

Ben Waldon

Finance Director, Deborah Ross for Senate

Would you first just walk me through how you were hired onto the Ross campaign?

I was recruited by the DSCC – Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee – and Emily’s List, who I work for now. I was working in Atlanta at the time for a member of Congress, I had run the finance department before on a couple different campaigns. The DSCC invited me to a training in D.C. for people that were current finance directors of Senate races, or people that they hoped would become finance directors. It was about eight of us. I went to the training and met with them and trained for a weekend, and then, after that they started sending me different possible races and states. Then separately, Emily’s list reached out to me about North Carolina around the same time.

It sounds like they thought that North Carolina was going to be a tough one

Yes. I think that they thought it was going to be – well we lost – but I think that they thought it was going to be tougher than it was, because they just didn’t have a candidate – that was the whole thing.

Once you joined the team, would you describe to me the people that you worked with closely on strategy, and what their backgrounds were?

I was the first official “hire,” so I hit the ground in October of 2015. (2:30) I reported directly to [campaign manager] John Bray, who I love. The other members of the senior staff were L.T. McCrimmon, John Bray, Austin Ververca (*sp?*) – who was the Communications Director. L.T. was the political director. Then, I think that’s it.

Later on, we had people down from the DSCC, and they kind of sat in on those meetings, but that was the senior staff meeting. I led the finance department – I had a full-time staff, in North Carolina, of about nine people – maybe 10, when we were full. I had two Deputy Finance Directors under me, and then we had three finance assistants, a call-time manager, and a call-time assistant. Then, we had someone that raised money for a victory fund, which was a separate account.

Did any of those people have backgrounds in data, tech, anything like that?

None of my staff did. We had somebody named Karthik (*sp?*) – did John Mention Karthik to you at all?

Was he the guy from Harvard? I’m glad you mentioned his name, because I don’t think John could quite recall his name at the time.

Yes –Karthik*, and I’m not even going to try to pronounce his last name. But I can send you his name if you’d like, I’m sure he will be happy to talk to you. He had a background in data and tech. I have, in terms of like data-driven decision making, I have a background of that through my previous campaigns. I had to manage a digital consultant that ran all of our online fundraising, a mail consultant – and to make those kinds of decisions we used data.

I'm really glad you brought that up. How did that prior knowledge play into the Ross campaign?

As the Finance Director, in addition to all of the in-person staff, you have to manage consultants - like I mentioned digital and mail. I think that data played the biggest roles in those. Deborah had never run for anything, never been anything but a state rep. She had never raised more than \$100K, and we had to figure out how to raise 16 million dollars for someone that had been a state rep in Raleigh. It's tough.

I had run other finance shops, so knowing how to run digital acquisition, to run Facebook ads, Instagram, Google Search - go up on those kind of things. Then, running a responsible level of acquisition, buying and swapping and e-mail addresses, seeing how that's performing, and adjusting your content and your rate of send. Knowing how to, on -mail, seeing who's responding to your pieces, how many pieces are you running, what do those pieces look like? All of that stuff. It was helpful to have done that before.

John [Bray] mentioned that you worked with Well & Lighthouse some for online fundraising.

Yes, they were our digital consulting firm.

Would you describe how their people were able to help you plan how to spend your budget?

Yes. Well, there's two sides of the ball for Well & Lighthouse. John Bray was the decider for how much are we going to run on straight digital ads. My side was like how much are we going to spend and how much are we going to get back on what we call acquisition. So, are you familiar with acquisition?

Only a little. Could you talk about that a bit?

When you see ads on Facebook or Instagram and you click through them and put in your email address - that's acquisition. So it's capturing people's e-mail addresses via a paid medium. The most popular, and successful, ones are Google Search - so if you Google something, your sponsored links come up first. Usually you'll hit what's called a splash page - so if you searched "Deborah Ross" when she was running, you'd see a DeborahRoss.com would be the first thing that comes up. There's also like a Christian commentator named Deborah Ross so we had to run those ads so that we came up first.

[Well & Lighthouse] would give us a weekly update document. It was like a spreadsheet that had the amount of emails that we captured that week. I got daily updates on the amount of money those pages brought in, the amount of money the digital fundraising program was bringing in, unsubscribe rate - all of these kind of quantitative figures.

Then I would look at all of that, and be like, "OK, our unsubscribe rate is really high this week. Maybe we should not send as many emails." Or, we're making a ton of money on Google Search, why don't we ratchet that up and see if that continues? We captured a ton of emails via Instagram ads, let's see how that goes.

They had like a consultant that was assigned to our account that knows more about it than I do, but I would just sort of look at everything, see if it made sense, ask questions - kind of like, see if there were any weak spots or things that we could be doing more to maximize our fundraising.

When it came to donations that you acquired online, how did most of those come in? Was it through an email that you sent them, or people going to straight to the website, or was it mailing in checks? How did most of it come in, once you had acquired [the donor] online?

E-mails. I don't know why it works, but it works. Those really annoying emails – a lot of people give money to them. Digital donations were almost exclusively coming from emails. The whole name of the game is to get peoples' emails, introduce yourself like a brand, and continue to communicate with them, and just like barade [*barrage?*] them with fundraising requests. There is some point of diminishing returns – you can send too many times, you lose your trust, that sort of thing. But everything I've heard from good digital vendors...

When you're trying to elect someone to U.S. Senate, I care about pissing off that donor in the long term, but if we don't win, does it really matter? So the name of the game is to get as much money as humanly possible. So all e-mails – some of it came via the splash pages through the acquisition ads, but most of it, all emails. We used a vendor called ActBlue, so we'd have quick links. There'd be a button that says "donate \$5 now" or "donate \$10 now" and progressive people all over the country do that kind of thing.

