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Weekly Web Action Update

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This Week's Headlines:

- 1. Battle of the Titans:** Voter.com vs. Grassroots.com in a death match.
- 2. It's tough being high-profile:** Grassroots.com also takes it from non-profits.
- 3. Lazio goes for the throat:** In 24-hours, he's on the net and on the attack.
- 4. Did ABC "liberate" Voter.com's logo?:** Remarkable; creative minds think alike.
- 5. "Quote of the Week":** Phil Nobles remarks on candidates who breath in deeply.
- 6. How the Win:** Free, nationally distributed anthology now available.
- 7. Invited to the Party:** It's great being accepted by your peers.

Battle of the Titans

Take \$50-million, a narrow niche audience, conflicting East Coast-West Coast cultures and evaporating venture capital. Mix them all together, and you get Voter.com versus Grassroots.com in an FEC-refereed death match.

New York Times reporter Rebecca Fairley Raney's article in the May 18, 2000 CyberTimes section of the NYT web-site exposes all the gory details of the FEC-centered conflict between the two as Ms. Raney details the Byzantine politics behind the political web site controversy.

The left-handed attack comes from Voter.com, which filed a request for opinion from the FEC. It asks the commission to decide whether or not free links to political web sites constitute an illegal corporate contribution.

Ms. Raney quotes Voter.com's Cleta Mitchell, who might be accused of crying crocodile tears: "We need to know the answers so we don't get any candidates in trouble."

The bottom line is that despite protestations from Voter.com that it just wants a clarification of FEC rules on the ability of web sites to post candidate links without charge, insiders say the real battle is between the competing business models each is using to make the speculative venture capital they raised pay off.

Voter.com wants to sell links and turn them into a revenue stream. Grassroots.com wants to give them away as a marketing tool to capture eyeballs. If Grassroots.com can continue depriving Voter.com of a revenue stream, its deeper pockets (reportedly \$30-million in VC money compared to Voter.com's \$20-million) could allow it to outlast its competitor.

For Voter.com, the difference in capitalization is a serious concern. Now that political web sites are maturing, they are moving from creation to marketing. While Grassroots.com is still depending on free ink from national circulation news organizations, Voter.com is taking the advertising route with a buy on MSNBC's avant-garde *The News with Brian Williams*. Its spots feature a series of Yes-No checkboxes backgrounded with stark grayscale photos illustrating various issues.

The stealth attack on Grassroots.com is alienating political powerbrokers. A class which itself frequently uses innocent facades to conceal less-than-innocent ulterior motives, they see Voter.com's innocent public statements as PR sugar-coating its real agenda.

GOP and Democratic party officials are planning to state their opposition to the Voter.com move. They contend two opinions issued last year already settled the question when the FEC said non-partisan sites, even if commercial in operation, do not violate contribution laws.

Voter.com, trying to get through the front door as another medium for reaching voters, may find the impact of its attack to be somewhat "impolitic." As any ad rep will tell you, its tough to sell to people who are angry with you.

It's tough being high-profile

The problem in having your head above everyone else's is that it makes you the obvious target.

Such is the case for Grassroots.com, which finds itself pummeled not only by Voter.com, but by The National Legal and Policy Center (NLPC) based in McLean, Virginia.

But the non-profit watchdog is living up to its reputation of going after anyone. It is also chewing on the legs of the staid League of Women Voters in this case, and another non-profit dissolving into Grassroots.com, the Democracy Network, as well as The Center for Governmental Studies. In short, its shotgun complaint filed with the FEC attacks anyone who ever touched Grassroots.com.

Again, it's all about money. The NLPC contends Grassroots.com should be charging candidates who link to the site. If it doesn't, NLPC contends Grassroots.com is making an illegal contribution to the candidates whose links it posts.

Grassroots.com attorney Trevor Potter, a former chair of the FEC, disagrees. He, and others who think the NLPC filing is harassing, are relying on two decisions made last fall in which the FEC ruled non-partisan sites, commercial or not, can post links freely.

The NLPC retorts that the decision, involving the Democracy Project, is inapplicable to the Grassroots.com situation because the Project was a non-profit at the time, but now is in the process of rolling itself into Grassroots.com, and is giving up its non-profit status. In addition, they contend that it doesn't apply because at the time, Grassroots.com was not selling services to candidates, as it is now.

This action, which preceded the Voter.com attack, is causing distress among political professionals, who like the idea of free links. They know the Internet is a valid medium for them, and the fund-raising effectiveness of the McCain 2000 campaign wasn't lost on them.

The FEC will find itself between a rock and a hard place on this issue. It cuts immediately to the issue of free speech, and whether or not Internet sites constitute a form of First Amendment protected publishing.

