A Search Too Far
Improving your search ranking is important, but SEO tricks can land you on a blacklist

By Shane D'Aprile

Search engine optimization—or SEO for those in the know—is a must for political campaign websites. After all, if potential voters can’t easily find your campaign via search engines, your digital strategy is pretty much DOA. Smart SEO strategies can bolster your candidate’s search engine results and can be key to messaging and branding. But in the rapidly evolving and hard-fought online contest for votes, there is such a thing as over-optimizing.

While the Federal Election Commission has begun to look at the rules for online campaigning, search engine companies are the current judges and executioners here. Attempting to boost your site’s search results with hidden phrases in the source code is a serious offense in the eyes of the top search engines and could land you on the blacklist at Google and Yahoo.

Case in point is Kay Bailey Hutchison’s gubernatorial campaign website, which Google sentenced to the Internet equivalent of the death penalty in July for doing just that.

Standbykay.com was removed from Google’s search index after more than 2,000 phrases were found hidden in the site’s source code. Among them was the phrase “Rick Perry gay,” a reference to Hutchison’s primary opponent, Gov. Rick Perry. Tech experts say the hidden code was likely an ill-conceived attempt to cheat the campaign’s website to search engine relevance. Yahoo quickly followed suit and blacklisted the website the day after Google took action.

The discovery of the hidden phrases by a reporter at the Austin American-Statesman led to the axing of the Hutchison campaign’s web firm, ElectionMall, followed by plenty of finger pointing. The Hutchison campaign told reporters the phrases were automatically generated by technology sold to it by ElectionMall and that they were actually intended to aid the campaign’s decision on where to purchase banner advertising.

Beyond that, the Hutchison campaign is tight-lipped and ElectionMall won’t comment on the incident beyond a statement that appears to lay the blame on the Hutchison campaign. “ElectionMall does not provide strategy to campaigns,” the company tells Politics. “ElectionMall provides technology services. As with all of our clients, ElectionMall has a five-year confidentiality agreement with Texans for Kay Bailey Hutchison. Therefore we are not allowed to comment on any strategies implemented by the campaign.”

Asked for further comment, ElectionMall CEO Ravi Singh declined to elaborate. Singh did say that ElectionMall’s business is booming, both domestically and overseas. The company opened an office in Kiev, Ukraine this September, and Singh says ElectionMall is rapidly expanding its international client base.

As for Google, the search engine wouldn’t comment directly on the Hutchison incident. A spokesperson tells Politics, “While we don’t comment on specific incidents, it’s important to bear in mind that Google generally evaluates sites individually, not actors or individuals, and that we take user reports of violations of our Webmaster Guidelines seriously.”

Whether the blame in this case lies with the vendor, the campaign, or some combination of both, the incident should serve as a cautionary tale to both campaigns and vendors, says Peter Corbett, CEO of the online firm iStrategyLabs. “It’s why we tell campaigns all the time that there’s a huge danger in not having a technologist on your staff,” says Corbett. “You need someone who’s savvy, who under-
stands why you would use a vendor’s services for SEO and exactly what the vendor is doing.”

Perhaps most importantly, this sort of attempt to influence search results doesn’t appear to have much of an upside. “It’s kind of like search engine malpractice,” Danny Sullivan, editor of SearchEngineLand.com, says of the Hutchison incident. “It’s very old-fashioned to think that if you just add a bunch of words to a page, it’s going to increase its relevance,” he says. “It’s like throwing salt over your shoulder to ward off evil.”

Corbett says trouble could have been easily avoided—and proper SEO achieved—with some simple steps. “The above-board method of accomplishing what they were trying to do without being black-hat about it is to actually generate a lot of real content on your website,” he says. “So you would have actual blog posts and articles on your site that include the search terms you want.”

A blog post on Hutchison’s site that made mention of Rick Perry’s stance on gay rights, says Corbett, would have accomplished the same in terms of SEO but wouldn’t have broken Google’s rules.

The Hutchison incident also touches on another rift among the technophiles in the political consulting world: The competition between those who sell affordable off-the-shelf technology versus those vendors that offer strategic guidance, as well as building websites. “There’s a big difference between those who just sell technology and those who provide ongoing strategic counsel,” says Matthew Dybwad, director of creative strategy at emotive, a Republican web firm. “If you don’t want to find yourself in a situation like this, you have to educate yourself and understand the difference.”

When it comes to SEO, Dybwad says any campaign actually plotting SEO strategy should already possess a fairly sophisticated online presence. “For a lot of lower level campaigns, just getting a website up is over their heads,” he says. “Forget about SEO. If you’re just coming to online campaigning, don’t overcomplicate it.”

Matt Dunn, director of strategic services at the New York-based web firm VShift, says the key for campaigns at any level is to avoid the temptation to cut corners or automate too much of their online strategy. Dunn’s advice: Understand the technology you’re employing and devote enough attention to even the smaller aspects of outreach online.

“Anytime a campaign makes an assumption that they can sneak something out there online and people aren’t going to notice it, time and again they’ve been proven wrong,” he says. “So it speaks to more of a need to shift a campaign approach and an understanding of how online works, and that’s going to take time.”

Shane D’Aprile is the senior editor of Politics magazine.

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**Midterm Trouble?**

The pattern is well-established: The first midterm election for a new president is usually a bad one for his party. Five out of the last six presidents have seen their party’s House delegation shrink. The only exception was in 2002 when President George W. Bush, whose approval rating was still extremely high in the aftermath of 9/11, helped Republicans to a net gain in Congress.

President Obama is heading into the second year of his presidency with an approval rating hovering around 50 percent and with his party coming off two statewide losses in 2009. The question for political prognosticators is not if Democrats will lose seats in 2010, but just how big the drop might be.

Gallup measured Obama’s approval at 53 percent in November—in the same ballpark as Presidents Carter, Reagan and Clinton at the same point. Look what happened in those years...

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**Presidential approval ratings**

- Nov. 1977, Jimmy Carter: 56%
- Nov. 1981, Ronald Reagan: 52%
- Nov. 1989, George H.W. Bush: 70%
- Nov. 1993, Bill Clinton: 49%
- Nov. 2001, George W. Bush: 87%
- Nov. 2009, Barack Obama: 53%

*Source: Gallup*