



# RUNNING FOR OFFICE

as an

# ONLINE CANDIDATE

Web strategies for local campaigns

Shane Daley

# Running for Office as an Online Candidate

Web Strategies for Local Campaigns

Shane Daley

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Daley Professional Web Solutions/Online Candidate

PO Box 402

Montgomery, NY 12549

[www.DaleyPWS.com](http://www.DaleyPWS.com)

[www.OnlineCandidate.com](http://www.OnlineCandidate.com)

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# Introduction

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When we started Online Candidate in 2003, it was tough to convince local candidates that an online presence could help them win an election. Today, political candidates of all levels realize the power of online campaigning. They use the web to build a volunteer base, raise money, and boost voter support.

From building a campaign website, to social networking, to maintaining an online reputation, there is a lot to do and a lot to know.

With every election cycle the tools, services, and rules change. Keeping up with the digital realm can be a challenge for any political campaign.

This book is a primer for candidates who want to leverage the web to reach, communicate, and motivate supporters. It is not a comprehensive overview of online marketing. Our goal is to distill the online opportunities, tools, and strategies to help candidates win an election.

Starting early is your best path to success. Read the entire book. Then go through it again and use the checklists to prioritize your efforts. Get others involved, assign responsibilities, and put your plan to work.

Every campaign has a different mix of resources. Not every strategy that is mapped out in this book is necessary to be successful. Apply the ideas that work best for you.

With proper management, you can leverage the web to increase your campaign's online and offline effectiveness. Today, it's not a matter of *whether* you put your campaign online – it's a matter of *how* you do it.

# Laying the Groundwork

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## You, online

In the early 2000s, only the most online-savvy political candidates put much focus on the web. Sure, presidential campaign websites had been around since the mid-90s, but for local candidates the web was not an investment worth spending much time or money on.

How things changed! By 2008, Barack Obama's presidential campaign had raised half a billion dollars online. In 2012, he raised \$690 million digitally. By the end of his failed 2016 presidential primary, Bernie Sanders raised \$218 million, mostly from small online donations.

Then 2020 changed everything. Health concerns and a deteriorating economy caused by the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the old political campaign playbook.

Social distancing presented a unique problem for political candidates who spent much of their time interacting with others at campaign events, shaking hands and meeting people face to face.

Candidates were forced to campaign while acknowledging unprecedented social and economic conditions. Campaign staffers were ordered to work from home. Field organizing shifted to texting and phone banking. Almost overnight, digital advertising replaced door-to-door canvassing and in-person events.

It was a seismic shift that would permanently alter online campaigning.

Today, almost all political candidates accept online donations in one form or another. They promote themselves with online advertising and interact through social media. Campaigns

organize online and even recruit virtual volunteers who help by keyboard. Even local candidates target individual voters in ways that were unheard of a decade ago.

While a campaign website remains the hub of a candidate's online presence, the work begins on a much more personal level.

## **The value of social networks**

The internet allows candidates to make personal connections with voters - quickly, easily, and inexpensively. Through social networking, you can get to know many people, and even more people will get to know you. You can reach more voters online than you can through a dozen campaign events.

The value in building an online network is that you can begin slowly and go as deep as you want. You can start by putting basic information about yourself on the web. Then you can begin connecting with people you know. As your network develops, these connections help build relationships and start a conversation. *The purpose of engaging others online is to get people to know, like, and trust you.*

Building a strong base of supporters before a campaign is important. Successful candidates start an online presence long before they announce their intention to run for office.

Ultimately, you will ask others to act on your behalf. The individuals with whom you have built a relationship will be called upon to give money, donate time, spread the word and, in the end, *vote for you.*

Social networking made it big in the 2008 presidential race. There were over a million Obama supporters on Facebook. McCain supporters numbered just over 150,000.

## Creating your online identity

It doesn't matter if you're new to the web or if you've been online since the days of CompuServe. Odds are there is information about you online that can be accessed with a simple search engine query.

Go ahead and 'google' yourself. Do a search on google.com for your name. What shows up in the results? There might be pages that randomly contain your first and last name. Perhaps you share a name with someone else and results about that other person are showing up.

If that other person is somewhat famous (or infamous), there may be articles, blog posts, or other content about that person. Another reason there might be information online about that person is because they *put* information about themselves on the web. Search engines picked up that information and then provide that content as search results.

As a candidate, you want influence over what people see, hear, and read about you on the web. To do that, you need an *online identity*. Creating an online identity is simple, and you can do it over time. To start, you need a clear purpose. If that purpose is for political reasons, then you want to create a *personal brand*. That means getting yourself – your history and goals – out on the web.

