

Interview with Joe Trippi, Campaign Manager for Dean for America, July 30, 2003. Interviewed by Lawrence Lessig.

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L: Did blogs come to Dean, or did Dean come to blogs?

T: That's an interesting question.

For almost 2 I've been an avid reader of blogs — commenting occasionally, but mostly a lurker. About 18 months ago I was reading a myDD.com blog, and there was some comments that this guy Howard Dean might be running for President. I made a comment or two and I came back a couple days later and then began reading the blog pretty constantly. When I came on as campaign manager, I knew we wanted to do a blog, but I didn't have a big sense of urgency about it. I had a bunch of other things to worry about, but then two things happened that I think are interesting.

The first was meetup.com. I was reading the myDD.com blog one day, and saw this interesting thing called meetup.com that some of the Dean people from around the country were trying to use to meet up about Howard Dean. That caused me to check the meetup.com site. Within a few weeks, we'd made the decision that we were going to encourage people to do meetup.com. That idea came straight from a blog — myDD.com.

The second was another little twist of fate, or maybe destiny. A guy named Matt Gross came wandering into my office one day. He told me he had just driven from Utah because he cared so much about Howard Dean. He had decided to drive to Burlington without calling first, looking for a job. He managed to maneuver past the receptionist's desk and stuck his head in long enough to scream out, "I wrote for the myDD blog.com"! I immediately said, "You're hired!" And I think about 48 hours later he had this really ugly blog up that was on Blogspot. He was going to run back to Utah and get all his belongings and come back, but I said he had a job on the condition that he got a blog up before he left. And so in 3 or 4 hours, he created what

was then the “Call to Action” blog. It was cute and ugly at the same time, but I think it was the first blog of a presidential campaign.

L: What kind of pushback did you get about the idea?

T: Well, I think first on even things like meetup.com, it was “why would we put an icon for meetup.com on our site?” and that was from the IT department. And I’d have to explain it and it would take a week to get things like meetup.com on the site.

About the blog, there really wasn’t any resistance. But in the early days, there were many things that we had to get going. To get the blog going needed somebody like Matt. It needed somebody who was going to be able to care for it every day and make sure it happened while people like me and the governor were running around Iowa. Until Matt showed up, we just didn’t have that person.

We’re now onto our second blog. We had to retire the “Call to Action” blog. It was really a sentimental thing. We knew it was cute (and ugly), but it didn’t have a comment section. We wanted to have a blog where people could comment — where there was interaction, and where we were building a community and a narrative of the campaign. So the day finally came when we had to retire the “Call to Action” blog. It was exciting to come out with a spanking new “Blog for America.”

It was an interesting emotion retiring that little baby that got it all going — retiring it for this much cooler blog with a comments section, but still.

The response we are getting and the ideas that come off of it are just amazing. The comments section is just such an amazing thing. Little things you never would have thought of: Zephyr [Teachout] came up with the idea of having a poster that was downloadable and printable for each state, with a goal of getting a million of these posters put up — for example, “New Hampshire for Dean” — as a way to get visibility going. We put that up with the links of all fifty states and immediately afterwards, one of the first comments was, “I’m registered to vote, I’m working overseas in London, there’s a lot of American expats here, and you know, you really, I’d love to have an Americans Abroad for Dean poster that I can put up and that my friends overseas can put.” Two minutes later another post

comment was, “I’m in Spain, and you guys shouldn’t forget about us, you should do Americans abroad.”

This is my 7<sup>th</sup> presidential campaign, but in every other campaign, the campaign never would have known that it had screwed up by not just creating the fifty-first sign. It’s a small thing, but within ten minutes we had an “Americans Abroad” poster up with the rest, blogged about it, said, “hey, you’re right, you caught that.” And then right after that, someone posted, “Hey, you know, Puerto Rico’s not a state, but it votes for President of the United States — votes for the nominee — and there’s a lot of us down here, could you make a Puerto Rico for Dean sign?” All this is happening in the space of an hour.

There’s this interaction going on between the campaign and every hole that we haven’t plugged, or thought about. They’re plugging it for us and saying, “Hey, you forgot this, you need one of those,” and we’re building them on the spot and putting them up for everybody to download.

I used to work for a little while for Progeny Linux Systems. I always wondered how could you take that same collaboration that occurs in Linux and open source and apply it here. What would happen if there were a way to do that and engage everybody in a in a presidential campaign?

L: So is this an open-source presidential campaign?