There's definitely a line. I always grapple with this ethically. I'm like *oh my God, we're spamming these people. I don't want to spam people.* But nothing that I've seen indicates that we're going to lose your vote from sending you too many fundraising emails. Digital was maybe a third of my revenue. We raised almost \$16 million dollars, so that's quite a chunk of change you're talking about.

You obviously had these huge goals in terms of digital fundraising – did you reach them?

Yeah, and exceeded them. Blew them out of the water.

When it came to email, aside from acquisition – getting peoples' emails online – did you get your list from other people? Other places?

Let's see. We started out, Deborah had no e-mail list, which is almost unheard of for a candidate that is going to run statewide. So what we had to do, was we did list-swaps with other electeds – trading a name for a name – and then grew that way, and then ran lots of acquisition.

Then when we got other people to send for us, like PACs and other candidates, and when people send for you and they donate, you now have their email. You have to put in an email to donate. So we grew from having an email list of like 800 to, I think we ended up with like 60-to-70,000 email addresses. We were working out of her kitchen we started, so this thing was like a start-up.

How much were you thinking of social media playing into your fundraising strategy?

In terms of fundraising, you definitely need to have a presence. It needs to look professional and it needs to look good, you have to be producing content. It was important. I would sign off on e-mails that we would send out, but I wasn't involved in the day-to-day of social media management. From my perspective, if we are posting good content, and have good photos, and everything looks good – I'm happy. I don't need to get into the weeds on like, what they're posting, what we're talking about, as long as we have good content and are engaging people.

So did they ever try to tweet out something like “click here to donate” or anything like that, that you know of?

We did it a couple times. We didn't do it that much. I don't think that we saw any evidence, through the data, that it was working. We'd get a couple donations from it, but not a lot.

So do you think it was more on the trust-building side, that maybe led to donations later?

Exactly.

So when you were planning like how much you were going to spend on TV, or I'm going to spend this money on e-mail, Google, whatever – how much did you rely on data that was coming in, and then adjust?

Most of that was decided by John Bray. As Finance director, there's a bit of a misconception that I made spending decisions, which I really didn't, unless it was money to fundraise with. It takes money to have a digital vendor, hire consultants and staff, but John really decided on all of that stuff. I was in the room for a lot of that, but I don't know the ins and outs – are we seeing a 2-point bump in Carteret County because of our media buys, let's keep it up – that's not my game.

Especially because you've worked on other campaigns, do you feel, looking back that there were any missed opportunities in terms of your use of digital to raise money?

That's a good question. Maybe one – I stand behind everything digitally; I don't think there's a whole lot we could have done differently. The only thing is if you get something kind of viral. When you launch, if you have a launch video that just goes viral, you get a lot of exposure, you get a lot of money, etcetera. But, being able to do that is difficult, and viral content is viral for a reason. Not everything can catch fire like that. We didn't have anything that just went viral like that. I would have liked that.

Like Jason Candor. He ran for U.S. Senate in Missouri, and you should watch this ad. There's an ad of him blindfolded, putting together an assault rifle, like talking about his service in the military, and it's awesome. That went viral and he raised so much money off that, got national name ID. He actually lost, very narrowly, but that's an example of his media firm knocked it out of the park on that ad, and it had fundraising implications, he got a bump in the polls – everything. Google “Jason Candor gun ad” and it's awesome.

Going forward, what do you think is going to change the most in campaigning and fundraising because of new digital, analytics, new data things? How are you seeing that happening now?

The whole industry of campaign fundraising is moving to have more measurable goals, and more data-driven decision making. I think that's the smartest thing we can do, is use data to make better decisions. If you were running a campaign in 1998, how you raised your money was probably hosting house parties, calling people. Now there's all these different ways to do it.

Without data, how do you know if you're making good decisions? I would rely on data to do everything regarding my mail plan, that's like paid marketing – you'd mail people a letter with an envelope and be like “please return \$20” – that kind of thing – we used data for all of that. I think the future of it will be to hopefully things you can measure for the entire revenue stream. So like events, call time – as you know, candidates spend a lot of time every day on the phone soliciting donations.

We would keep a tracker on call time, so we would track how many phone calls Deborah made every day, what her connect rate was, how much money she raised, how many messages she left. We would look at that day by day and be able to say this was a good day or this was a bad day; she doesn't do well when she's doing calls on the road when she's in the car. We would use, in areas where there's not a great way to measure it, we would put in our own systems to try to and track and make good decisions. Like "oh, she does her calls better when she's with *this* staffer" – that kind of thing. So I think the future of it is going to be using, hopefully being able to use data to make better decisions.

[New recording]

In my experience, it used to be like "we're experts, trust us; here's how you're going to do it, you should just do it *this* way" and candidates were like "ok!" Now, because of technology, we have the ability to track and use data to make better decisions. Not fundraising, but like campaigns as a whole, is all going in the direction of, in my opinion, making better decisions based on measurable differences. Like, if I can't see that something's working, and I can't tell, I'm not going to just trust you on that. I think in the past, only having public polling to rely on, and not being able to digitally analyze what you're doing, I think it was a lot of D.C. rich consultants telling people how to run their campaigns.

Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign – he was one of the pioneers of digital fundraising. I don't know why, but when people talk about that kind of thing, they were one of the first to really start making money online. It was remarkable. I don't know if I'm 100% on this, but I think the National Finance Director for that campaign was Stephanie Schriock, who now runs Emily's List – it's all connected.