

An unlikely survivor in the digital age: Direct mail

By TARINI PARTI | 8/3/14

Its obituary has been written over and over, but the political direct mail industry isn't just still alive; it's thriving.

In an era of highly targeted digital and TV advertising, political campaigns are still banking on an old-fashioned, mundane routine: Voters picking up their mail and leafing through it as they walk from their mailboxes to kitchen trash cans.

Campaigns, party committees and outside groups have spent at least \$150 million on direct mail so far in the 2014 election cycle, according to a POLITICO review of Federal Election Commission reports and data compiled by CQ Moneyline. That total is just a snapshot, based only on expenditures that were categorized as a variation of "direct mail" or "mailer" and includes some postage and printing costs. Meanwhile, expenditures categorized as "digital," "online," "web" and "email" together totaled about \$70 million.

The cost of television time is rising – at the same time the TV landscape has become more diffused – and many voters are using DVRs and internet video streams that upend traditional advertising.

The cottage industry developing around Republican primaries – with electorates more easily reached by mail – is also contributing to the spending on the medium, which is relatively easier and cheaper to link with the voter data on which campaigns are becoming increasingly dependent.

A survey by Democratic pollster Mark Mellman in 1995 predicted mailers were on track for a slow death, but the firm reversed its forecast in 2008 after more than a decade of continued effectiveness.

Whether it's mail intended for fundraising or messaging, consultants from both parties now believe the industry has evolved with the times. Although it isn't growing rapidly like digital, mail remains an indispensable tool for many campaigns.

"Direct mail works. I've been doing this for 32 years. People keep saying 'Mail is going to die. It's a dinosaur,'" said Walter Lukens, founder of The Lukens Co., whose clients include Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Tennessee GOP Sen. Lamar Alexander.

Lukens said that mail has been especially effective in the 2014 Republican primaries, where campaigns have been targeting an extremely small, typically older slice of the electorate. He pointed to creative pieces of mail that his firm did for the McConnell campaign that were effective in portraying the senator's primary challenger, Matt Bevin, as a phony conservative.

In one of the pieces, Bevin is depicted as a snake oil salesman on the front of the mailer, which reads: "Genuine Bevin Brand Snake Oil: Behold the magical potion being spoon-fed to Kentucky Conservatives far and wide." On the back, it had a picture of a bottle with "half-truths, resume inflation, and delusions of grandeur" listed as the ingredients. McConnell easily dispatched Bevin, winning by 25 points.

"In terms of moving the needle, it's very effective because people still read their mail and some

even keep it around," Lukens said. "It's got a shelf life. It's cheaper, and you can reach a more targeted audience."

TV advertising doesn't quite have that level of targeting yet, but it will soon catch up, said Malorie Thompson of Something Else Strategies.

"Those days are quickly closing in on us," Thompson said. "It all depends on a campaign's budget and sophistication."

She added that even with improvements in targeting voters through TV ads, direct mail will have the crucial cost advantage, especially in supplementing TV and radio buys. "You want to create a campaign that chases a voter, that can engage them where they want to engage. Not all campaigns have the luxury of going on TV. That's why direct mail is still very efficient."

But Andrew Bleeker, founder of Bully Pulpit Interactive – a major Democratic digital firm – pointed out the biggest drawback of direct mail compared with digital. "When you send a mail piece, you don't know if they are reading it. With digital, we can now know if they saw an online ad."

Bleeker and direct mail consultants both agreed that "smart campaigns" with big war chests are using a mix of tools – including both mail and digital – to target and communicate with voters in a much more sophisticated way than ever before.

"It's not an antiquated way to reach voters," said Cameron Armour, creative director for GOP firm Axiom Strategies' direct-mail shop. "It's actually highly technical. Everything we do in direct mail from the design and concept is an exercise in efficiency."

One of Axiom's clients – Baptist minister Mark Walker – recently pulled off an upset in the North Carolina Republican primary for retiring Rep. Howard Coble's House seat. Walker, who was working with a limited budget, did not run any TV ads before the runoff – and spent at least one-fifth of his outlays on mail.

Axiom typically designs based on the results of eye-tracking studies that monitor the pupil movements of voters to determine what catches their attention, Armour said. The main picture and text written in the biggest font is usually all a voter scans at first glance.

Some of their other findings: The candidate's face on the piece of mail anchors the reader's perception. And readers key in on details like the disclosures identifying the message's sponsor at the end, even if most consumers think their peers don't practice the same diligence.

Several firms are also targeting voters through advanced data-mining – tailoring their message based on the voter's age, likelihood of voting, and data like magazine subscriptions and whether the children in the family go to private or public school. Many mailers will also encourage voters to connect via social media for more messaging opportunities and include links to a microsite that has information and online ads.

"Mail is the only communications method that can be targeted directly to the voter," said Duane Baughman, president of The Baughman Co.,



whose clients include the pro-Democratic House Majority PAC. "Once a target universe is identified in polling and modeling, mail can be sent to the individual who will be moved by specific messages.

"Other communications methods are advancing but still have their limitations," he added, referencing TV and digital appeals.

Baughman said his firm has developed a way to match IP with home addresses so that it can deliver digital ads directly to a targeted group of voters along with their mail.

"It's a great way to make sure that when 'Joe Voter' checks the mail when they get home and sees our candidate, they then see the same candidate message and imagery when they check box scores on ESPN[.com] after dinner," he said.

Mail can also help a candidate cut through the clutter if the voters are already being inundated with political ads on the airwaves and online.

"In today's day and age, you can have five-to-seven screens in your house, but you still only have one mailbox," said Kevin Mack of Mack Sumner Communications, which works for several groups on the left.

Specifically for fundraising, direct mail is crucial for getting donations from older donors and people who are still reluctant to give their credit card information online, said Michael Centanni, president of Base-Connect, which represents conservative candidates and groups.

Fundraising pitches via direct mail also have one big advantage over those sent through email: They can't be sent to the trash can without being looked at.

"It's so easy to delete your email without even looking at it. With direct mail, you would think it would be the same, but you at least have a few seconds," Centanni said.

Even President Barack Obama's campaign raised \$230 million from direct mail, according to a PowerPoint presented to supporters after the election and previously obtained by POLITICO.

More broadly, Centanni added: "From studies, we know that people remember more of what they read on paper rather than on a screen. That has something to do with it."

Still, with digital and TV buys getting all the attention, it can be hard to pitch federal candidates on direct mail, said Brad Shattuck, president of the Kentucky-based Strategic Impact. Shattuck's clients include Rep. Doc Hastings (R-Wash.).

"Direct mail is never as sexy," Shattuck said. "But more and more candidates are realizing that they need it."