T: Yes. That moment when that was all going on made me think, “That’s sort of what we’re building here.” I guess it’s about as open as you can do it in modern-day politics.

L: From the perspective of a campaign manager, your objective is to motivate people to help spread the word and to build excitement around the campaign. How does the blog help you do that, different from what other campaigns have been able to do before?

T: Well, there’s a real connectivity being created. There is no way you would be able to get these ideas. So many of the ideas that we’re building the campaign around are coming from people who there would be no real way for us to communicate with directly.

All blogs are important because of the point of view of the world or insight that you get if you become a regular reader on an issue that you care about. I think that many of them do that, and I think it's really important to have one place where people can go constantly, and understand what this campaign is about, what our thinking is on things, and where we can have that feedback.

And we know immediately when we do something wrong. I had an appearance on CNBC last night, on the Capital Report, and as soon as I walked off the set, I just turned to everybody and said, "That was the worst television appearance I've ever, that I've had in this campaign." Well, I didn't even have to go look at the box to find out. You know when you mess-up; you know when you're hitting it right. You know when there's something you've got to think about that you haven't thought about because they make — the people make — you think.

L: So let's say I'm a campaign manager of a different presidential campaign, and I say to you, look, I've got an email list that is ten times the size of your blog list, and I accept feedback, people can send me email back telling me where I screwed up. Why is what you're doing better than what I'm doing, if my list is ten times bigger than yours?

T: One, it's faster — sometimes almost in real-time, if you sit there and read the comments while you're doing it. You can really talk-out the ideas.

But I think more importantly, there's a sense of community that forms around the blog. That's really what the Net is about. It's about building a community. There may be zillions of communities within the Net, but you know, your own community builds around that blog.

L: So it's a community because people are both reading and writing at the same time about these ideas?

T: I think they're both reading and writing the ideas, but the other thing is that there is a sense of community. There's a sense of, "We're part of each other, and we're trying to find our way." No matter whether it's an issue of importance to the campaign or the nation, we're all exchanging these ideas in common cause — except for the trolls, of course.

L: Let's talk a bit about the trolls. If I'm a traditional campaign manager, the first thing I'd say is, "My God, you're giving up control here, and look what you're going to face: you're going to face a world of trolls and how are you ever going to get over that?" How do you answer the trolls?

T: Well, actually, they came up with that ingenious thing over at the blog. They actually created a Dean Team. We have a team-raiser thing where you can contribute money, and they created a "troll team-raiser," Dean-raiser, so that any time a troll comes on, everybody automatically goes and contributes to the troll Dean-raiser account. It's actually been pretty effective. Thousands of dollars have been raised because of the trolls. And this is no joke. It's not one of those things where they go, "Oh, a troll, everybody go pay the troll Dean-raiser." They actually go do it. So if you come on our blog and trash Dean, what you've done is help him raise \$500 that half hour. So that's done some job in discouraging them.

But in terms of the control thing: that's one of the reasons I don't think the other campaigns are having any success on the Internet. This is my 7<sup>th</sup> presidential campaign. In all of them, everything I ever learned was that you're supposed to have strong community control — military command over everything in the organization. You give commands to your state directors who give it to the county directors who order the precinct captains around.

I've worked with enough tech involving the Net to know that you will absolutely suffocate anything that you're trying to do on the Internet by trying to command and control it. It's hard to let go, but you know, we've decided that's what we were going to do. I don't think the other campaigns can do that.

There are a number of reasons this thing's working for Howard Dean. First, Howard Dean is who he is. He's different than these other guys. He's open, makes decisions based on facts, and really does believe that this is about engaging people in their democracy again.

Second, the campaign says, "Okay, we're willing to put the bat in people's hands, or put the blog in people's hands, and let them help us get there."

And third, regardless of where you are in healthcare, regardless of where you are on copyright or any of the

issues that we've got out there, unless people stop complaining about them and actually get engaged in the democracy — unless this campaign can get them to participate in it — almost regardless of what our position is, there's no way those issues are ever really going to get addressed and solved. Because right now, in the end, it's all about the money.

This campaign is trying to say, "Look, you can do this differently. It doesn't have to be about the 33 lobbyists for every member of Congress in Washington. People actually have the power to engage and make a difference."

I think our blog helps do that. People get involved. They're actually participating in the campaign. And to the extent we keep building this community, then even people with positions different from the Governor understand that we're building this together. So that when we get into the White House, you know you're going to have a fair hearing, and that we're actually going to have a discussion about some of these issues.

