
Liberal Renewal Commission (LRC)
Report of the Internet Task Force

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Internet is a direct, flexible and cost-effective way for political parties to communicate with supporters, mobilize volunteers and raise funds necessary to win elections. Innovatively used, the Internet allows parties to develop, consult, engage and inform in a manner that is unavailable via traditional broadcast media. As the number of people connected online has risen, political parties have started embracing the Internet as a means to present positions, raise funds through small donations and mobilize large numbers of people to action.

In Canada, there are now hundreds of Liberal and Liberal-friendly Internet activists engaged in dynamic, thoughtful and substantive online political dialog via the creation of email lists, online forums, blogs, social networking and other tools of independent Internet-based media. These activists tend to be opinion leaders or those who have been called ‘Influencers’ in their respective communities. Outside of Canada, political parties -- as well as market-savvy companies -- have recognized the power of the Internet to reach these influencers and in turn, leverage these existing channels to greatly extend their party’s political and marketing reach. By re-interpreting online strategy as an extended partnership with like-minded opinion leaders, pioneering political parties have increased their ability to fundraise, sign up members, recruit volunteers and win votes.

The Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) has not fully taken advantage of the political opportunities afforded both by such partnerships and evolving tools of engagement and communication. LPC needs to restructure and reprioritize its online strategy so that the party meaningfully engages influencers that include Liberal members, like-minded progressive thinkers, and the general public. This means adding new tools *and* refining – not scrapping -- the multiple Liberal national and regional site approach currently in use by the Liberal Party. The current LPC structure has a well-suited, but underdeveloped foundation for a distributive or multi-sited Liberal network that could, and we argue, *should* include not only the ‘official’ Liberal Party web sites, but also embrace, leverage, and marshal the considerable talent, energy, and existing efforts of online Liberals and other progressive issue supporters.

The Liberal Renewal Commission (LRC) Internet Task Force (ITF) recommends that LPC undertake a principled approach to restructuring based on openness and engagement derived in part from current international best practices adapted to a Canadian context. Internet communities, like Canadian communities, are about discourse. Successful Internet strategies allow for listening and experimentation in ways that one-way broadcasting does not and cannot. It is incumbent upon LPC to provide a space online for Canadian voices to address Canadian concerns. Online populations are already discussing their hopes, desires and voices in meaningful ways. LPC needs to use Internet-based tools to listen, respond, and incorporate their visions of Canada into the Party and in so doing, offer a broad invitation to all Canadians. Operationally, this approach we have broken into three parts.

EXAMINE: The Liberal Party’s current Internet-based tools are divided between the national and provincial offices. This division of Internet responsibilities between the offices has

caused some anomalies particularly in terms of consistency of Liberal Party Internet services available across the country. The LPC needs to focus on developing a strong set of ‘core Internet services’ that set a minimum ‘usability standard’ for official Liberal Internet sites in Canada. This standard will enhance the ability of LPC to promote key party activities such as database management, fundraising, online forums, news distribution, media contacts, forum discussions, training opportunities, optional provincial web site templates, turnkey web services for ridings, hosting for caucus member blogs, etc. via both Liberal-branded sites as well as the growing Liberal-friendly online universe.

EXPAND: The LPC online sphere of influence should be expanded to actively incorporate and utilize the growing number of online Liberal-friendly influencers and websites. LPC has a time-limited opportunity to leverage the existing energy, ambition and desire of online Liberals to further the Party’s aims by sharing access to discussions, decision-making, information and materials.

EXPERIMENT: LPC should establish a Liberal online ‘skunkworks’, an Internet ‘practitioners advisory council’ that actively seeks the opinions of active online Liberal influencers to advocate for and assess ongoing experimentation of Internet tools such as SMS text messaging, video blogs, viral marketing, and other such tools that are rapidly being created and/or continue to evolve in the realm of digital political communications.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet as a political tool is taking root around the world. Candidates of all political persuasions are adapting their techniques to take advantage of the Internet to reach constituents, shape messages, tap into grassroots sentiments, and mobilize networks of supporters. Direct citizen engagement is amplifying political debates, effecting policy discussions and in some still rare cases, redirecting the course of entire elections.

Yet, moving beyond the plethora of options, successful experiments, and general hype, the questions to be asked are: Can the examples from the US, UK, and other countries be successfully transferred to a Canadian context? Is it possible to revolutionize a campaign with technology? What steps should the Liberal Party of Canada take to effectively use the tools of the Internet? And most importantly, can Liberals win elections using the tools of the Internet?

LRC ITF was formed to examine such questions. The members of ITF represent an exceptionally broad cross section of Canadian society – Anglophone and Francophone, private and public sector, young and old, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, tech experts and new computers users, Liberal and non-Liberal – who responded to the LRC invitation to talk, share and engage their fellow citizens in a substantive and meaningful discourse about the online Liberal universe.

Using online and telecommunication tools, the ITF met regularly in an online collaborative website, debated Internet issues at length via group teleconferences, and forged an active online community that reached around the globe. The task force examined the current LPC Internet offerings as well as the best-of-class Internet practices of other political parties, government organizations, e-government initiatives and online businesses.

These activities were undertaken with the ultimate aim of providing practical direction to LPC on how to best use the Internet to further a Liberal agenda in Canada. This report is an intervention that points the way to opportunity for the Liberal Party and for Canada. The ITF recommendations contained in this report are focused on creating a flexible and evolving Internet infrastructure for the Liberal Party.

Based on a careful study of the best political Internet applications as of 2006, knowledge of the Canadian context, and a commitment to a renewal of the Liberal party, the recommendations of the can be broadly categorized in the following terms:

EXAMINE – Streamline LPC’s current Internet offerings by focusing on the users’, not the organizations’, needs.

EXPAND – Enable and incorporate the growing non-LPC Liberal online world

EXPERIMENT – The Internet is rapidly evolving -- ask for help from Liberals practitioners who know the technology

All of these recommendations must be undertaken with the philosophy of increasing engagement with Canadians. This means opening access to the LPC online world so that the Canadians can tell and share, in their own voices, what is important to them.

Finally, what cannot be reiterated enough is that the Internet, like any technology, is rapidly evolving. What was cutting edge technology in the last election cycle is rapidly being supplanted by new and innovative applications. As a result, the development of an enhanced LPC Internet strategy will need to be an incremental process requiring flexibility, openness, experimentation, and above all, a willingness to adapt to new situations.

