

Jonathon Bray

Campaign Manager, Deborah Ross for Senate

Will you walk me through how you were hired onto the Ross campaign?

The Ross campaign, after the primary, was looking to hire a campaign manager. I was introduced through the DSCC and Emily's List to Deborah. I had spoken to Deborah over the phone and then had spent some time talking with [inaudible] in North Carolina.

Would you also describe to me the team you worked with - who you were surrounded by for the majority of the campaign. Can you tell me about their expertise and backgrounds?

Let me give you a broad overview picture. The way the campaign was structured, similar to most Democratic campaigns is that I was the campaign manager, there was a consultant team that included a media consultant, mail consultant, digital consultant, a pollster - those were the big consultants. And then, in terms of the actual campaign staff, we were broken into departments.

There was a fundraising department that was focused on raising money, had a finance director, two deputy finance directors, and then a number of finance assistants who were responsible for raising the money. We had a communications team: a communications director, a press secretary, press assistant - and then that team grew bigger. We had help from DC with the DSCC coming down with staff.

We had a research department: research director, deputy research director, and then we had a tracker paid through the state party who would track Richard Burr for us, but also assist with other research projects. And a political department, which was responsible for grassroots events, interfacing with elected officials, and coalition groups and ideological allies, things like that.

The finance team also had a national finance consultant that they worked with, and some regional/national finance consultants. So if we trips to New York, we would have a New York person that would help us build, trips to Texas we'd have a Texas people, and the national consultant handled our PAC and labored fundraising. So that's the team, a broad picture of the team.

Then the field efforts were run through the party, that were joint Hillary Clinton campaign, Roy Cooper, Deborah Ross - of course the Clinton campaign put in a lion's share of the money for it, and the DSCC also invested significantly in that, and that was the Geo TV field operation. That was separate from the campaign itself.

Were any people in your campaign "tech" people, rather than "political" people?

We had a digital firm, Well and Lighthouse - they were responsible for not only doing our

online fundraising – that’s email building, list acquisition, fundraising through social media networks – though fundraising through Facebook and things aren’t as necessarily effective as direct email solicitations, so they did that. They also helped us with placing our paid digital communications. And then we did have another person that we brought on who is getting his PhD from Harvard Business School, and so he helped out a lot on the, I’d guess you call it, analytical side of things. He did a lot of work in putting together sort of like cost-per-impression for digital advertising – but a word of caution, relying on analytics alone just gives you half the story.

But he helped us put together, like, you know, when we’re spending money in Eastern North Carolina, we’re spending more, there’s less undecided voters, than say, in a Raleigh or Charlotte market, even though Raleigh and Charlotte were a lot more expensive. We were maybe paying the same amount really to communicate to an undecided voter, based on our polling data, based on analytics. So he was an asset inside the campaign to help with that, and then he [inaudible] a lot when we were running paid digital communication. And then lastly, the DSCC – Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee – did run an analytical model. They were working with Civis Analytics to run an analytical model looking at the voters. So those are the three if you’re looking at “tech” industry.

What type of democratic national technologies did you tap into? Did you use the Voter Action Network? Blue State? You mentioned that the Harvard guy developed some systems, sort of, in-house. Was there anything else like that?

Yeah, so Blue State Digital. We ran our emails through Blue State Digital and most Democratic campaigns do who work with these outside firms. So, we did do Blue State Digital – they ran our emails. Most of those emails were sent by our digital firm Well & Lighthouse, although local fundraising events, we did bring on a social media director near the end - he also sent emails for local fundraisers and for event building, as well.

So we used Blue State Digital, and then we used Vote Builder, the democratic database that’s national – so we used the North Carolina Vote Builder, which gave us the voter file, giving us access to all of the voters in the state. We used those pieces of technology –of course, for tracking, we used NGP – or now it’s NGP VAN is the company. It’s also the company that maintains the voter file Vote Builder. And so we used NGP for our financial database, and then we did some of our internal analysis. Of course, our internal analysis we used a lot of Excel.

When it came to social media, what were the main goals?