Another purpose of building an online identity is *search result page domination*. This means that when someone searches

your name, positive information about you appears in the top search results. This can be information created by others, *or it can be information that you create yourself*.

The first step in creating an online identity is to create *personal profiles* about yourself.

In this case, we are talking about *personal profiles*, not campaign accounts, which have the purpose of promoting you as a candidate. Think of this section as creating your personal online resume.

For our purposes, we want sites that have a high search engine authority and tend to rank well for personal name searches. Many websites fit this criterion, but we are going to start with the following:

- LinkedIn
- About.me
- VisualCV

Here is a brief overview of the sites listed above:

**LinkedIn** – <https://www.linkedin.com/>

LinkedIn users tend to be business professionals, but the site can be used by people in any field. With a profile, you can post your resume information and link your profile with others. LinkedIn is discussed in more detail below.

**About.me** – <https://about.me/>

This site allows you to create a simple page about yourself. It is a place to showcase who you are and what you do.

**VisualCV** – <https://www.visualcv.com/>

This site is designed for job seekers. It features an online resume generator that can include images, video, and links. You can share your profile with a vanity link.

By creating profiles on these types of sites, you can begin to brand yourself online long before you begin campaigning. There are other profile-building sites, but the ones listed above are free and popular. You may also want to create personal profiles on industry or professional-related sites.

### **What about Wikipedia?**

Almost every Wikipedia page (or Wiki page) tends to rank very well for Google searches. It might seem like creating an entry for yourself on Wikipedia.com is a great idea.

It's not.

Using Wikipedia to put out information about yourself can become a problem. Once a Wikipedia page is created, it is likely to remain there forever. Your page will almost certainly be edited at some point, as anyone can submit changes. Edits can be approved if there is a reliable reference to back up the changes. Potential changes can include positive or *negative* information and citations.

While you may be able to create a Wikipedia page about yourself, *you will never have control over it.*

If a Wiki page already exists about you, you can submit your own updates. Be factual in your edits and avoid anything that smacks of self-promotion. Otherwise, the editors will reject your changes and potentially block your account.

While *online reputation management* is usually associated with businesses, it also applies to individuals. A person can have a great public reputation. Unfortunately, it is impossible to control what others say or post online. One bad post can undo a lifetime of achievement. A negative online reputation can cause embarrassment, cost someone a job, relationships, and future business dealings. Take control of what you can to help maintain a positive online reputation.

## The least you need to know

Is it essential to build profiles and put content about yourself online? No, but it will help if you are looking to build a solid online foundation.

In time, profiles will appear in searches related to your name. Where you can, link your profiles together. Cross-linking similar pages builds relevancy for your name. In time, you can also link your personal profiles to your campaign website and social media profiles to also boost their search engine ranking.

The web is where voters look for political information. If you do not put out information about yourself, *then someone else will.*

## Action Steps

- Create personal accounts that will rank well for online searches. Only add information that you are comfortable sharing. Keep in mind that if you are running for public



office, there won't be much information about you that *isn't* public.

- Use a consistent name throughout all your profiles. Try to match your future ballot name if you can.
- Include a head shot photo. It should be a recent picture where you are dressed well. A smile always helps, too.
- When you have completed your profiles, go back and cross-link profiles to each other where you can.
- Finally, maintain a list of your profiles and keep them up to date as you move forward.

# Creating Your Social Media Presence

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In years past, most candidates started social networking after they made the decision to run for office. Social media was an afterthought, a secondary way to drum up support – if they used social media at all.

These days, it is recommended to start an online presence as early as possible. That allows you more time to build a network of friends and supporters.

Building a personal online social presence gives you a leg up when you announce your intention to run for office. Your friends and fans will be the first to check out your campaign website, provide feedback, promote your cause, and help in your fundraising and volunteer efforts.

Did you know that 72% of U.S. adults have at least one social media account? Source: Pew Research Center, 2019

## The dark side of social media

Are you already engaged online? Do you maintain a Facebook or Twitter account? Is there an old MySpace page of yours somewhere? Did you ever post comments on online forums under your own name? If you have ever done any of these things, then you have left behind all kinds of digital footprints that could come back to bite you when you run for office.

Young people tend to put personal information online because they have been exposed to social media earlier in life. At some point they may be older, wiser, and dealing with the consequences of their online activities.