ENGAGEMENT: THE TRUE KILLER APPLICATION

... until parties, politicians and pundits abandon the one-way conversation that has come to characterize contemporary politics, no amount of broadband geewhizzery will save them from the collective yawns of the demos.”

*‘It’s interactivity, stupid! Digital media and the DIY election campaign’
Stephen Coleman, Oxford University*

Political parties, grassroots activist organizations, and non-government organizations have seized the Internet as a tool to reach constituents, raise funds and organize supporters.

From Asia to Europe and the Americas, citizen movements are using the Internet to share opinions, direct policy and change the course of local and national elections.

Some outstanding examples of Internet-based political activism:

- US - online organizations have mobilized thousands of citizens to join campaigns, volunteer time and donate unprecedented sums of money to political movements.
- South Korea - a presidential candidate’s narrow 2% electoral victory is credited to the creative use of Internet and text messages to direct over 1 million young voters to polling stations.
- Middle East - text messages sent via the Internet were instrumental in organizing rallies to support Kuwaiti women’s right to vote, and in Lebanon, similar tactics were used to draw together 1 million demonstrators against the Syrian occupation.
- Europe - citizen groups have founded online political and policy sites that enable citizens to send messages to politicians, journalists and top media outlets. Campaigns against the ratification of the European Constitution, and the short message service (SMS – mobile phone text messaging) public response to the Madrid subway attacks, demonstrate the growing influence of citizen-led Internet initiatives.

One would expect that Canada, an active and robust democracy with a highly connected and Internet-embracing population, would be a leader in the political use of this new technology. According to recent statistics, Canadians use of the Internet is among the highest in the world. And yet, despite having all the technical tools for online mobilization of citizens, an effective political use of the Internet has yet to appear in this country.

Why?

The answer is simple. No group in Canada has yet provided an effective online conduit to mobilize citizens to action. Herein lies the opportunity for the Liberal Party of Canada.

OPEN ACCESS AND ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Every successful case of Internet activism is founded on a profound commitment to the principal of open access and active engagement. It is no longer simply about having a website – it's about exploring and providing new pathways for people and communities to engage with one another both on and offline so that their values and dreams are reflected in a larger purpose that is voiced through increased civic participation. Traditional broadcast media – newspapers, television, radio – while informative, exclude people from directly engaging their immediate community. Rather than provide a 'top down' perspective, broadcasting ideas 'at' people and limit the ability of the audience to shape any message they are receiving.

In contrast, the Internet, and specifically online media such as email, forums, discussion groups, text messaging services and social networking sites are about conversations between people, groups and organizations. By creating a network between people and ideas, the Internet creates points of inclusion, fostering and making visible participation and involvement. It allows for the formation of a new kind of decentralized commonality that invites people to contribute ideas, produce materials, share resources and participate in online civic forums that were not possible before the Internet. This has been called a new participatory culture or, a collective 'intelligence.'

Social and political groups that understand this new 'bottom up' diversification of perspectives provide the means for people to connect, organize and take action, and are able to tap into on and offline networks that were previously not available to them. Successful online groups abroad enable people by engaging their values, hopes and aspirations and include these into their organizational activism. They tap into what people are already feeling and talking about. Experience has proven that, given an opportunity to join online with others of similar aspirations, people will respond.

LPC, through its existing national, regional associations and commission websites is in a prime position to build such an engagement network.

In order to take full advantage of the political power of the Internet, LPC must initiate an online engagement strategy that seeks to engage Canadians and their values. This means reaching out to Canadians -- both on and offline -- and providing outlets for people to voice their concerns, connect with one another and become an integral part of the Liberal Party's political processes.

EXAMPLES

There isn't one perfect engagement strategy. The organizations that have found online success are employing different strategies discovered through individual trials and applications. As such, there are a plethora of online political, social and community engagement examples that provide LPC with valuable data and examples how to open the party to greater online citizen participation.

A sampling of the more interesting online engagement resources and examples include:

www.ipdi.org

Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet. A compendium of research and findings on a wide range of political Internet uses including detailed reports on social networks, user-generated content and other online trends.

www.politicsonline.com

Politics Online provides news, tools and strategies for using the Internet in politics and public affairs. Offers a comprehensive list of online resources including links to e-democracy, online campaigning, online advocacy and citizen journalism sites.

www.personaldemocracy.com

From the Personal Democracy web site: “Technology and the Internet are changing democracy in America. We envision this site as one hub for the conversation already underway between political practitioners and technologists, as well as anyone invigorated by the potential of all this to open up the process and engage more people in all the things that we can and must do together as citizens.”

www.Care2.com

Care2 is an online community of progressive activists that allows individual activists and activist groups to create and generate messages to elected officials or other email targets. With over six million members and growing by thousands every week, Care2 is more than twice as large as the more commonly referenced MoveOn.org.

www.meetup.com

Meetup.com is an online social networking site that facilitates offline group meetings. Meetup allows members to find and join groups unified by a common interest, such as politics. In the 2004 US election season, Meetup.com facilitated over 25,000 online-initiated political meetings bringing together over 500,000 individuals.

www.openspace-online.com

Open Space Online is a Germany-based ‘do-it-yourself’ online collaboration site that allows user to share knowledge, address group problems and engage in online dialog without real-time moderators.

www.Unity08.com

An American political site, Unity08 aims to bring together Democrats, Republicans and Independents who are dissatisfied with conventional presidential politics to form a "unity" ticket in 2008. Candidates will compete online for the nomination and will be presented in an online convention in June 2008.

www.backbonecampaign.com

Backbone Campaign sponsors a US ‘shadow cabinet’ of prominent progressive leaders and academics to develop alternatives to current government actions. The public is

encouraged to give input to the policy discussions via weekly webcasts and teleconferences. Additional support tools include podcasts and public meetings.

www.liberalweb.ca

An non-working concept site of an online collaborative policy development tool. Established by Jay Zimmerman (a member of the LRC Internet Task Force) the site outlines the potential of the Internet to engage Canadians to develop policy resolutions. A detailed outline of the concept is provided in appendix A.

www.hillwatch.com

A Canadian government relations agency that specializes in developing online political tools for Canadian and US clients. Hillwatch produced an exceptionally informative report comparing online Canadian political tools of the 2006 general election to those of US and UK parties. Entitled Political Web Sites: Strategic Assets or Virtual Lawn Signs, the report is available as a free download from the www.hillwatch.com website.

www.theelemengroup.com

The Element Group is a Vancouver-based communication firm that helps clients win elections across the Americas by developing engaging television, radio and online advertising. The Element Group has worked on over 22 US campaigns, numerous Canadian elections, and across Latin America. A detailed portfolio of their innovative online engagement strategies can be found online at their website.