For social media, we had Facebook and Twitter and we expanded to Snapchat after the team grew bigger and we could handle expanding it. We had a couple objectives on social media: one was overall engagement – so that meant putting up content, engaging with supporters – it’s an important, a good way to communicate with voters, supporters in particular. Also used, when it came to our fundraising side, we used social media – Facebook in particular – to generate paid Facebook advertising to collect email addresses in order to raise. You don’t raise a ton of money off of Facebook – we didn’t have success in raising money off of

Facebook directly - it's better to collect email addresses and then turn those email addresses into donors.

When it came to paid communication, the last 8 weeks we did a lot of paid advertising through not only Facebook, but we also used the Google network to target persuadable voters or base supporters to turn them out through the Google Network and the AOL network, which are the two larger digital networks. And those were mostly pre-roll 15- or 30-second ads or banners. And then on Facebook, 15- to 30-second ads on Facebook. So three parts.

You mentioned Snapchat. What are some of the ways you used Snapchat? Did you do geo-filters for certain areas - or how did you use that?

We used geo-filters around events - the screens that you can use that have graphic designs on them, so we did a little bit of that around events or specific things, mostly press, actually. I don't know the efficiency or efficacy of Snapchat - I don't think it really had much of one. Once again, more about engagement.

But, on flipside, was D.C. press was always interested, in the morning tip-sheets like "morning score" through Politico, they were always interested in when people did Snapchat filters and things like that, so we saw our opponents would use that a lot, actually. It would be a quick blurb in the morning tip sheets, which, not to persuade voters in North Carolina, but rather a tool to make sure your morning was present in what everyone reads in D.C.

So, we did a bit of that at the end - it was mostly fun stuff. It was fun stuff using Bitmoji, things like that, to reach out to voters. Mostly younger voters, is what they say, or younger residents in North Carolina. So it was an interesting tool, and of course the free press that we generated off of it was always excellent to have - to sort of show people in D.C. - that, part of the campaign is also that you're competing for attention from 10 other competitive Senate races or 5 other competitive Senate races, and that was a way to keep your name in the D.C. press.

How much did technologies, or your use of them, change from the beginning of the campaign towards November?

So of course paid communication, which happens at the end of the campaign. When you say "technology" in general, that could be a lot of things. Of course we used the databases throughout the campaign. Analytical modeling was helpful in us determining who our paid mail targets would be - so you're using technology, you're using these analytical models to build a list of people you need to persuade, or supporters to turn out to vote, and then you're communicating with them in a very analog way through the post office.

When it comes to paid communication, especially when it comes to the digital side of things, that happens near the end of the campaign. But, it's all about building. Those types of tools are important, but we also use things like focus groups and traditional polling. So it was using all of those tools together to create the best picture of the electorate as possible.

How much trust in your campaign was put into digital data, and how much was this allowed to steer your strategy?

When I talk about who we were targeting, in terms of persuadable voters, in terms of base turnout, who are the voters needed to maximize turnout in order to win and who are the voters we need to persuade to win – we used the analytical modeling to do that. That analytical modeling was informed through live-dial polling that was one by the modeling firm, and then also through our polling as well that we did, traditional polling. So, every decision you make, you need to make using quantities analysis, but there's a lot of qualitative that you just can't get around, and that you shouldn't ignore either.

We always tried to make the best decisions with the data as possible, and one thing that we found very interesting was that, when we were running Facebook ads, we would have three different types of ads up at one time on Facebook, communicating with persuadable voters – Facebook makes it very easy. You can put in people from the voter file – all the information you have about them – and then it matches them on the Facebook user network, and when you get toward the younger end of that scale, you can get to about 80% match, which is excellent; a little older, that drops down, but even with 50- and 60-year-old voters, we were getting really great match rates.

Then we could see how long they were actually staying on the ad after launching it, so in a 30-second ad, one of the ads, people were watching the first seven seconds and then moving on, and in the other ad, people were watching it for like 20 seconds and moving on. That was a good way to see what ad was working – it was one way to answer the question 'which ads are working and not?' If they're only watching the first seven seconds, maybe we dial that down, and put more of our money behind the ad that people are watching for 20 seconds.

