

Political fundraising tool taps social networks

June 14 2010, By GLEN JOHNSON , AP Political Writer

(AP) -- Candidates in some top political races are raising big sums of money using software that taps donors' social networks, an endeavor that lets the donors track their friends' donations with the zeal a fantasy baseball team owner uses to monitor player statistics.

Republican gubernatorial candidate Charles Baker in Massachusetts and two GOP Senate candidates, Marco Rubio in Florida and Rob Portman in Ohio, are among those using a software-based fundraising tool called BlueSwarm to successfully tap their social networks for campaign cash. The Democratic Governors Association also plans to use it.

The software democratizes the fundraising process by letting average citizens not just donate, but raise money themselves from their Outlook contacts or their [Facebook friends](#).

The traditional political fundraising model relies on experienced bundlers to hustle money from a small set of well-connected donors.

In contrast, BlueSwarm and similar software lets users work their friends and families and, in turn, have them solicit their own network to build a donor tree with deep roots. The same technique applies to institutional fundraising used by colleges or social causes such as charity campaigns.

Success and failure are tracked over the Internet on a screen illustrating the roots of donor's organization, as well precisely who has given and who still needs to cut a check or type in their credit card number.

It's an advance over 2004, when Democrat Howard Dean posted the rudimentary outline of a baseball bat on his Web site and ask donors to "fill" it with money. It's also more sophisticated than 2008, when Democrat Barack Obama coaxed small donations from supporters concerned about a specific issue and then returned time and again until they had incrementally given sizable sums.

"It's bringing a sales-force technology into the political realm," said Brian Shortsleeve, a [venture capitalist](#) from Boston who is already responsible for raising more than \$100,000 for Baker's gubernatorial campaign personally and through his network.

"If you can empower a broad range of people to use this system to go out and solicit, it helps the whole operation," Shortsleeve said.

All told, BlueSwarm is being used by 11 U.S. Senate candidates, 26 House candidates, three state parties and 11 political action committees.

Clients of the company, split between Westford, Mass., and Palo Alto, Calif., have raised more than \$45 million this election cycle.

Baker has far outraised Democratic incumbent Gov. Deval Patrick in Massachusetts, while Rubio was closing the fundraising gap on Gov. Charlie Crist before Crist quit the GOP to run for Senate as an independent. Portman's campaign kitty is seven times as big as his rival's.

Shortsleeve, 37, tried the first generation of such technology in 2007, when he participated in a national fundraising day for Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney. The "CoMITT" system allowed supporters to tap their contacts and easily track any donations they provided or solicited.

Romney raised \$6.5 million in a single day, at the time an unprecedented sum and early validation for a candidate who ended up being the last survivor among the challengers to 2008 GOP nominee John McCain.

Erik Nilsson, who developed CoMITT, has since refined the technology. His software's name derives from the tendency for big-time fundraisers to dress in blue suits.

In the old days, wealthy candidates could invest the money needed to establish a fundraising apparatus, said Nilsson. BlueSwarm sells itself as an easy way to motivate donors.

"Now, you can give them a user name, a password or a Facebook application and make them a part of your network," he said.

Baker's gubernatorial campaign is his first statewide race in Massachusetts, though he is well-known as a former administration budget chief.

Baker's network plays to the strength of social fundraising: After just five months of campaigning last year, he had \$1.6 million in campaign funds, about triple the \$670,000 Patrick had at the end of 2009. As of May 1, Baker had built the balance to \$2.3 million, while Patrick was at \$1 million.

Baker's staff declined to specify how much they have raised through BlueSwarm, but campaign manager Tim O'Brien embraced it.

"BlueSwarm has been an integral piece of our fundraising efforts and allowed us to reach more new faces and grow our team in a quicker time period," he said. "So much of our grass roots outreach is through social means, so having the ability to link our fundraising to those networks is crucial."

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