[Governor-on-the-phone break]

T: You know, there are all these issues that just never get solved, including a lot of the issues that that I've read you on — copyright and public domain. Part of the reason is that there's no one who can listen. When you have a system where there are 33 lobbyists for every member of Congress, and where it's all about raising tons of money to buy TV ads, the participation of the people doesn't really count. There's no one really encouraging them in the process. Then there's no way for people to have an impact on the debate.

That's one of the things this campaign really is about: the Governor believes strongly, and we believe strongly, that there's a responsibility for citizens to be involved in their democracy. You can't have self-government without it. That what's been missing for a good 2-3 decades now. It isn't something George Bush made happen. He's just put a magnifying glass on what we've lost.

What we need to do is to get people to participate in their democracy again. If people did that, and if thousands of them take small actions — a few hours of their time, a few dollars out of their wallet — there's a real chance that when a candidacy like ours wins the White House, the people

will actually own their government again. And we'll actually have an honest discussion about all the issues that always get ground-down by the powers that don't want them to be raised.

We're trying to do a campaign that's on a different level than your standard presidential campaign — that's more than two people screaming at each other about who has employer mandates in their healthcare plan or not.

L: So when the DLC attacks your campaign, are they attacking your campaign because they're not comfortable with this form of democracy?

T: Yes. I really think that's a good part of it. I think the one reason we have so much opposition — even within our own party — is because they like being in charge. They like it the way it is, or at least, too many of them do. And they're actually afraid of what would happen if people actually gave a damn again and started becoming involved and actually demanded that issues like healthcare got addressed without special interests whacking it down.

So yes, I have come to believe that a large part of why the DLC attacks Howard Dean so vehemently has a lot more to do with the power of what they're saying this campaign is about. They're not real thrilled with it.

L: One of the most surprising things that's happened in the last six months through the Internet — other than your campaign — was the extraordinary response to the FCC's decision about media concentration. One very salient feature of that response was that it cut across party lines. There was a real groundswell of support, both Democrat and Republican. Is that the sort of thing that you're hoping to build inside the Dean campaign, too?

T: Yes. Exactly. Because a lot of the problems are not ideological, even though broadcast politics makes them seem ideological. Broadcast politics has made the vocabulary of politics meaningless. Everything's quick and easy: "he's McGovern, he's a liberal." It's just two-word things. But the world's a little bit more complex than that. People are more complex than that. Howard Dean is

definitely more complex than that. And the issues certainly are.

Many of these issues have broad support across the spectrum of our political discourse. The FCC decision is a good example of that. But they still don't get addressed. With the FCC decision: they were still trying to sneak that one by, but what was amazing was the response. That's exactly what we're trying to do in this presidential campaign: harness that desire for people to actually have a voice again. Our campaign is a platform for them.

If we do that, we will have made a huge change in the political process. A huge change in how campaigns are funded. A huge change in how people are participating again. And we'll have a participatory democracy again, in which the people demand that these issues are addressed, and they will be.

Our biggest hurdle is getting people over their disbelief that they can make a difference. And the one place where I think people are starting to get over that disbelief is on the Internet: because of the sense of a community they're getting when they go onto a blog, or when they participate in something like responding to the FCC, more and more people every day are starting to realize, "Hey, wait a minute, we do have the power to do something here." They saw it with the FCC, and how Congress reacted. I think people are seeing it in our campaign too.

It isn't just each person giving \$25. The act of one person giving \$25 alone isn't that much. But that so many people believe that by doing something, just a small amount, they could really rock and shake the Democratic race for President, meant that they did it. I mean, that was totally that same sense of "We do have the power to make change in the system."

The other part of that, though, is that it's harder when you're a candidate. There is some natural cynicism about whether he really does mean it. Is he really for real? Or is he just one of those other guys?

Our campaign strives every day to make clear that that's not the case. But that's the other thing the blog does. Every day, day-in and day-out, you go over there, you can check what's going on, and you get that human feeling for the people who make up this campaign. For who and what they are. And somewhere along the line you hope that when you have that kind of connection, the people will begin to

realize, “You know what? Maybe they really are different. Maybe this campaign really is different.”

How you would get that over on a sort of flat, wallpapered website, I don’t know. But on a blog, there can actually be that depth of a connection with people, as they communicate and exchange ideas together over months and months.

At least, I hope so, anyway.

L: So you believe the actual architecture of the blog is something that is enabling a deeper engagement with these issues than the television or the standard way?

T: Yes, absolutely. I really believe that there’s a deeper connection on the blog for the exchange of ideas than I think you get over television or just a flat website.