We also ad-tested all of our ads using online focus groups, where people are paid to watch commercials or to participate in an online focus group. So what they did was, we had 1,000 people – 1,000 North Carolinians – who, through this network, they would watch our ad, and they would watch one of our opponent's ads, or a negative ad that we made against ourselves, and we would ask people to rate the effectiveness of the ads to get people's interest.

People had qualitative fields in there, as well, so people could say what they liked about it or didn't like about it – that was useful in figuring out which ads we thought would be the most effective and persuasive. It's not like you see huge jumps, between your worst and your best ad. You're talking up at the margins about, if you're going to invest money and this ad is was not rated so highly – I think it was out of a nine-point scale – if this ad is a 4.8 and that ad is a 5.8, you want to put your money behind the 5.8 ad because it's more effective.

Plus, with a 1,000 person sample size, you're able to delve in deeper into better crosstabs – you're able to understand who is an independent, persuadable voter?; who's undecided in this race?; what ad did they find most effective?; What ad did democratic voters, or people who are already with you, what did they find to be the most effective ad? So we did two rounds of

ad testing that way – I found that to be really useful in making decisions about paid communications.

Like I said, every ad, when you're spending money, you want to get the most information possible. You don't ever want to make a gut decision, you want it to be informed on some sort of data, but at the same time, that data tells you just part of the story. Experience matters. People who have done this in the past have seen what works and what doesn't work, so you have to combine all of those information streams together to make the best decision.

When you would run these Facebook ads or online ads, or even TV ads, would you buy the Google ad words to go along with them? I know everyone watches TV with their phone now – or everyone has 10 different tabs up on the internet. Was there a second step there?

When we launched our digital campaigns, our ads were always accompanied by a website, and the website would have the backup information on it for people. We would take our research that proved what we said in the ad was factual and true, and then turned that into a website where people watch it on Facebook, they click on it and it goes to this website and there's more backup information.

We did do some Google Ad Searches around there, we of course always had Deborah's name on Google Ad Search – Google Ad Search, also did that for fundraising purposes as well. So we had Deborah Ross' name tagged for the entire campaign. It's not a lot of money – you might spend one hundred bucks and raise \$2,000 off of it, or worse, but it was something we definitely always did. But that was a small part of it.

When you did the backup sites, were those heavily Ross branded? Or were they kind of "undercover" with this information?

Yeah, you'd have the FEC disclaimer, all the proper FEC disclaimer work on it – it's very clear, there's a box at the bottom that says "Paid for Deborah Ross for Senate" or "Paid for Richard Burr for Senate," but yeah, it doesn't look like your website. It's not like there's pictures of Deborah all over it. It's different. That one-page site that can fit completely on your computer screen, or with a minimum amount of scrolling, was purely just to push that message out. So, it wasn't as if it was Ross-branded, per-se. But very clearly always had the FEC disclaimer language on it, so you would know who paid for the site, who put it up. But it wasn't like you're saying "Deborah Ross for Senate is attacking Richard Burr for senate," or vice versa.

And the one big thing I would point out is this cycle, I saw for the first time, and though I know they had done this before, where we saw conservative groups such as the Senate Leadership Fund, which is affiliated with Mitch McConnell, it's their super PAC side, they went very heavily with digital advertising, especially after Burr's campaign ran their first attack ads. They were very confident in the press that they would run their first round of attack ads and they'd be up 10 points and be race-over and things like that. Come to find out, they run their first round of attack ads, we responded, and Deborah Ross was actually tied or slightly leading in the polls. The outside groups, who were spending significant amounts of money on TV, also

then started spending significantly on digital advertising to attack Deborah. So that was something new that I hadn't seen before – that they went all-in on digital. And it wasn't very targeted, what I saw, it looked like it was blanket digital buys.

You could probably look on the FEC website and Senate Leadership Fund, you can pull up how much they actually spent to oppose Deborah Ross online – you will have to do a bit of digging, it's not like free-sorted for you – you'd have to go through what they spent in opposition to Deborah to see what was on TV versus what was digital.

