

Face time

Candidates discover social networking site to reach young voters

By Andrew Shaw
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There's a new campaign tool out there for political candidates with online savvy and a few young volunteers who are well-versed in one of the latest trends.

Facebook.com has taken two rarities in an election season — free campaign advertising and young voters — and brought them together in its first foray into national politics. Facebook.com's "Election 2006" network, which connects candidates to potential voters using online profiles, is viewed as campaign gold by those willing to keep their postings up to date.

The site, which has more than 10 million users, allows people to create a free online profile complete with photo, blogging and messaging service. Users can also be connected through the site's topical interest groups or by adding another person as a "friend," a version of an online acquaintance.

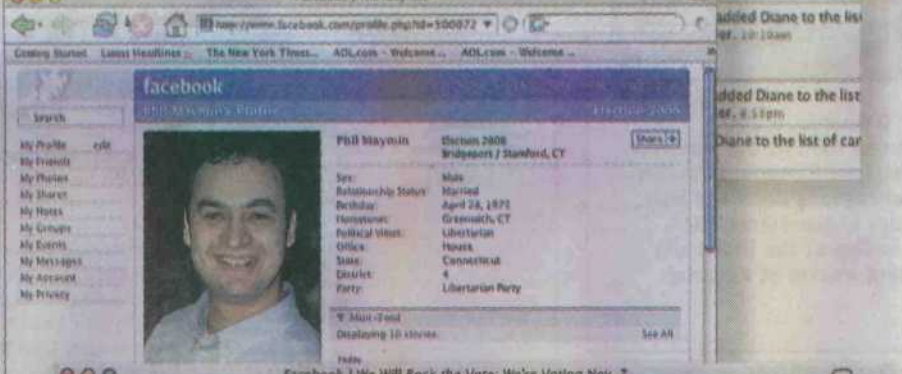
All of the candidates in the 4th Congressional District, U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races have posted a profile. Facebook is not used as a replacement for an official campaign Web site, but candidates do offer links on their profiles to their official sites.

Campaign officials say the trick of using the site is knowing it exists in the first place and then not looking like a fish out of water with the youth-oriented online community. Michael Sohn, campaign manager for incumbent Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., said the campaign uses a secret weapon — college-age staff members — to keep in touch with the Facebook community.

"I would have never thought about it," Sohn said. "It wasn't around when I was in college."

Campaign officials for U.S. Senate candidate Ned Lamont and incumbent Joe Lieberman have frequently posted updated material on their candidate's profiles. They also recap debates, point out election trends and provide other fodder for their potential voters.

More than 350 users have left messages known as a "wall post" on Lamont's profile page, writing praise or concern for his campaign or citing reasons why they will vote for him.



Facebook

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Lieberman's page has more than 1,000 of the posts, while Republican challenger Alan Schlesinger's has just 25 posts. Officials for Lieberman and Schlesinger could not be reached for comment.

The ability to hear directly from potential voters is unique to the Internet, according to Lamont's Internet director, Tim Tagaris.

"The Internet gives two-way communication," Tagaris said. "It provides people with the tools to really get involved."

Tagaris said it was a no-brainer to get involved, but he is unsure of how big Facebook's effect will be in its first year of election involvement.

"I don't think anyone knows how effective it might be," Tagaris said. He said Lamont also has a profile on MySpace.com, a similar site geared toward teens and young adults. "We have both, we use both ... but it's so difficult to get any quantitative measure on the impact."

Facebook opened its doors to the candidates on Sept. 1. Candidates of all parties running for state or federal office were invited to create a free profile that would be part of the site's Election 2006 network. The network now features more than 1,600 candidate profiles nationwide and more than a million Facebook users participating by pledging their support for a candidate through its online poll, "Election Pulse."

Candidates may post photos, information on campaign events, list political beliefs and write messages to other users. Facebook users — many of them between the ages of 18 and 25 — see a candidate profile as an opportunity to contact a politician who would otherwise be inaccessible.