Lazio goes for the throat

When MSNBC political analyst and *Newsweek* journalist Howard Fineman called GOP congressman Rick Lazio "aggressive" following his stand-in for Rudy Giuliani, it might go down as the understatement of the year. Host Brian Williams played a June 1999 tape of Rep. Lazio attacking Mrs. Clinton's candidacy, and one guest commentator remarked "that in just 2 minutes he made 15 talking points."

His opening story in the web-edition of the NYT was more of the same. It quoted him as saying about Hillary (the candidate formerly known as First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton), that she has "no real rationale for serving here other than as a steppingstone to some other position."

Ever a picture of consistency, his opening press release posted at his web site stated, "Lazio vows to take on Hillary Clinton head on with a strong positive campaign contrasting his record of experience and achievement against Clinton's lack of a record of any achievement, familiarity with New York, and understanding of the issues that confront people who live in New York."

The NY City Hall press corps rushed from Rudy's last press conference to candidate Lazio's nerve center in Bay Shore on Long Island - a town so small all the phone numbers are prefixed "666," an idiosyncrasy some religious fanatics will no doubt note and some astute PR flack will no doubt go to work changing. The recently expanded building where his former congressional re-election HQ existed was immediately geared up for the Senate run and operating by Saturday afternoon.

It's safe to bet the espresso ran freely at his web developer's office as well. The job landed on the desk of Donaudy Munch Interactive. They made the campaign contribution window a fixture when accessing the home page at www.lazio.com. And web host Long Island Globalink will no doubt find its servers under severe

stress as word gets out about the site's URL.

The navigation bar takes visitors through the home, issues, news & pr, campaign kit, volunteer, contribute and contact us options. Only the campaign kit area is "under construction," but hints that you will be able to download banners, buttons and for your computer, desktop wallpaper.

Did ABC "liberate" Voter.com's logo?

This week's PoliticsOnline "Hot Site" is onlinedemocracy.com, which is described in the review as "a collaborative, non-partisan, political news and voter outreach website sponsored by ABCNews."

Only one problem: Has anyone at ABC bothered to catch the Voter.com logo and compare it to the artwork at the "Hot Site?" Who, if anyone owns it?

Check it out for yourself by visiting both sites.

"Quote of the Week"

Leading off the *Campaigns & Elections* Training Seminar in Washington, D.C. June 5 -7 was Washington powerhouse Phil Nobles. When asked by a participant in his session to defend his assertion that web sites are important to campaigns, and his citation of almost-made-it McCain 2000's site as one of the best, Mr. Nobles replied with our Quote of the Week: "Doesn't matter how great your web site is, if you suck, you still suck."

Internet campaign guide now available

How to Win Your Next Campaign on the Internet is a free, nationally distributed anthology prepared in collaboration with the Democracy Online Project at The George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, The Brookings Institution and American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies.

Multiple copies may be ordered from USPN by calling Tami Oglesby, Marketing Director, toll-free at 1.888.508.USPN (8776). USPN is making the guide free to all political parties for distribution to their candidates, to political professionals for their clients, to candidates directly and to journalists and scholars as a reference tool.

USPolitics.Net gaining national, international recognition with major parties

The Democratic National Committee has invited USPolitics.Net (USPN) to attend its Year 2000 Nominating Convention in Los Angeles and offered it 5 rooms in the Florida delegation area. This is the fifth significant initiative by a major party to incorporate USPN into their activities since the company launched its web site May 2, 2000.

This convention invitation comes on the heels of requests by the chairman of the New York Republican State Executive Committee, the Illinois Republican State Executive Committee, the Hawaii Democratic State Executive Committee and the Florida Republican State Executive Committee for the first nationally distributed guide to online campaigning published by USPN, *How to Win Your Next Campaign on the Internet*. The guide is an anthology prepared in collaboration with The Brookings Institution, the Democracy Online Project at The George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management and American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies.

USPN recently mailed out samples of the guide to 178 state executive committees for the Democratic, Republican, Reform and Libertarian parties, 186 Washington-based advocacy organizations and 1,224 accredited members of the Washington press corps. Interest is running internationally as well, with requests from Canada, Venezuela, Mexico and India.

In addition to the specific party requests, USPN recently mailed more than 9,300 of the guides to candidates and officeholders across the country. It plans to distribute an additional 13,000 at the 2000 Texas Republican

Convention in June.

USPN is a closely held corporation that hosts the information site www.uspolitics.net, designed for journalists, scholars and voters who want to research issues by linking directly to source sites utilizing the exclusive USPN Browser Mode (TM) of Internet data retrieval. It also hosts America's first community-based e-commerce site, The CyberMall, on the USPN site.

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