Candidates flock to social media to connect, influence

By Russell Lissau | Daily Herald Staff

If John Kennedy was the first presidential candidate made for television, Barack Obama might have been the first made for the Internet.

With his campaign's heavy reliance on e-mail, Twitter, MySpace and other Web-based tools, Obama used the Internet to attract volunteers, connect supporters and raise money like no one before him.

Now, a year after Obama's historic election, candidates across the country - and throughout the Chicago suburbs - are using his high-tech model as a blueprint for their own political bids. Candidates running for federal, state and even county offices are campaigning via Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and e-mail.

At a minimum, anyone who's serious about running has a Web site that lays out their political platform, features a biography, lists endorsements and has hyperlinks to news stories about the candidate.

"If you don't have a Web site, people draw conclusions," said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "They're going to make assumptions that you're not credible. It becomes a threshold."

But a tech-heavy campaign won't guarantee victory. A strong Web presence should be only one part of a well-rounded campaign, political experts say.

"You can't just take a boilerplate (Web site) and run with it," said Bruce Newman, a DePaul University professor who specializes in political marketing and advertising. "It has to be integrated into the whole (mission) of the campaign."

Candidates have been using the Web to spread their messages for about a decade, but political experts generally agree no one has used it as well - or in as many new ways - as Obama.

He raised millions of dollars over the Internet. He announced Joe Biden as his vice presidential running mate with e-mail and text messages.

He even had an iPhone application that let voters stay connected to the campaign and find contacts in battleground states.

Obama's campaign also wooed voters by sending e-mails and creating Web pages that seemed personally tailored to recipients based on how they answered questions about their political interests.

That particular technique especially impressed Collin Corbett, a Palatine political consultant who's worked on several Republican campaigns in recent years.

"It was so personal," said Corbett, who at the time was working for Republican congressional candidate Steve Greenberg in the 8th District. "That's where they went above and beyond."

Obama's Web presence also was effective because it let people learn about the candidate on their own time using media they preferred, Corbett said, unlike previous campaigns that fed candidates to voters through scheduled TV and radio ads or public events.

Candidates throughout the Chicago area have since followed Obama's lead and embraced the Web's many facets.

In Lake County, Republican state Senate candidate Suzi Schmidt's Web site offers biographical information, news headlines and links to her Twitter and Facebook pages. It also encourages volunteers to join her campaign by providing some basic personal information, which was an important tool of the Obama campaign.

Schmidt, who is running unopposed in the February primary, doesn't consider herself especially high-tech but sees the value in using the Web to connect with voters and supporters.

"I am an out-in-the-public, shaking-hands, knocking-on-doors person. But I also see a lot of people who like things sent to them via e-mail," said Schmidt, who now serves as the chairwoman of the Lake County Board. "There are a lot of ways to campaign, and this is just another mechanism."

Schmidt certainly isn't alone on the Net. DuPage County Board member Brien Sheahan of Elmhurst, one of five Republicans running for the 41st State House District this year, has a loaded campaign Web site, and he tweets on Twitter, too.

He even invited a Daily Herald reporter to join his Facebook network recently.

Sheahan said he was skeptical of using Facebook until he created a personal account and promptly reconnected him with old friends from high school. He soon recognized the site's potential usefulness during a campaign.

"There really is no better way to connect as cheaply and as quickly with people as Facebook," said Sheahan, who was first elected to the county board in 2002. "Facebook and Twitter didn't even exist (then). But now, every news release goes out on Facebook first."

In the 8th Congressional District, where six Republicans are running in the Feb. 2 primary, candidates have embraced the Web in a variety of ways. Maria Rodriguez's Web site features links to her Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts; Chris Geissler's Web site includes reproductions of his Twitter postings; Dirk Beveridge's Web site includes Facebook and Twitter links but also links to images on the Flickr photo-sharing service.

"We have a social media plan in action to touch the voters in ways that engage them, in ways that are personal and in ways that are really timely," said Beveridge's campaign spokeswoman, Anne Waliczek.

Case in point: When news broke about prisoners at Guantanamo Bay possibly being transferred to Illinois, Beveridge talked about it in a homemade YouTube video.

"He got in his backyard and spoke from his heart," Waliczek said.

Other Republican campaigns in the 8th District aren't as invested in the Web. John Dawson and Joe Walsh have Web sites but don't make any mention of social networking on the sites. Greg Jacobs has a Facebook page but not a Web site. Jacobs said a Web site is in the works.

A relatively low-tech approach can backfire.

Mount Prospect resident Patricia Bird, a onetime Republican candidate for the neighboring 10th House District seat who dropped out of the race in November, wasn't considered a legitimate contender by party leaders and activists because, in part, she didn't have a proper Web site.

"You have to do it at a certain level in order for people to take you seriously," Redfield said. "It used to be bumper stickers and buttons. Now it's Web sites."

Although candidates definitely are focused more on the Web because of Obama, they shouldn't expect Obama-sized Facebook or Twitter followings, DePaul's Newman said.

Obama was able to build such a strong online network because he first established himself as a brand through television appearances and advertising, Newman said. Although they may have great Web sites and have social networks in place, most of the candidates seeking office this year are, at this point, unknown commodities, he said.

If they want to build online teams, candidates must first build their brand so people will seek out their Facebook pages or sign up to receive e-mail updates.

"And that you can't do on the Internet. That requires money (for TV ads)," Newman said. "You have to first establish who you are to the people you're sending this message to. And only then, after you've connected with these receivers, are you in a position to tell them what you want them to do for you."

And even if a candidate has a well-developed marketing plan, maintains a sharp-looking campaign Web site and posts revelatory tweets on a regular basis, an Election-Day win isn't assured.

"If the candidate is bad, all the technological content in the world is going to do you any good," Redfield said.