"It really helps their cases in elections," said Kristen Harris, 19, a Greenwich High School

student. Maymin points to the Internet's ability to give immediate feedback, something he experienced after giving a speech at the University of Connecticut's Stamford branch last month.

"As soon as I got back, someone posted something on Facebook about it," Maymin said. "It's a great way to communicate with students."

Other candidates have not been as enamored of the site, either eschewing Facebook altogether or using it on a limited basis. Instead, they have relied on traditional forms of campaigning to reach young constituents.

Campaign officials with Diane Farrell, Shays' Democratic challenger in the 4th District, said she is relying more on traditional campaigning to reach young voters. Farrell's Facebook profile has been kept basic so the time and energy needed to keep an interactive, constantly updated profile updated can be used elsewhere, they said.

Campaign officials for Schlesinger have not posted nearly the same volume of Facebook content as those for Lieberman and Lamont, but Schlesinger's profile does include a photo album of campaign events.

Candidates running for local office and for the state legislature are not included in the Election 2006 network that connects candidates directly to other Facebook users; they are allowed to create a general profile like any other user, according to Facebook officials.

That's not a major concern, according to state Rep. Claudia "Dolly" Powers, R-151st District, and state Sen. William Nickerson, R-36th District. They agree that their efforts are best put elsewhere.

"I don't think that's where my

graduate and Facebook user. Harris volunteers at the District 3 polling location in Greenwich. "They can't advertise like that on TV. Facebook lets them give more detail about themselves."

Shays is one of the candidates embracing Facebook as a competitive tool, Sohn said.

"There's an energy among college students. It reaches out to students all over Connecticut," Sohn said.

Shays' profile includes background information, links to articles and announcements from his campaign. Sohn said some Facebook users have come out to support Shays by working on his campaign.

"(They) might not have helped Chris otherwise. It's just adding an energy to the campaign," he said.

Besides a profile, candidates can also get a sense of their support through Facebook's "Election Pulse," a continually updated poll where people can see state-by-state support for state and federal candidates. Users can click on a candidate's name to show their support, although they do not have to be registered voters within that district to participate.

Perhaps no local candidate has taken advantage of Facebook's capabilities more than Libertarian Phil Maymin, a congressional candidate in the 4th District. The Greenwich resident updates users on his upcoming events, offers links to his television campaign ads, and lists personal information about his background and interests.

"You avoid it at your own peril," Maymin said of the social network sites. He said it helps that at 31, he is closer to the age of most Facebook users than his opponents.

He said he often responds personally to messages from other users. "My (profile) is interactive," he said.

audience is," Powers said. "That may be more of an audience for someone like Lamont."

Powers said she did consider making a profile, but, on the advice of her resident Facebook experts — her children — decided against it.

"Their advice is that if you're not going to stay on top of this almost every single day, it'll look stale and unused," Powers said.

Nickerson said that in a future election, maintaining a Facebook profile might make sense, but it's not a priority for this year's race. He said that from what he's observed, a Facebook profile wouldn't have much impact unless he could keep up with constantly adding material.

Nickerson's opponent, Democrat Frank Farricker, also does not have a profile. He could not be reached for comment.

Democrat Edward Krumeich Jr., Powers' Nov. 7 opponent, said that although he does not currently have a profile, he is coming around to the idea. Like many candidates, Krumeich makes no claim to firsthand knowledge of Facebook; he gets his information from his teenage children.

"If I was more familiar, I'm sure I would have used it. I'm sure I'd consider using it in the future," Krumeich said. "Anything that increases the communication between the candidate and the electorate is important."

Sohn concluded that by the time the next fall election rolls around, campaign officials will most likely have a new Internet tool to contend with.

"The Internet moves at such a fast pace, who knows what will be the next Facebook," he said. "Who would have ever thought it would be such an aspect of campaigning?"