US Republicans reboot in bid to close 'digital gap'

March 18 2013, by Rob Lever

Social media tweets are displayed during the Republican National Convention on August 28, 2012 in Tampa, Florida. As part of an effort to rebound from its 2012 US election defeat, the Republican Party is rebooting its digital strategy to make better use of data, social media and other technology platforms.

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The party's new digital strategy was unveiled Monday as it released its analysis of the November campaign defeat and proposed new strategies for the 2016 presidential election.

Republican National Committee chief Reince Priebus said the party will hire a "chief digital and technology officer" to coordinate tech teams.

"Those teams will work together to integrate their respective areas throughout the RNC and provide a data-driven focus for the rest of the organization," he said.

Republican spokeswoman Kirsten Kukowski said the Republican chosen as the party's flag-bearer in the race to replace Barack Obama in the 2016 vote will inherit a ready-made digital campaign system.

She said this will be "the first time a party committee will take on a full digital restructure in what is a space race ... to have a well-oiled digital strategy ahead of the 2016 cycle."

Yet analysts say it's not clear if Republicans will be able to replicate the success of Obama and the Democrats in the use of technology and social media.

"The Republicans are playing catch-up," said Zach Green a founder of the left-leaning website UniteBlue and a political social media consultant.

A delegate poses with red, white and blue top hat in the Facebook photo booth at the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida, on August 29, 2012. As part of an effort to rebound from its 2012 US election defeat, the Republican Party is rebooting its digital strategy to make better use of data, social media and other technology platforms.

"They said for a long time they were catching up on social media, but it seems like a fundraising thing."

Green said that digital strategies played an important role in 2012 but that the tools may not work if the message fails to resonate.

"You need to start with the message to get the people to rally behind

you," he said.

Moreover, Green said, the technology landscape may be different for the next election, requiring different strategies, said Green, without wanting to tip his hand to Republicans. "They can figure that out," he said.

Most analysts say Obama outmaneuvered his Republican foe Mitt Romney on the digital battlefield.

Obama pioneered the use of social media for organizing, fundraising and communicating in his 2008 White House bid and began ramping up his digital campaign back in 2011 with millions of online ads.

The tech-savvy president had far more "likes" on Facebook and followers of his Twitter feed.

Robert Bluey, head of digital media for the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank, said it was "healthy" for the Republicans to focus on digital strategies, addressing a weakness in the Romney campaign.

"I think it was one of the factors," Bluey said.

"Where the Obama team clearly had an upper hand was that they were able to use data in a way to make strategic decisions, including decisions on where to spend money.

"It doesn't seem this was happening to the same extent in the Romney campaign."

But Bluey expressed reservations about the Republican plan, saying it may focus too much on centralizing power in the party.

"Conservatives haven't been about a big centralized government, and we

shouldn't be about a big centralized party," he said.

"When it comes to data, I don't know if there should be a central repository that the RNC is only going to share with the candidates of its choice, instead of letting the market pick the winners."

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