But, they did spend a ton of money – the news story broke that Sheldon Adelson wrote a \$20 million check to the Senate Leadership Fund, and a lot of that money went against us. I think the press was saying something like \$7 million, and I'm sure you can find those press clips that were dedicated to the race. But we saw, immediately after that, a significant uptick in digital communications from outside conservatives and that group in particular – but other outside conservative groups. That was something new – usually they just put up TV ads and send out mail pieces, but they went part digital as well, and it almost looked like they were testing certain messages digitally to see what worked best – I don't know if that was the case. But we would see digital first, and then TV would follow. So that was new.

That kind of leads me to this – how much did your campaign look to your opponent's digital strategy and digital content, and respond? Were you keeping a close eye on Burr?

No, I don't think Burr did as much digital as we did – though I could be wrong on that. But some of the effectiveness of digital was that people would be seeing it on TV, getting something in their mailbox, potentially seeing it digitally, as well. The goal wasn't to fragment the message – we tried to coordinate the messages as much as possible. The reason being, somebody seeing something on TV that's different from what's online. Now, online gives you the ability to target better, which is great. It also gives you the ability to just run more content at people than a TV ad at a better price point, so they might be seeing two or three separate ads over the course of a two-week span, but on TV maybe only seeing one or two different ads.

In that respect – yes, we did have ads where we responded when Burr's campaign attacked Deborah Ross for opposing the sex offender registry, and replied with our Fountain Odom ad. We also had a digital component to that. At that point, we weren't spending as much digitally, but we did have a digital component. And then we responded back with "Richard Burr, 20-plus years in Washington – time for a change." People would be seeing the same ads or similar-seemed ads online, as well. And they would respond to that, of course, TV and digitally. We tried to keep sort of the message disciplined across all mediums of communication throughout the campaign in order to maximize the effectiveness of that message. We didn't try to dilute any of the message streams – we wanted to keep it pretty together.

Digital does give you the benefit of running multiple messages or multiple pieces of content in a paid way to different sets of voters. We didn't do that as much, but when we're

communicating with our base voters - people who are turning out to vote, strong democrats, strong "D's" - it was less about Richard Burr, and it was more like here's Deborah Ross and President Obama, things like that. We did have the president cut an ad saying people should get out and vote for Deborah Ross, and people did see that the last four weeks, during early voting and then, strong democrats. We ran the Obama ad on TV a little bit, but it was mostly a digital push.

What was your approval process when it came to social media or writing emails, or creating Facebook ads? Was that a pretty intense approval process, or just a couple people? How'd that work?

It's always a fine balance. Whenever you put something out by the campaign - and you can see this in corporate communications as well - you know, Wendy's got a lot of followers from their back-and-forth on Twitter with someone, but a Wendy's digital person also put out a Pepe the Frog meme, which is now associated with the alt-right and white nationalist movement in the United States - and got some backlash.

The process, how it worked was: our social media director would write tweets or Facebook posts, the vast majority of them are like "had a great time in [insert event here]" like "Had a great time with Swain County Democrats" and pictures and things like that. It goes through the Communications Director, I would see it before it going out, and Deborah would see everything before going out, as well. Certain things didn't need to be looked over too intensely, such as like pictures from events and things about town, or re-tweeting or re-posting something from a newspaper that was complimentary to the campaign or to Deborah. But then there's other things that needed to be more tightly, in the process.

We did have three or four people reviewing them and looking at them and giving the OK to send out, which slowed down the process for some of those - I don't want to say 'controversial' - but maybe for some of those "other" things. So that did slow down the process, might not have been as rapid as a response as we would have liked, or had been perfect, but it was in place to prevent getting pushback or blowback. You don't want to send up something that is detrimental to the campaign.

Part of that is just having multiple eyes on it and trying to keep the process moving as fast as possible. And part of that was making sure 80% of the Facebook and social media responses were written the day before. You know you're going to be at an event, you know somebody's going to take photos right there at the event, and five minutes later, get it back to the digital director. You know, having that stuff pre-written helped. But there's also times where you saw it and said "well, this might be a little too snarky" or "this doesn't seem right on-message" where you make changes. We had an approval process in place that tried to let things move fast, but then also slowed it down when it needed to be slowed down, too.

