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August 01, 2006
BELTWAY BLOGROLL

Trying To Trump The Competition

Two years ago this fall, **Raj Bhakta** made a splash on the reality TV show "The Apprentice." His wardrobe (bow ties) and antics (jogging in his boxers after losing a bet) helped make him the standout personality among 17 other candidates.

But in the end, Bhakta didn't make the cut. **Donald Trump** fired him in the ninth episode, costing Bhakta the chance at a $250,000-a-year job with one of America's most famous entrepreneurs.

Bhakta is in another competition this fall. He is trying to parlay his "Apprentice" fame and entrepreneurial experience into a lower-paying ($165,200) but higher-profile job as a congressman, and in his bid to unseat Democrat **Allyson Schwartz** in Pennsylvania's 13th District, he is using the blogosphere to generate buzz and bucks.

The most obvious element of Bhakta's effort is his campaign blog. "Team Raj" typically posts multiple entries a day, and the candidate himself makes an occasional appearance. On Friday, for instance, Bhakta penned a critical response to a speech about violent crime by Philadelphia Mayor **John Street**, whose city is in the 13th District.

The blog also includes a "donate" button in the shape of a bow tie. It takes visitors to a page that until recently featured the "Joe Biden 7/11 Challenge." The fundraising gimmick called attention to a wisecrack in early July from Sen. **Joseph Biden**, D-Del., about not being able to "go into a 7-Eleven or into a Dunkin' Donuts unless you have a slight Indian accent."

Bhakta, who is of Indian ancestry, seized on the quote as an opening to invite donations of $7.11, $70.11 or $700.11. "I hope you'll show the senator what a silly thing he said," Bhakta said in an audio statement explaining the challenge. The challenge, which was promoted by some bloggers, yielded several thousand dollars, Bhakta said in a telephone interview.

That's just one example of Bhakta's outreach. The candidate granted an interview to The Real Ugly American that in turn generated links to Pennsylvania and national blogs. "We don't have to beg [the media] for an interview," a worker for Bhakta wrote. "This campaign and the blogs can communicate directly with the people."

Bhakta, who said he is running in the "Republican tradition of **Theodore Roosevelt**," also has a blog presence at the redesigned Townhall.com. And he has been pursuing endorsements from both local and national bloggers. He has at least seven: Blogs for Condi, Blogs for Fox, The Centrist, Church and State, Right in Philly, Save the Soldiers, and Tom Shakely & Friends.

"The age of the Internet truly has arrived," Bhakta said. "Our use of blogs and our use of the Internet is a component of a grassroots strategy" that is focused on "reform, reform, reform" -- of health care, education and environmental policy.

Bhakta was motivated to run for Congress in part by what he called the corrupting influence of big money in politics. He said it has "insulated and deafened our representatives in Congress from the real needs and concerns of the people," and blogs have forced that issue to the top of the agenda. "The issue of money in politics is one where the blogs are very helpful," Bhakta said.

He likened the emergence of the blogs to the "age of pamphleteering" and called them "a revitalization of the political system and reporting on politics."

But Bhakta's embrace of the blogosphere may not bear any more electoral fruit than his stint on "The Apprentice" bore professional fruit. Corrupting or not, money matters in politics, and his campaign doesn't have much -- slightly more than $28,000 as of the end of June. Schwartz has nearly $1.5 million and the advantage of being an incumbent who won her first House race in 2004 by a spread of 56 percent to 41 percent.

Four House races in Pennsylvania currently make the most-competitive race rankings of Hotline Editor **Chuck Todd**. A fifth is listed on the "fringe." The Schwartz-Bhakta battle is not even on the radar.

Building a grassroots campaign online, furthermore, has been tried before and failed -- repeatedly. Republican bloggers are fond of noting that most of the

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candidates backed by Democratic bloggers have been defeated. And last year, Utah House Majority Leader **Steve Urquhart** briefly ran a blog-based campaign against fellow Republican **Orrin Hatch** for the U.S. Senate but quickly abandoned the race.

Micah Sifry, who had a disenchanting experience as the e-campaign director for **Andrew Rasiej** in last year's race for New York City public advocate, knows the challenges firsthand. The Internet helped the campaign enlarge its base, raise $350,000 and triple the size of the mailing list, Sifry said. But Rasiej finished fourth in the Democratic primary.

Blogs are "a very effective way to reach 'political junkies' and the media," Sifry said. "But they cannot generate interest in a candidacy out of thin air. If people aren't paying attention to a particular race... tech and blogging can't change that."

What might have an impact, he said, is the kind of interaction with voters being practiced by Democrat **Pete Ashdown** in his race against Utah's Hatch. Sifry said Ashdown is "inviting voters to help draft policy ideas with him on a wiki, where he is an active participant."

That is the kind of "real lateral conversation" that modern voters want, Sifry said. They don't want candidates who use the Web "to either talk at voters or to get voters to do things for them. Until candidates get off their top-down pedestal, I don't think many voters are going to be very impressed by the mere fact that they have a blog or some blogger endorsements."

Posted by Danny | 07:03 AM

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"Beltway Blogroll" is K. Daniel Glover's bi-weekly look at the growing number of policy blogs shaping Washington debates. It publishes every other Monday, although additional updates will be made when events warrant.

Glover is the managing editor of National Journal's Technology Daily. He can be reached at dglover@nationaljournal.com.

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