L: One more question. Let’s talk about the money issue. Just what are the numbers now? What are the averages that you are seeing? Has the success been a surprise, or did you expect it? And talk about the Cheney lunch.

T: On the numbers: We’re up to 224,000 signing up to support Howard Dean.

On the Cheney lunch: the Vice President had something like 125 people who gave him \$2000 each, for a total of \$250,000. We had 9700 people, giving roughly \$53 on average, totaling \$508,000.

But there were a couple things that surprised us. We really didn’t have much doubt that our supporters would respond to that and meet the 250,000. But we never thought it would happen as fast as it did. We weren’t even sure that half the people would open their email, and even know that we were doing it. We thought a lot of people would go away for the weekend, get back, and not even know the thing happened, because of how late we sent the email out on Friday. So we were surprised by that.

On the other hand, yes, I think we knew the whole time that we’d been building this not for the money. That was the interesting thing. We’ve really been building this from Day One because we believed it wasn’t enough to organize something on the Net. We wanted people to organize, to

use the online community, to organize in their offline community. And we've seen amazing, absolutely amazing, things there.

We had, for example, an email list of 481 people in Austin and we emailed them and said "We're coming." We get to the event, and there are 3200 people there. The reason there are 3200 people there is that those 481 people went out, downloaded flyers, leafleted the Latino community, leafleted polling places for a city election that was occurring, made phone calls, and did all those kind of things on their own.

This happens all the time. In Seattle, we showed-up and there were 1200 people, half of whom have never been involved in politics before, all organized by small groups of people who had come to the blog, or somehow used our organizing tools, but are all part of this Dean community that we're building.

So that's why we were building it. You know, obviously it was not lost on us that if we built that, contributions would follow. But yes, we were absolutely stunned at the size. We knew the contributions would follow, but never did I think it would be 83,000 contributions by June 30<sup>th</sup>, totaling, millions of dollars.

So to have the Cheney Challenge, with Howard Dean sitting ready to blog with his \$3 turkey sandwich versus Cheney sitting down at his \$2000 a plate lunch — that really does juxtapose the point that we're trying to make in this campaign. If we can keep that going, and get even more people to understand it, then that will be the difference here. If these guys are going to depend upon corporate soft-money and thousands of dollars from PACs, and it becomes a campaign of \$2000 donors versus a campaign that gets \$25 and \$100 from thousand and thousands of people, and that adds up to be competitive with George Bush, then that's the way we will beat him. Then he is running against the American people, and the American people are running against a system that isn't listening to them. And then they are willing to get involved to fix it.

And then you can really get down to some of these critical issues that really do matter but that no one is going to do — if the FCC could have gotten away with it, they would have. And frankly, if 750,000 people hadn't rattled Washington, probably the President and his folks would've been able to push it through.

So that's what this campaign's trying to do.

We're still learning every day. When the Governor first got here, he didn't know what a blog was. But he's gone from "what's a blog?" to "Hey, how come the White House doesn't have a blog?" The whole thing has been a learning process for him, and I think it's been great. And it's great for both communities. It's great for him that he's learning more and more about this. And it's great for folks who use the Net to understand some of the core issues that are facing us. And that there's a guy running for President that at least has got an interest, and is at least trying to experience it. Some of it for the first time, sometimes not up to people's expectations, but I think it's kind of cool watching him. He's discovering things we knew three years ago, but it's cool to see a candidate for President discovering the same thing you discovered. It's pretty cool.

So watching that happen and watching him learn is fun. I was one of the early people on the Net, when the Net was something most people didn't know. I've gone through all that. And so it's kind of cool to watch. I've worked for guys who had no curiosity about stuff at all. It's just the way people are.

And we're learning too. I'm learning. I'm still trying to figure out what's working and what isn't working. And we've still got a lot of learning to do.

But the blog has been amazing. We just learn so much and get so many good ideas about how to move forward. Even with the Cheney thing: We were sitting there with \$250,000 raised on Sunday. Half of them were saying to us, "I'm not giving till Monday. I refuse. Don't set this down because I'm waiting till Monday, I'm going wait till Dick Cheney is sitting there and then I'm giving my money." And the other half was saying, "We've made it." And we really didn't know what to do. And then all of a sudden, we started reading the comment sections, and it all became suddenly really obvious what we should do. And it worked. Everybody was happy. Everybody had collaborated, in nearly real-time. And we had a huge success.

Who can argue with \$508,000 coming in over a \$3 turkey sandwich?