THE CHALLENGE

However, as exciting as it would be to see the Liberal Party reaching out online to Canadians, the Party is not yet in the position to implement such large-scale Internet changes.

Online, the Liberal Party is not a united party. There are at least 13 different online Liberal presences that don't link either at all or in any meaningful way. This causes an inordinate amount of confusion for anyone seeking information about the party or seeking to move from one Liberal source of info to another. Adding engagement tools to the current online Liberal structure would be ineffective as these tools would not be easily accessible across all Liberal Party sites.

Before any changes are implemented, LPC needs to deal with some serious structural challenges to its Internet presence and strategies.

EXAMINE: THE CURRENT LIBERAL UNIVERSE

Why is it so difficult to find the content you want on many web sites? Organizations often produce web sites with a content and structure which mirrors the internal concerns of the organization rather than the needs of the users of the site.

www.usabilitynet.org

A project funded by the EU to promote usability and user centered design.

Online, the LPC exists as at least 13 semi-independent sanctioned websites. The LPC constitution permits the establishment of semi-autonomous regional association and commissions.

This arrangement has resulted in the establishment of a number of equally autonomous Liberal websites across the country. The result is an online ‘balkanization’ of LPC content across more than a dozen websites that do not integrate services with one another or provide an acceptable level of inter site connectivity.

In addition to the national LPC site, there are four Liberal commission sites – Women, Senior, Aboriginal, and Youth -- as well as nine provincial/territorial sites.

There are also a number of ancillary sites for MPs, Senators, local Riding Associations, student youth chapters, and a number of provincial commission chapters.

Here are some specific findings:

- The 13 sites have independent and unconnected web addresses, and are only partially linked to other Liberal sites. In many cases, the sites do not allow users to return to a central LPC site. Nor is there a uniform standard of service offered on the different sites. A visitor to one provincial website may or may not be able to access the same Liberal Party services on another association’s site.
- Not all provincial or territorial associations have sites.
- While fundraising or donation links are provided in many (but not all) cases, these often transfer the user inexplicably to the national site without explanation.
- Information on one site is often not shared with other Liberal sites. For example, the national LPC site recently introduced innovative online tools such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS), party member video submissions, and Liberal podcasts. Yet, due to the balkanized nature of the Liberal websites sites, little information about these recent innovations were communicated to Liberals via the provincial or commission sites.

This poor level of usability hampers the Liberal Party's ability to fully use the Internet as an engagement network tool to mobilize and empower the party membership. In a world with over a billion web pages, people will not take the time to navigate sites that have poor Internet usability. The current network of 13 Liberal sites is clearly designed to meet the needs of the organization, not the user.

FOCUS ON THE USER

The LRC Internet Task Force heard a number of opinions on how to improve a user's ability to connect, find and contribute information to and from the various Liberal Party websites. One opinion forwarded by some Liberal members was to scrap the multiple sites concept and centralize all web decision making with the national LPC office.

Such action, while initially seductive, goes against the best patterns of effective Internet use. As noted earlier, the Internet is a radically decentralized medium that is well suited to the development of diverse peer-to-peer content and communications. It is a place where people communicate in a multi-directional conversation. Having a number of LPC sites can be a strength for the Party providing the overall objectives, purposes and services of the sites are closely aligned.

Well-coordinated content-integrated sites have proven to be a valuable online tool, particularly for organizations that reach multiple populations across a great distance. Regional sites have an important part to play in incorporating and disseminating local information. A regionally representative network of LPC web sites offers the Party the ability to be sensitive to community issues – a key for our government system which is based on local ridings – while, at the same time, provides an integrated online infrastructure for national dialog and communication.

Commercial sites like www.amazon.com, and iTunes on www.apple.com have successfully used regional sub-sites to offer localized content to individual national markets. Newspaper chains in Canada like www.nationalpost.com similarly focus their distribution to local and regional markets by offering focused content via a variety of well-integrated sites that allow visitors ease of access to not only local but national and international information.

A coordinated Liberal network can similarly extend the Party's influence provided it is a closely allied network.

We believe that LPC needs to set a minimum Internet standard for the variety of Liberal web sites in Canada. A web visitor should expect a minimum standard of design, service and navigation elements across Liberal Party websites.

This is not to suggest that the LPC should dictate the overall look and feel of the regional associations or commission sites. However, without at least a minimum usability standard, the Liberal Party's online presence will continue to be hindered by poor data integration, lack of shared services and a confusing user experience.

A LIBERAL USABILITY STANDARD

Focusing its online efforts on web visitors means putting users first over the needs of the organization by establishing a national standard for all LPC websites.

A national LPC standard for all websites, coordinated by LPC National and shared between adjunct provincial, regional and commission websites would provide clarity for all Liberal Party sites across Canada. This is not about centralizing control within the LPC, nor is it about dictating a national look-and-feel to the numerous websites. It's about improving the usability of all the Liberal websites, and the sense of network among independently run websites with shared goals and users.

Individual LPC entities would continue to be responsible for their own websites, but the agreed minimum level of Internet service would ensure that a visitor to any of the Liberal websites would be able to easily find content, communicate in national and regional community forums, donate money, and locate officials no matter where they may be located in the Liberal network.

The LRC ITF recommends that specific attention be focused on defining a national standard for the following areas:

- Central databases - email lists, supporter, media contacts, events, etc.
- Legal compliance – Election Act and other federal statutes
- National policy material – reference documents, databases
- General public reference inquires – redirected to regions when necessary
- Media inquires – handling, processing, redirect services
- Optional web site hosting for provincial/regional associations and commissions
- Multi-directional web site redirect to relevant Liberal sites across all sites
- Forums – external for public access
- Forums – internal for party members and volunteers
- Fundraising support – collecting information, database maintenance reporting, donation processing, etc. (There is a strong correlation between engagement and the ability to raise large amounts of money from small donations. International experience has shown that the Internet can be is a powerful framework to engage supporters and effortlessly solicit small donations. Given the importance of fundraising to LPC, a joint LRC ITF and Fundraising Task Force subcommittee report is included in appendix D.)

