

Micro Targeting 2005: Curse or Blessing?

Micro Targeting is the new magic word for the forthcoming revolution in political communication. With the help of MT the long-known broadband phrases of politicians should be replaced by tailored speeches. But is this hope justified?

“It is the end of mass communication, as we understood it for a long time”, said Dick Morris during his cheered appearance at the last political congress in Berlin, in December (see also p&k, February 2005).

With this Morris means the shift from a classical advertising campaign to interactive Internet projects. Never before it was possible, to address voters that instantly, directly and individually. “Broadband”-phrases loose in importance. The more tailored activities, the more personal the message, the better: Micro Targeting is the new magic word.

The latest trend

Micro Targeting is a new term for an old concept: direct marketing. What private business already uses for a long time as a standard component for its marketing mix, now also enters, since the U.S. presidential elections of 2004, through the Internet the world of politics. “It is necessary to apply the resources there, where they leverage the highest impact: by using existing data in a way, so that you can determine exactly the interests of the voters”, as emphasizes Ron Faucheux, top consultant in Washington DC and author of the book “Running for Office”, the importance of the new (old) tactic.

In the U.S. the Micro Targeting is more important than here:

- Because of the electoral system (“The winner takes it all”) it always has been essential to localize in the “swing states” – with their unclear power balance – those target groups, which are pivotal for victory. Nowadays, as a result of the Internet, one can easily contact and mobilize these target groups to an unpredicted extent.
- The candidate-focused electoral law makes individual strategies much easier than in countries like Germany or Austria: there party committees, which operate by definition slower, are the guardians of the election campaign. Front men and front women express much less of an influence – including strategies that would underscore individualization.
- Individual messages re-motivate non-voters more effectively – since they contrast with the current mix of non-messages and defamations of the political opponents.

More quality through MT?

“Finally we again connect with the people”, says Christopher Arterton, Dean of the Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University in Washington DC, where most of the consultants in Congress are educated. Three new courses – “Targeting”, “Grass Roots Field Campaigning” and “New Media in Politics” – reflect in this academy of political consultants these development in favor of Micro Targeting. Arterton is convinced that Micro Targeting can enhance the quality of politics.

Ten reasons make this plausible:

1. Politicians have to reflect content more focused. Individualized communication demands more in-depth understanding.

2. They have to listen more carefully. Attention focuses longer and more frequently on the audience – more empathy and an advanced understanding of the concerns and demands of the public do not guarantee sophisticated political decisions, however, they represent a good starting point.
3. They have to prepare better. Instead of delivering under temporal pressures, in two weeks, for fifty-seven times the same speech, the individualized communication demands actual references and up-to-date examples.
4. They have to move closer to the voting people. We can expect an increase of personal contacts and appearances. The likely consequence: politicians with more transparency, and candidates you can “touch”.
5. They can focus their energies. Because of the exact data, politicians can proceed more specifically and apply their energies more effectively – and do not have to deal exhaustedly with an over-demand of appointments and promises. Instead of producing in every “beer tent” broadband phrases, the future candidate can address, in the context of specific meetings, a selected audience with particular messages.
6. They start to think and act across party boundaries in a diversity of clusters. Party political power gambling still will be part of the daily routine, however, there also must be an emphasis on thematic strategies.
7. Minorities become more relevant. Those, until now being ignored as being not relevant for the electoral outcome, can now make the difference.

8. More professionals enter the business of politics. Exact data and address materials are the result of precise studies and comprehensive data computation. In the future, the behind-the-lines offices will be boosted by increased manpower – creating a pleasant side effect for the job market.
9. Higher-quality speeches make more people interested in politics, producing additional ideas and energies for the common public welfare. Social events, where voters discuss the themes of the political parties in their own home – transferring the “Tupperware” system into politics –, are purpose-oriented means.
10. In the long run, there will be a greater diversity of candidates – a higher quality of persons appears to be a logical consequence, but will take some time for realization.

Or less of a quality?

But it can come also completely differently – MT may also decrease the quality of politics.

1. Politicians may focus only on special-issue needs and may sacrifice their own ideas in favor of the desires and moods of the voting people. Politicians could only execute contradictory single-issues. One could fear a total fragmentation of messages.
2. Reactions to public opinion polls could dominate, at the cost of actions devoted to the public welfare interests and the value base of a society. To be too closely attached to the different public opinion currents could create a principle, which already nowadays is being regarded as problematic by critical voters. Ethics would loose in influence.

3. The “transparent person” already becomes a reality. Should also political organizations engage in professional data mining, then privacy of individual information could hardly prevail.
4. Specific groups within society would be flooded by contact ambitions. Disinterest, resulting from an impression of being permanently troubled by solicitation, represents only one example of negative effects. This list could be continued ...

How do parties in Germany react?

The Washingtonian campaign gurus refer to an electoral participation increase of ten percent last year, when compared with 2000, and interpret this as a direct consequence of this new tool. Does MT also make sense for our region? The coming general national election in Germany serves as the first major test in the core of the EU, whether “broadbanding” or tailoring will determine the campaign activities. One does not need to be a prophet to predict that less “language bubbles” and a more careful treatment of the needs of the voters will be rewarded. Whoever manages to communicate personal credibility for himself, herself, and his or her future ideas, will be successful. Whether we call it Micro Targeting, is then only secondary.

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