

Digital campaigns get the vote

 By [Tess Sulaman](#)

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USA president Barack Obama is scheduled to serve his last full day in the White House on 19 January 2017. When he looks back at the legacy of his administration, including the elimination of Osama bin Laden, introduction of Obamacare, initial steps towards normalising relations with Cuba, shutting down the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison for "combatants", and many others, are likely to be high on the list of his achievements during his eight-year presidency.



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What history may not place at the top of the Obama legacy list is how he got there in the first place. Presidential hopefuls such as Hilary Clinton and "The Donald" Trump will no doubt have analysed his campaign strategy to see what worked for him on his journey to the world famous house on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC. Political campaign strategists will have pointed out the use of social media and how that played a crucial role in winning him the keys to the White House.

As South Africans get ready to head to the polls, there is no shortage of advisers on what the three main political parties should be doing to win the hearts and minds of voters. Granted, the South African political landscape is vastly different to the US's. However, those who choose to ignore digital means of delivering their messages to potential voters can kiss the hotly contested metros such as Nelson Mandela Bay, Johannesburg and Tshwane goodbye.

{{Image}}

The manifesto launches have come and gone. They all trended on Twitter, some for the wrong reasons. Social media and email media have become so sophisticated that you can easily track who is captivated by your messages or posts. You're able to receive instant message feedback and, if our politicians care to listen to voters – a foreign concept in SA politics in general – you have the means to tweak your messages as you go along to ensure they resonate with your audience.

So is anyone winning the Twitter war? It seems many people consider social media a box to tick rather a real tool with which to take over the administration of local government. The Green-Black-and-Golds, Blues and Red Berets all have Twitter and Facebook accounts, which they use actively – with varying degrees of success.

When operating on digital media platforms, it's not enough simply to have things to say; it's vital to track the manner in which those receiving the messages interact with them.

I have received an SMS with fewer than 150 characters urging me to vote. I am still waiting for someone to send me an email targeted at people of my demographic, which explains in detail why I should vote for them. I read my emails every day, as do many other South Africans with a digital ID, aka an email address.

The 2014 elections saw 25,388,082 people registered to vote but only 18,654,771 exercised that right. There are many people who can swing the balance of power one way or another, but it would seem no one is talking to them at a personal level.

Perhaps it's too difficult to sustain a slew of catchy phrases in a 500-word article. But if you had sent one to me, you would know if I'd read it and if I clicked through to other documents or to your website, which articles I spent time reading and how much time I spent looking at specific content. You can even conduct quick polls using email to establish which way people are likely to vote.

That is a wealth of information that anyone serious about changing my mind on who I should vote for should be spending their precious time mining, analysing and applying to fine tune their campaign.

What we are likely to see in about two months' time are giant advertisements wrapping tall buildings in town and billboards all over our highways as well as door-to-door campaigning on steroids. They are useful, but can anyone seriously give an objective calculation of the return on the investment on these tactics?

Anyone with a social media account also has an email account, while we will soon see tons of 140-character messages, perhaps it might also be worth exploring the idea of telling your good story in an intelligent and comprehensive manner.

If it does not matter now, it sure will matter in the future. So get used to talking to your audience on platforms they spend most of their time on – email, social media and online publications – or find another job... if you can.

ABOUT TESS SULAMAN

Tess Sulaman is CEO of Rocketseed South Africa.

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