A national standard would allow the party to better capture user information in nationally accessible databases, provide intra-party communication tools for volunteers across the country, ensure that a unified message is maintained, and reveal ways to reduce support and application development costs which are now individually replicated across 13 organizations.

EXPAND: THE LIBERAL BLOGOSPHERE

“The people who are reading blogs tend to be opinion leaders and they tend to be trendsetters. So they are influential far out of proportion to what their numbers are...”

Carol Darr

*Director, Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet
George Washington University*

Beyond the existing official LPC sanctioned websites, there are growing numbers of Liberal-friendly blogs, websites where Internet activists provide commentary or news on particular subjects.

Blogs are a powerful new tool for communication. People around the world can sign up for a free web page and, within minutes, begin posting their opinions for anybody to read. Those opinions are then archived by Google and any person’s blog can be the first result for any set of search words if there are enough links to the post from other websites. As a result, blogs are slowly creating a free market for news and ideas. They turn formerly private speeches into events of public record. They have provided a forum to question broadcast media consensus. They provide a potential tool for Liberals to communicate their ideas, unedited, to other Liberals, members of the media, and Canadians at large. So far, LPC has not engaged bloggers in a significant way.

Abroad, political parties have recognized the value of including blogs and their activist participants as an alternative communication outlet to reach electorates saturated by broadcast media.

INFLUENCERS

In 2004, the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet (IPDI) at George Washington University released a study that indicated individuals involved in politics through the Internet, like bloggers, are a potent but underutilized source of political influence. The study found that online activists are almost seven times more likely than the average population to be opinion leaders among their friends, colleagues and families.

The IPDI study dubbed these opinion leaders “Influencers,” a term originally espoused by Ed Keller and Jon Berry, authors of the marketing text “The Influencers.” Keller and Berry contend that approximately 10% of the population are highly influential in convincing others “what to buy, who to vote for, and where to vacation.”

Influencers share a number of personality characteristics. As a group, they tend to be:

- community activists
- highly educated

- socially well connected
- news junkies consuming vast amounts of online news and information
- trendsetters who are usually among the first to spot new trends and ideas
- political active
- financial contributors to political parties
- political activists who initiate on and offline communication efforts for candidates and causes

Their passion for political action is an invaluable resource for political campaigns who have the vision to reach out and include them in their campaigns.

In Canada, a number of the Liberal Leadership candidates have started reaching out to these Internet activists for fundraising, member recruitment, message communication and event organization.

THE CANADIAN BLOGGERS

Canada has an active community of political bloggers. In order to gain links and additional readers, bloggers have organized into different lists.

The main lists are:

- Liblogs (<http://liblogs.ca/>)
- The Blogging Tories (<http://bloggingtories.ca/>)
- The Blogging Dippers (<http://dippers.myblahg.com/>)
- Green Bloggers (<http://www.green-bloggers.com/>)
- Progressive Bloggers (<http://www.progressivebloggers.ca/>)
- The Blogging Alliance of Non-Partisan Canadians (<http://www.nonpartisancanadians.org/>).
- The Daily Canuck (<http://www.dailycanuck.com/>)

By joining a list, bloggers have their blogs added to a list of links that is normally posted on all members' sites. They also have the first few sentences of each new post added to the main list website. In Canada, political blogs are read by many people who follow politics closely. This includes politicians, media, lobbyists and party activists.

Canadian blogging is dependant on a number of widely read, professional writers who maintain a blog. They include:

- Warren Kinsella (<http://www.warrenkinsella.com/musings.htm>)
- Paul Wells (<http://weblogs.macleans.ca/paulwells/>)
- Andrew Coyne (<http://www.andrewcoyne.com/>)
- Antonia Zerbisias (<http://thestar.blogs.com/azerb/>)
- Adam Radwanski (<http://www.adamradwanski.com/blog.html>)

These bloggers draw in new readers who then follow occasional links to other bloggers. Most Canadians who rely on online news read their sites daily.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CANADIAN POLITICAL BLOGGERS

The organization of amateur bloggers began with The Blogging Tories. However, in the spring of 2005, non-Tories started to organize. The first non-Tory site to include Liberals was Progressive Bloggers. It includes Liberals, New Democrats, Greens, non-partisans and even some ‘red’ Tories. Soon after the creation of Progressive Bloggers, a group of Liberals joined together and created Liblogs.

During the 2006 election, Canadian media paid close attention to blogs. As the more well known bloggers, The Blogging Tories effectively spread the Conservative message by repeating party talking points, undertaking original research and constantly replaying the Conservative message. They also posted the unreleased Liberal television commercials so that anybody could watch them at any time. This ensured that the ‘ads’ were widely disseminated and kept them at the forefront of the election discussion. However, that same election saw Liblogs increase from approximately 30 members to 150 members. Liblogs is now a non-profit corporation, of which Jason Cherniak (a member of the LRC Internet Task Force) is the president, and the site is widely read by Canadians.

Among the most widely read Liberal blogs are:

- Calgary Grit (<http://calgarygrit.blogspot.com/>) by “Bart Ramson”,
- Cherniak on Politics (<http://jasoncherniak.com/>) by Jason Cherniak
- Cerberus (<http://canadiancerberus.blogspot.com/>) by Ted Betts

These blogs receive between 1,000 to 1,500 “visits” a day from unique computers and the numbers grow every week. Not all of these visits represent people who read every day, though, so the actual number of blog readers is much larger.

Information is spread very quickly and widely on blogs, largely from one blog “linking” to the blog posts of another. Liberal blogs have been effective in communicating news releases, new articles and original commentary and research to each other and to the media by linking to other Liberal blogs. In this way, everyday readers, who may not visit many websites, are exposed to a much greater amount of information. Meanwhile, Liberal bloggers (Libloggers) communicate privately with each other and organize. Some of them regularly correspond with national media.

BLOGGERS AND THE LIBERAL LEADERSHIP RACE

Almost all leadership campaigns have blogs and the media has been paying attention. Bloggers have been interviewing candidates, reporting on speeches, providing analysis and organizing on the ground. Without blogs, many Canadians – journalists included – would have much less information about the candidates. This contest has proven that blogs can have an influence on Canadian politics.

Blogs – both in their commentary and forum discussions – have initiated considerable policy and priority discussions. Much of this has been rancorous and even at times vicious, but for the most part online participants have thrived at the opportunity to discuss their own and leadership candidates’ visions for the party and the country. Through the blogs, many readers are able to engage one another and obtain more insight into the leadership campaign than via the candidates’ official websites or the media.

