ time more efficient.

My favorite story is from a volunteer in Wisconsin 10 days out [from Election Day]. She was knocking on doors on one side of the street and the Romney campaign was knocking on doors on the other side of the street. She was asked to hit two doors. One was an undecided voter and she knew exactly what to say. The other was an absentee ballot and she was told to make sure they filled it out and returned it. On the other side of the street, the Romney campaign was knocking on every single door. Most of the people weren’t home, and most of the people that were home were already supporting Barack Obama. She looked at me and said, “You’re using my time wisely.” That’s what data can do.

C&E: And at the same time it gives volunteers more of a sense that they’re having an impact.

Messina: Absolutely. It allows us to use our most precious commodity, which is volunteer time, more effectively. And we weren’t perfect at this, but as we got through the campaign we got better and better at it. We had this amazing gift called 2011. While the other side was doing their stuff, we were studying and learning and making mistakes much like Bush did in 2004 and Clinton did in 1996.

C&E: How vast is the technology gap between the two parties?

Messina: Right now it is vast. Having been on panels with the Romney campaign after the election, I think the data we were seeing was very different than the data they were seeing, and our voter contact tools were more advanced. But in 2004, George Bush was much more advanced than the Democrats, and we spent eight years learning lessons and experimenting to be able to change the game. So my biggest piece of advice to the person who has my job next time is to not run the same campaign I did, because the technology will change. I said to Obama the day he asked me to run the campaign, “I want you to promise me we’re not going to run the same campaign we ran in 2008.” Everything had changed. Facebook was ten times the size. We sent out one tweet on Election Day 2008, because Twitter was still new technology. Smartphones hadn’t really evolved yet. So we set out with a really tough goal for an incumbent: change everything.

C&E: On the digital side, you almost seemed to be in a different world from the Romney campaign.

How much attention did you pay to what they were doing online?

Messina: We understood very early we had to change the game and develop some things that had never been developed, especially on our tech team. Eric Schmidt, the chairman of Google, said something very wise to me: “Don’t hire very many political people. Hire people who are really conversant in tech and understand where the future is. You can draw on a whiteboard what you want and they’ll build it for you.” That was really good advice. There were definitely growing pains. I remember taking one of our technology and data teams to the Wisconsin recall elections [in 2011] and having them knock on doors and they came back and said, “I’ve never done that before, but now I understand what you’re asking me to build.” That was an interesting process.