Looking back now at the campaign, do you feel like there were any missed opportunities, big or small, in terms of social media, email, any of that?

Our email list grew pretty fast, so that was [inaudible]. Deborah has a fantastic email list now – it's very large, and raised a lot of money online. But I would say, the one thing that stands out to me is that we should have invested in digital advertisements sooner. We spent a lot of the campaign – of course, you know, we outraised Richard Burr in first quarter, second quarter and I think the third quarter, as well, of the campaign. But he started with \$5 million in the bank or \$4 million in the bank, and we started out with zero dollars. So a lot of our decisions were on using our money best, and that meant trying to match on TV. Because if you lose on TV, you're going to lose overall, so we didn't invest as much into digital, which was maybe a few thousand a week.

But at the end, we dramatically increased that spending to over \$200,000 a week online on paid communication in the last four weeks. But we started our TV advertising about 12 weeks out, and looking back, I would have probably put a little bit more in digital communications 12 weeks out, as well. Even if it wasn't what we were spending at the end. We just had a lot of great fundraising support at the end nationally that came in, and that money, we found it to be that TV ads had essentially all been bought – there was no more space on TV, it was all political ads. You couldn't buy anything else. So we applied a lot of that [money] digitally.

What we saw, though, is when we did start investing heavily digitally in week 8, and then really ramped it up in week 4, we saw our favorability numbers with younger voters – voters under the age of 45 – rise at about an average of four points a week. So people who didn't really know much about Deborah, to a majority of targeted voters under the age of 45 knowing her and liking her. The majority of the people know her, and the majority of that group had a favorable rating of her. If we would have spent that money [on digital] a little earlier, we could have moved those numbers a little earlier, and I think we would have seen better polling earlier on, which may have had a beneficial effect down the road on the campaign.

At the end of the day, we tracked very closely with Secretary Clinton – I think the race was very nationalized, which meant that if Clinton won North Carolina, Deborah Ross would be a senator right now. But, she lost, by what – five points? So we lost by something comparable to it. Moving the poll numbers earlier with younger voters may have brought us in more money earlier, which would have helped us fundraise earlier, change the narrative of the race earlier at the national level, and I think that would have helped the campaign immensely. So that was the one area where I made the decision based on the money we had and based on what we thought was the best use of it at the time. Hindsight being twenty-twenty, we would have probably done that.

Going forward, what do you think will change the most when it comes to the use of technology, across the board – analytics, targeting, social media – in political campaigns? How are you seeing this unfold now?

I would say, first of all, I think it's going to be less it's own special side-thing and become more integrated into the campaign. Most campaigns have a "digital director" who is separate from all of the different departments, that work in accordance with departments – but I think you'll

see a more digitally-native integration into each operation. I think you'll see that more, rather than digital being its own thing - so that's one.

I think secondly, myself, I cut the cord on cable - I don't have cable TV, you know I have a little digital antenna to maybe watch a football game when it's a Sunday, but other wise I have Netflix, Hulu and Sling. So it's a question of how do you communicate to voters like me, which is no longer just your 20-somethings, but your 30- and 40-something's as well. I think of my aunt and uncle who are in their sixties, who don't have cable anymore either - they watch all of their TV by the same thing, like Hulu or Netflix. Communicating to those voters - you can't just run TV ads anymore - you need to do it all and you need to do it in the right way.

So I think you're going to see a massive change in how we advertise, as well. I've had people say "well why not just do all digital?" But still, as of right now, if you're not winning the battle on TV, you're not winning overall. But it's now like, if you're not winning on TV *and* you're not winning digitally, you're losing. You can't just throw up TV ads and think that you're going to communicate to everyone that you need to communicate to. So, I think a lot more early spending on digital. I saw that with the Senate Leadership Fund - they put a lot of money into digital, and it had a real impact on the race.