A list of blogging techniques, including specific proposals on how the LPC could include blogs as part of a comprehensive online strategy, is included in appendix B.

EXPERIMENT: A LIBERAL SKUNKWORKS

Skunkworks: a group of people who, in order to achieve unusual results, work on a project in a way that is outside the usual rules. Often a small team that assumes or is given responsibility for developing something in a short time with minimal management constraints.

www.whatis.com

Internet Technical Term Dictionary

Internet and online political tools are rapidly evolving. Innovations that worked in the last election cycle are apt to be copied, lose effectiveness or otherwise fall out of favour. Across Canada – and overseas – there are Internet-savvy Liberal Party members and supporters – bloggers and others -- who are willing to assist the Party in evaluating and developing new ways of using the Internet to help engage Canadians with LPC.

LPC should establish a Liberal ‘skunkworks’, an online volunteer Internet advisory council that taps the experience and knowledge of these experienced Internet practitioners. These volunteers, chosen *not* for their political connections, but for their demonstrated Internet skills, would provide the party with a window on the rapidly evolving political uses of the Internet. A list of current emerging online political tools is included in appendix C.

Such a group would act as a nimble ‘on the ground’ resource that could explore and encourage ways for the Party to encourage online citizen participation in the Liberal Party, and ultimately, to develop Internet tools to help win elections. Operating outside of the traditional LPC offices, such a group would be free to examine the most promising emerging political Internet trends and technologies and make recommendations to the Party.

Given the current financial and personnel resources of the LPC, it is not possible for the Party to be up-to-date on all the rapid online changes in this area. As such, it would make sense to access those party members who already have the expertise, the capacity, and the interest to contribute in this manner.

From relatively simple online forums, through to text messaging uses, or viral word of mouth marketing, there are an impressive number of technically aware Liberal supporters who would be pleased to offer their talents to develop opposition-beating Internet applications for LPC.

In addition to engaging member’s talents of the Party, such a strategy would ensure that the LPC is continually informed of the leading political uses of the Internet. Around the world, political groups, non-governmental organizations and social activists are continually trying and refining new online methods to reach voters and constituents. It would take minimal effort for the Party to establish a volunteer working group of Internet activists to track, evaluate and recommend potential political applications that might be of use to the Liberal Party.

CONCLUSION

Canadians don't want political parties to talk 'at' them. Canadians want to be heard, they want to know and see that their opinions are not only valued, but actively incorporated into a better Canada. They want to be engaged in a respectful and meaningful way. The Internet provides an opportunity to do exactly that.

This report is intended as a beginning -- an intervention and a set of recommendations to spur discussion within LPC regarding the most effective use of the Internet to promote Liberalism in Canada. LPC needs to develop a coordinated online strategy that addresses the challenges of maintaining a fragmented network of 13 independently managed web sites. LPC needs to develop a national usability standard based on the needs of users, not the internal structure of the Party. And it needs to continue to experiment with new and promising online political uses of the Internet via a Liberal 'skunkworks', an Internet practitioners group.

There are numerous world-wide examples of successful online political applications that could be more fully studied and adopted by LPC. And, even more importantly, there are a growing number of experienced and capable Liberal Internet activists -- bloggers and other new media practitioners -- who are already engaging Liberals and Canadians at large. LPC needs to include these influential opinion leaders in the development of an improved online network.

The Internet is both a mass and niche media, able to network a few or a lot. It allows individuals who were previously part of a passive broadcast media audience the ability and potential to speak and know that *their* voice matters. If LPC creates the means for people to connect with one another, share their aspirations and ideas, discuss what they want for their futures, and above all, be heard, Canadians will respond. An opportunity awaits.

APPENDICIES

This report contains information contributed by Liberal and progressive supporters from across Canada, the US and overseas. This report would not have been possible without their dedication to the Liberal Party and the Liberal Renewal Commission.

The majority of ITF members' information is contained in the text of the report. However, in some cases, members contributed valuable subject-specific information that did not easily fit within the main document.

This information will be of value to the LPC, and as such, is included as appendices.

Appendix A - Online Policy Development (Jay Zimmerman)

Appendix B - Rules for Successful Blogs (Jason Cherniak)

Appendix C - Promising Technologies for Skunkworks Group (Mark Podlasly)

Appendix D - Fundraising Sub-Committee Report (Paul Klie, Thomas Marshall, Michael Teeter, Richard Thomas, Greg Wong)

APPENDIX A – ONLINE POLICY DEVELOPMENT

**Intranet and Internet Online Liberal Policy Development Forums:
Two Key Tools for Policy Engagement**

The Liberal Party of Canada can use the Internet to do a far superior job of engaging Liberal party members, policy experts and other citizens in the Party's public policy proposal development processes.

The Liberal Party of Canada should build new online policy forums to attract and usefully engage people with a strong interest in public policy proposal development, to generate excellent policy proposals, and to provide feedback that will help Caucus gauge the public's policy preferences.

Two key recommendations:

- 1. Vastly improve the LPC's grassroots policy proposal development process by creating a permanent online Intranet policy resolutions development forum.**

This password-protected, members-only Intranet forum will allow Party officers authorized to participate, including LPC Riding and Commission policy chairs and presidents, past candidates and members of Caucus, to submit formal policy resolutions to online peer review, comment and optimization well in advance of Policy Conventions.

With this online forum in place, the quality of policy resolutions will be greatly improved, and the perennial problems which have affected policy resolutions in the past will be avoided: duplication, overlap, resolutions which are not a matter for federal jurisdiction, resolutions for policies which are already in effect, poorly worded or confusing resolutions, etc.

As a result of enabling a much higher standard of policy resolutions to emerge, the resolutions brought to Policy Conventions will be taken more seriously than in the past. This will energize the Policy Convention process, attract more serious participation, and provide Caucus with a source of well-considered fresh policy ideas.

Eventually, a permanent online Intranet policy resolutions development forum could be equipped with the technology for online voting: Policy Conventions could occur purely online, or as a hybrid online/live process.

- 2. Create a permanent, nearly cost-free open-access online Liberal think-tank and invite experts and citizens to engage in structured online policy deliberations on the key issues of the day.**

As a complement to an internal, members-only Internet policy resolution forum, the LPC should build a permanent open-access policy forum viewable by anyone. This forum will invite participation by any interested person, regardless of whether they are Liberals (yet!) or non-Liberals, experts or laypersons.