Racy photos, crazy party shots, offensive posts, embarrassing video clips, and discussion board comments can remain online for years. When these digital artifacts are ‘discovered’, political opponents often use these items out of context (or even *in* context, as the case may be). This can leave candidates confronting sticky issues.

## **No amount of detergent can provide a digital scrubbing**

Deleting online material will not make the information disappear. A saved screen shot, a digital photograph on a hard drive, or even an archived web page on [Archive.org](https://archive.org) may still be out there. Trying to delete material after it is discovered can only inflame the issue and make it seem like a candidate is trying to hide something.

**When posting online, use this rule of thumb:** Anything that you say or do online will be made public and could be used against you by a political opponent. If you are not comfortable with anyone seeing certain material about you, then do not post it online.

Of course, that doesn’t prevent *other people* from posting material about *you*. In this age of viral content, you will want to watch what you do or say in any setting where there is the possibility of you being recorded.

**Do not rely on the privacy controls of online services.** Privacy policies change, and there is nothing to stop other users from reposting material you've shared.

## Fix what you can as early as possible

If you currently use social media sites, consider cleaning up old posts, and watch what you post going forward. Rework slang or colloquial phrasing within your profiles. Update your profile images to ones that better suit a political candidate. Do this as early as possible. You don't have to change who you are but be aware of how you could be presenting yourself to future voters.

No matter what you do, embarrassing online material may be discovered. In the end, it is best to fix what you can, accept what you cannot change, and move on to more important issues. If you believe that existing material will become a problem at some point, figure out ahead of time how you will deal with that.

Again, assume that any online communication you make will become public. Privacy standards shift over time. Information currently walled-off within certain websites might become open at some point.

**TECH TIP:** During a campaign, you will create several online accounts. For better security, use different passwords on all your accounts. That way, if one account is hacked, the others will not be as vulnerable. Consider using software like *LastPass* to help manage your passwords.

## Who should manage your online presence?

You may need help to monitor and post material on behalf of your campaign. Many candidates handle everything themselves, but even a small campaign may have one or more persons who act as an *online coordinator*.

An online coordinator may be tasked with monitoring accounts, creating posts, handling campaign email and newsletters, and perhaps even updating the campaign website. You may decide to have several trusted volunteers help with your online efforts. Everyone should know their duties and what they are authorized to do on behalf of the candidate or campaign. Ongoing communication between coordinators is important.

Online coordinators need access to various accounts. Take care not to allow one person to have too much control. You don't want to be potentially locked out of accounts or unable to post if a coordinator is not available. For better coverage, you may want to have multiple administrators for different accounts.

Give others only as much account control as they require. If someone only needs 'Editor' access to update an account, then don't give them an 'Administrator' role.

## **Keeping it safe**

When setting up accounts, you may want to use a common campaign email account that is controlled only by you or a high-level campaign member. That can help you keep control over everything. At some point, you may need to update login information or remove a coordinator from your accounts.

Most website hosts allow you to create *email forwards* that simply redirect email from one address to one or more other addresses. You can use a different email forward for each social media account. It is easier to update where email forwards point to than to change permissions over actual email accounts.

Maintain an ongoing list of the information for your various accounts. You should note what individuals have access to any accounts.

## Choosing your campaign handles

When you start your online campaign, you will need to pick a website domain name and names (or handles) for your campaign's social media profiles.

The question that often arises is whether you should include the name of the office you are seeking.

For example, should you use the handle *Elect John Smith* or *John Smith for Mayor*?

Avoid using an office name and/or year in your website name and social media handles. It's better to use your name with a more generic 'vote for' or 'elect' prefix.

If you are going to be in politics for a while, odds are that the position you are seeking will change in the future. If that happens, all the work to build your online presence for an old position may go to waste.

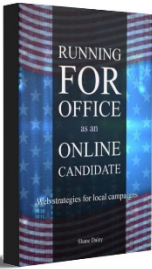
For example, you can change the web address on a Facebook Page to a unique username address. However, once you choose a unique address, you might not be able to change it again in the future. A page named *facebook.com/smithforsupervisor* won't work well if you run for a different office. It may be tough to get all your old followers over to a new page.

The same goes for a campaign Twitter account. Your handle *@smithforsupervisor* will look silly when you later run for state representative.

When coming up with your online account names and handles, be sure to choose carefully – and be prepared to keep them for a while.

**Don't switch personal social media accounts into campaign accounts.** Start fresh and create new social media handles and accounts. Encourage existing friends and contacts from your personal accounts to follow your new campaign accounts.

**[END OF SAMPLE]**



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