Creating a social media strategy for use during political campaigns has become an essential part of every candidate’s plan to get into office. With social media sites often getting more traffic than an official campaign website, it’s important for candidates to get connected.

“The use of social media in today’s campaign is not only important — it is critical,” says Hubert “Sonny” Massey, a Business instructor and advisor at South University, Savannah. “Millions of people are involved in using social networks daily. It is the opportunity to be in touch with large numbers of voters quickly, constantly and at a low cost.”

Massey says it has become a common practice for political campaigns to create social media sites or pages as part of their marketing strategy.

“From now on, social media will have a huge impact on elections,” Massey says. “With the speed of communications and the numbers of people involved, the impact has to be significant.”

Chris Saad, chief strategy officer at Echo, says the use of social media was pivotal during the 2008 presidential election, when U.S. President Barack Obama became the first candidate to use it successfully.

“It was the first campaign where social media was pervasive and he understood it and leveraged it,” Saad says.

He compared the use of social media in the 2008 presidential election to the first televised campaign debate in 1960, between then-presidential candidates John Kennedy and Richard Nixon.

As part of their social media strategy, Saad says politicians create interesting posts to try to engage followers, similar to the tactics used by a brand or media company.

Candidates create simple to digest posts that can be easily retweeted or shared, Saad says. This type of campaign marketing is much different than creating television commercials, as the politicians can create social media posts quickly and easily to react to news and reach out to voters, whereas making an advertisement is a much longer process.

“They are using social media and engagement numbers almost as proxy battles for the actual elections.”

Saad says the main social media goals in the presidential campaign are to create content that people share, for fundraising purposes, and to gauge where the candidates stand in the race.

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Political Campaigns Connect With Voters

Most of what happens on social media from brands and political campaigns are not conversations, as they aren’t creating a back-and-forth dialog with voters, but simply hoping the messaging will get voter to vote a certain way.
Saad says candidates don’t typically reply to voter’s tweets and Facebook posts, but they do use social media companies like Facebook and Twitter to host live Q&As from the company headquarters, as a sort of town hall debate.

“They’re using the brand of a Facebook or Twitter to appeal to a young generation,” he says.

Though candidates may not reply to voter comments on their social media sites, Massey says it can be helpful for them to have the opportunity to see responses and opinions to topics they post.

## Campaign Social Media Strategy

Massey and Saad agree that having the ability to see the political views of family, friends, and peers can sway a person’s vote.

“I think that’s the only way that social media works,” Saad says.

Saad says politically active people are subscribing to the candidates on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and although less politically savvy people aren’t doing that, they’re still seeing those messages when their politically active friends comment and “like” them.

He says the only way the people without much interest in politics find out about a candidate’s posts is through the politically savvy people.

“A candidate may have a million subscribers, but will reach 10 million or 100 million people because of its viral effect,” Saad says. “Everybody is seeing a ton of campaign content coming through, whether they like it or not.”

With so much emphasis placed on social media sites, it can be easy to forget that candidates typically have an official campaign website as well.

Saad says it ebbs and flows as to whether voters visit the official campaign website of a candidate or their social media site more.

“With AOL and MySpace, there was this pull towards party websites, so people would push everyone to those sites, that peaked, then people realized their own websites were more important than other people’s,” Saad says. “We’re in this interesting swing right now where people are promoting Facebook and Twitter more than their own websites, but we actually think this is a temporary glitch. Their own website needs to be the place they’re promoting.”