Despite being open to everyone, this online policy think-tank can be intelligently structured to ensure that serious policy work gets done. It need not be a forum for endless threads of rambling posts.

Imagine an online forum which posts questions like “What should Canada do about Darfur?” or “How can Canada’s west coast aquaculture policy be improved?” How can such a forum be designed to generate useful, high-quality policy proposals?

Three key features are necessary for an online forum to achieve a high quality of policy proposal formulation:

- (i) Each policy topic should be moderated by a competent topic moderator. Topic moderators will generally be volunteers with relevant credentials, recruited by the website’s overall moderator (who should in turn be appointed by the LPC and will likely need to be a paid LPC staff person).
- (ii) Each policy topic should be addressed by two parallel streams of participants: an experts’ stream and a public stream.

The topic moderator should recruit a small group of experts on the topic of interest to participate in an experts-only stream to which only invited experts can make posts. (Experts’ time is valuable, and they will be unwilling to participate in an open forum that would require them to read through large volumes of often uninformed public commentary.) However, the experts’ posts will be viewable by anyone.

In parallel to the experts-only stream, a public stream should be set up to allow for any interested member of the public to comment on the experts’ ideas and suggest improvements. The topic moderator will read both the experts’ stream and the public stream, and will bring good ideas from the public stream to the experts’ attention.

- (iii) Each policy topic should be developed as a collaborative policy development exercise in a disciplined, timelined, structured process with a clear beginning and end.

How might this work? Let’s consider a sketch of how an effective online policy proposal development process could be designed and implemented.

The experts’ stream. A policy topic such as “What should Canada do about Darfur?” could be explored in a four-week policy development process involving several expert-stream participants: for example, NGO participants such as medical staff from MSF with experience in Darfur, academics, former diplomats or retired military personnel with relevant field

experience, Party officials, and if possible, indigenous refugees from Darfur. These experts will be asked to participate on a volunteer basis.

For the first week, they would simply compare notes in the online forum, to help each other identify key issues and information related to the policy topic at hand.

After the first week, several of the experts would submit first-draft policy statements – one to five pages in length – for the consideration of their online peers. The participants in the experts’ stream would read the several drafts, and by moderator-guided consensus or an online preferential-ballot vote, they would choose one draft which finds the greatest support as the ‘working draft’.

Once this ‘working draft’ is chosen, it will become the single focus of the ensuing three weeks’ work. The working draft’s sub-sections and lines will be numbered for ease of reference. All subsequent input by experts’-stream participants must take the form of amendments to the working draft: “I propose that Paragraph 18, Line 4 be amended to read:...”

Participants would provide daily feedback on each day’s proposed amendments for the topic moderator’s consideration. At the end of each day, an updated working draft would be generated by the moderator for the next day’s continuing work.

In this way, a consensus policy document will emerge from a structured several-week process guided by a competent topic moderator. A firm timeline will ensure closure is achieved. The final policy recommendation will then be forwarded to the relevant LPC Caucus members, Parliamentary committees and others who might be interested in considering the experts’ consensus policy proposal.

A commitment by the LPC to ensure that the policy recommendations are brought to the attention of Caucus will serve as a very strong incentive for experts to participate in this consensus-oriented policy forum.

The proposals that emerge in this process would, of course, have no formal status within the political or parliamentary system; however, if they are of high quality, they will gain the attention they merit.

In cases where serious disagreements arise amongst participants in the experts’ stream during the consensus-building process and the topic moderator’s efforts at reconciliation of diverging viewpoints on core concerns prove unsuccessful, the topic moderator would allow the process to fork into two rival policy proposal documents.

The public stream. Members of the public will be able to read all the experts’-stream deliberations and comment on them in a separate parallel public commentary stream.

This public stream will be endowed with self-moderating mechanisms: Each post written to the public stream will have a ‘quality bar’ allowing any other participant in the public stream

to assign the post a quality rating, from one to five (terrible to excellent). Readers will be able to select different ways of viewing public stream posts: in order of time submitted, or in order of quality rating. In this way, it will be easy to find excellent contributions.

The topic moderator will be authorized to bar participation of persons (or more accurately, IP addresses) deemed disruptive, according to well-defined rules for participation (e.g. decorous language, staying on topic, no *ad hominem* attacks on other participants). Conversely, where the topic moderator identifies a public-stream participant whose input is consistently excellent, the moderator may propose the promotion of that individual to the experts' stream (the promotion proposal would be accepted or rejected by the existing members of the experts' stream).

Benefits of a permanent online Liberal policy think-tank

Using a process such as that sketched out here, it will be possible to build an online federal policy recommendations development forum that serves as a superbly cost-effective, user-driven permanent online Liberal policy think-tank.

This will help re-establish the Liberal Party of Canada as the most dynamic and attractive federal Party for people who are interested in policy. It will allow the LPC to recruit new members by engaging people in useful public policy deliberations. It will assist the Liberal Research Bureau by providing, in effect, free policy research.

Moreover, an online think-tank will be invaluable to Caucus. The parallel experts' and public-commentary policy development streams will help Caucus identify excellent policy proposals developed by consensus among groups of experts. At the same time, it will improve Caucus members' awareness of the public's policy preferences, because the public-commentary stream will in effect serve as an online 'focus group' that evaluates and comments on experts' policy recommendations. In this way, issues of public concern can be flagged and addressed long before Caucus adopts a policy approach in the course of its parliamentary or electoral duties.

An online Liberal policy think-tank designed in accordance with the guidelines set out here would be extraordinarily useful to the LPC and to Caucus.

More information

A non-functional mockup of an online Liberal think-tank can be found at <http://liberalweb.ca>.

APPENDIX B - RULES FOR SUCCESSFUL BLOGGING

Some basic rules for a successful blog:

- 1) Do not start a blog without first reading blogs for a few weeks to understand how they work. Do not advertise the new blog until you feel comfortable with it.
- 2) Blog posts should be well written, spell-checked and thoughtful.
- 3) Post at least four times a week. Daily posting and multiple posts in a day will lead to higher readership even if only done occasionally.
- 4) Be nice. Negative comments always look worse in print than they sound in person.
- 5) Do not write anything that you do not want as a headline the next day.
- 6) Write your own posts. People only read blogs if they show a personal side.
- 7) Allow comments. If people start debating in the comments section, they are more likely to return. Comments can be moderated, but respectful, negative comments should be allowed.

Proposals

- 1) Liblogs should remain an independent organization. If the Party gets involved in organizing bloggers, then the Party risks taking responsibility for everything that is written. Liblogs is an important resource that should be supported by Liberals, but not the Liberal Party.
- 2) The Liberal website should include a blog with occasional posts from prominent Liberals. While the leader, president and office staff cannot be expected to blog every day, a group blog could give the party a more personal face. If it is successful, it should also bring regular readers to the website, where they will have the opportunity to read our message.
- 3) MPs and Senators should be encouraged to write blogs. This will help them create public personalities. Over time, it will also give them greater communications experience. However, they will need to follow the Rules of Successful Blogging.
- 4) The Party should use bloggers to create interest in new policies. For example, the Party could release bits and pieces of a policy to bloggers one day, more bits and pieces to a media person the next day and then the full policy on the third day. This is really just the addition of one day of blogging buzz before the standard pre-release.
- 5) The Party should treat Libbloggers as very friendly journalists. If Libbloggers are given occasional exclusives and interviews with important Liberals, then it will give Canadians greater reason to read what they write.

6) The leader and other prominent Liberals should hold occasional conference calls with bloggers. This would keep bloggers interested and give them incentive to maintain a positive message. However, negative messages should not be punished. The idea is that it is harder to be upset with a person who takes the time to talk to you.

7) The Ignatieff campaign has been quite successful with an online policy forum where any person can comment and propose ideas. These ideas are reviewed by the campaign and people with good ideas have been contacted privately. Party blogs could be used in a similar manner.

APPENDIX C - PROMISING TECHNOLOGIES FOR SKUNKWORKS GROUP

**POSSIBLE TOPICS FOR LIBERAL SKUNKWORKS GROUP
(AN INTERNET ACTION ADVISORY COMMITTEE)**

- Blogs including chat-groups, message boards, forums, commentaries, etc.
- Local audience/constituency targeting of internet and web messaging via local media, news outlets and sports franchises
- Development of an overarching national office web infrastructure to ensure a coordinated and united national party internet direction
- Web, PDA and mobile device video
- Word-of-mouth / Viral marketing campaigns
- Improved online party fundraising via traditional donations but also targeted emails, banner ads, pay-per-click keywords, relational merchandising agreements, etc. (within bounds of applicable legislation)
- Constituent tracking services – supporting voter re-locations, socio-economic progression, Liberal and non-Liberal-supportive family household data, consolidated contact databases, etc.
- Determining, improving effectiveness/reach of current Liberal Party websites and web initiatives
- Web-coordinated databases of constituent sentiments, issue tracking, etc.
- Web and GPS-enabling of party volunteers during election campaigns/election night
- Mobilizing local support via better use of email and instant messaging
- Using emerging mobile phone services for targeted text messages, news delivery, video presentations, voter contact, etc.
- Improving access of Liberal Party material, content to potential supporters beyond current support base
- Reaching demographically-defined groups – youth voters, special interests, single issue voters via the web and related mediums.
- International examples of internet, use of web and new media for political advocacy, electoral mobilization and issue highlighting
- Podcasts of party messages, interviews, training packages, statistics, debates, etc.
- Online polling
- Online policy discussion, formulation, feedback
- Comparative benchmarking/performance evaluations of Liberal web/internet applications against other international progressive political movements
- Web-casting
- Coordinated local web infrastructure for each of 305 riding association with some ability for local modifications/additions
- Online public web-video discussions between Liberal caucus members and constituents and potential traditionally non-Liberal supporters
- Online shadow cabinet
- Micro web sites

APPENDIX D - FUNDRAISING SUB-COMMITTEE REPORT

**Online Fundraising Sub-Committee Report
August 14th, 2006**

Direction Statement

The Internet fundraising group is charged with developing short-term and long-term online fundraising solutions for the Liberal Party of Canada. The target audience includes party members and the general public. We will illustrate a number of online tactics, methods and technologies available to achieve this goal. The group's final report will deliver clear and concise recommendations for the Liberal Party of Canada to implement. The goal of this report is to illustrate new online techniques the Liberal Party of Canada can use to successfully raise money online.

Introduction

Fundraising offline and online share many similarities. Starting by defining and measuring the universe of prospective contributors is job one. Today, more than 49% of Canadian homes have broadband Internet connections. Canadians go online in droves to research purchases, make bank transactions and partake in most of the same activities as users in the United States. Last year 80.5% of Canadians online spent \$4.6 billion. However although Canada is 1/9th the size of the United States online spending was 1/30th of theirs. The reason attributed to our sagging online spending is that retailers and organizations are not using the same marketing techniques used in the United States. As a result it is just a matter of implementing the right strategy, tools and inspiration for political parties in Canada to unlock the online wallets of progressive Canadians. The recommendations below are a starting point for the Liberal Party of Canada to successfully fundraise online.

Recommendations

Short term

Email list acquisition: Match existing LPC donor and supporter files to commercially available email address lists to immediately extend the LPC online reach by building its email database. Today, match rates typically vary from 10-35 percent, but terms can be negotiated to pay on a per match basis.

Online communications plan: Establish an ongoing online communications program to reach out and encourage supporters and convert prospects to become online contributors.

Develop message-based fundraising models: With message-based models, the LPC can target niche groups of individual supporters and prospective contributors by: issues, income, age and gender.

Use existing listserves to identify issues of importance and interest and to engage existing supporters: There is no greater strength than your current lists. Currently, these lists are typically used to push information to supporters- they are not used to engage. Use the listserves we have now to identify policy issues that Liberals feel passionately about. Harness the power of

this passion and solicit donations that will assist the party and its members in taking action. Set up organizational activities around the policy issues that Liberals on current lists feel passionately about. Use viral marketing techniques to encourage existing supporters to enlist friends, colleagues and other like-minded Canadians. Grow the lists and encourage financial support. Do not discourage small donations.

To be successful on a national basis, these activities should be coordinated and implemented out of Liberal Party Headquarters in Ottawa.

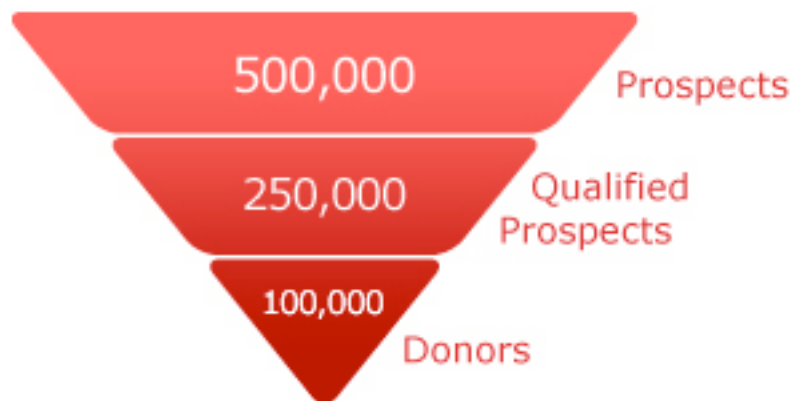
Longer-term

Opt-in campaigns: Develop a comprehensive series of campaigns designed to draw in supporters to sign-up with their email addresses and cell phone numbers. These campaigns could target, as examples, issue activists and the top five percent of LPC polls across the county, particularly those in wealthy ridings.

Online creative tools: Develop creative tools such as issue and attack websites, viral videos and SMS text messaging to generate email addresses.

Identifying and Soliciting Prospective Donors

Developing an effective online fundraising plan requires complete integration with an equally effective online communications plan. At the very basic level, both plans should focus on capturing the email addresses of prospective donors. U.S. political parties, political committees and the Bush-Cheney ticket acquired millions of email addresses through a variety of creative strategy and tactics.



To acquire email addresses there are number of tactics available to the LPC.

Opt-in Campaigns

Opt-in campaigns are a cost effective way of acquiring email addresses. Persuading Canadians to provide their email and geographic information in conjunction with encouraging them to sign-

up to support a specific issue and cause is a key component of any opt-in campaign. The LPC can then use their emails to send action alerts and information about the issues and target specific solicitations to the individuals that submitted their contact information. Online tools such as issue and attack websites, viral videos and SMS text messaging have proven very effective in generating email addresses.

Using web-based applications the ability exists to track email communications. Pinpoint tracking helps to customize a model to develop future online communications and target specific online fundraising asks.

1) *Attack and issue websites*

Attack and issue websites can generate email addresses for opt-in campaigns by engaging the visitor to get involved. Emails collected from these websites are generally from people who feel strongly about the particular issue or subject. This engagement of the visitor is the key to the value of an opt-in email address.

Typically the most successful websites at collecting email addresses are about issues that are controversial or people feel strongly about. Also effective are attack websites that are entertaining and satirize the opposition. The success of both types of websites hinges on the ability for them to be virally forwarded to friends and family. Also beneficial, is when a website is deemed too controversial that it receives attention in the main stream media and blogosphere.

Successful U.S. based attack political websites that have generated email sign-ups include sites such as “Pink Slip” (<http://votelouise.com/page/petition/rove>), Nevada gubernatorial candidate Jim Gibson’s site to brand his opponent as a foe of Northern Nevadans (<http://www.theelementagency.com/gibsonzxcz/index.html>) and the Democratic and Republican campaign committee attack websites.

Many U.S.-based advocacy organizations are launching campaign websites to advocate for their cause and influence the outcome of the 2006 elections. The NRDC’s “Moving American Beyond Oil” (<http://www.nrdcactionfund.org/beyondoil/action.asp?step=2&item=53649/>) and (www.stopglobalwarming.org) campaigns have generated hundreds of thousands of email sign-ups.

Efforts could be made to link attack and issue websites with existing party activities, at the regional or national levels. Efforts should be made to encourage issue supporters to get involved in party activities. However, we should never discourage the issue supporter; their donations can make a difference to party financing and to effective online and off-line action.

2) *Viral videos*

Viral videos generate email addresses by using images, motion video and sound to advocate for a particular cause, party or candidate.

Unlike the television viral videos are not limited to 30 seconds therefore more time can be taken to fully develop its message. The videos are designed to crescendo at the end when viewers are encouraged to sign-up, support the cause and forward the video friends. The success of viral videos to generate email addresses depends on number of factors but tends to vary depending on the level of controversial content included in the video.

Recently the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee released a video online to generate email addresses that used controversial images of coffins coming home from Iraq.

<http://www.theelementagency.com/newsletter/dccc/news1.html>

Mainstream media pundits are forever searching blogs for controversy and can be relied upon to communicate any outrage and uproar generated from a video that achieves viral circulation. Online earned media in the form of viral motion videos are contributing to successful opt-in campaigns for the Democrats in the U.S.

3) *SMS text messaging*

Advocacy organizations and political campaigns have exploited SMS text messaging to generate opt-in email addresses. The idea is to simply offer a much simpler means to indicate interest by texting a keyword such as "Ford" or "MABO" to a short-code (28444 for Ford and 56658 for MABO) to subscribe to a campaign. Using SMS text messaging offers organizations the advantage of unprecedented message open and email sign-up rates.

Developing text messaging capabilities enable political organizers and parties to connect with the hard-core foot soldiers and get the message of the day in place first thing in the morning.

The idea is to encourage subscribers to action (place a call here to voice your support/opposition to this issue; sign up now to receive a bumper sticker/yard sign; review the candidate's new health care plan, etc.). This type of "call to action" implementation is the key to making SMS work in electoral politics.

4) *Online advertising*

Online advertising is a cost effective way to engage specific groups of people and ask them to sign-up. Unlike traditional forms of advertising online advertising can be targeted using:

- Keywords
- Issues
- Postal Codes

Online advertising generates traffic and be targeted to increase your return on investment by focusing on geo- and demographic areas of existing support to generate fundraising dollars.

Offline advertising

All offline advertising and promotions should make strong efforts to drive supporters to the relevant URL where donations are easily made and accepted. Receipts should be issued immediately by return e-mail.

Return on investment (ROI)

Calculating a return on investment (ROI) for opt-in campaigns is an initial step to developing a budget to support an integrated strategy.

A general rule of thumb for political campaigns is that each opt-in email address is worth the equivalent of \$1.00 in online contributions. If the LPC develops a program to generate 250,000 email addresses then they can assume a return of \$250,000 in online contributions.

Privacy Policy

It is important to ensure the Party's privacy policy allows it the freedom to implement the suggestions above. A casual review of the Party's privacy policy indicates that few minor changes are required for it to implement the reports suggestions. It is the recommendation of the report that a lawyer be consulted to make the necessary changes. Also important is that all provincial and territorial associations participating in the program have similar privacy policies.

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