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Democracy Online:

CAN IMC STIMULATE DISENFRANCHISED VOTERS?

Adam Froman

The first pilot test of Internet voting in a major municipality in North America took place during the November 2003 municipal election in Markham, Ontario, Canada, an affluent town of more than 200,000 just north of Toronto. An integrated marketing communications (IMC) campaign was crucial to getting the vote out. In this case study, Adam Froman shares insights from the Markham election's IMC campaign and explores the opportunity for electronic media to contribute to future elections.

“Walking the Talk” with Non-Voters

The first pilot test of Internet voting in a major municipality in North America took place during the November 2003 municipal election in Markham, Ontario, Canada, an affluent town of more than 200,000 just north of Toronto. An integrated marketing communications (IMC) campaign successfully drove the voting process and proved the importance of communications in affecting societal change.

It is perhaps not surprising that Markham was the continent's first large town to embrace the online voting technology of Election Systems & Software of Omaha, Nebraska. Markham calls itself the “high-tech capital of

Canada” and has successfully recruited a number of high-tech businesses, including IBM and American Express, many of whose employees call Markham home. The population is affluent and educated. Eighty percent have computer access and approximately 60 percent of all eligible voters have broadband access. Sheila Birrell, the town clerk, is responsible for managing municipal elections in Markham. As she put it, “This town hall needed to walk the talk.”

Like governments across North America, Markham administrators were aware of the demographic trend that threatens democracy itself: Younger people are far less likely to vote than older people and people who have never voted

Table One
Analysis of Average Voter Turnout in 2000 vs. 2003

Criteria for Average Change of Voter Turnout	Average % Change from 2000
Markham Mayor wins by 80 % of the votes	-1.5
Municipalities >100 registered voters	-2.57
Municipalities where incumbent won	-3.84
Municipalities where incumbent won by >50% of votes	-5.72
Municipalities where incumbent did not run/win	-0.74
Municipalities where mayor won with ≤20 % of votes	-1.17
Municipalities where mayor won with ≤10 % of votes	3.26

Source: Delvinia Interactive Analysis

Markham’s voter turnout in 2003 was only 1.5 percent lower than in the 2000 election, despite the landslide of Mayor Don Cousens. In other municipalities where the incumbent mayor won by more than 50 percent of the vote, turnout dropped by more than 5 percent.

are less likely to start. Plot the curve out 50 years, and there’s a frightening possibility that apathy will kill the instrument of our freedom.

Markham officials hoped that using new technology would attract younger voters as well as those who found it physically difficult to get to the polls. “We believed Internet voting would make it easier for all Markham citizens to vote — including the elderly, the disabled, those who commute home to Markham after the polls close and those out of the country during the election period,” Birrell explained. Also, municipal elections in Ontario fall in November, one of the dreariest months of the year. In the past, when Election Day is cold or wet, many people who intended to vote just stayed home.

Typical Canadian voter turnout for municipal elections is about 28 percent. Markham officials feared that two factors unique to the 2003 voting cycle would cause even more voters to stay away. The first factor was that four weeks before the town vote, a hotly contested provincial election would be held. Would the much-discussed (but little-proven) theory of “voter fatigue” materialize, keeping people away from the ballot box in the second election?

A second characteristic of the 2003 election was clearly not speculative: Markham’s popular, long-term incumbent mayor had an opponent with less experience. Mayoral races are generally the draw for municipal voters, and voter

participation rates typically fall precipitously when the incumbent mayor is a shoe-in for re-election. (See Table One)

One other issue complicated Markham’s embrace of Internet voting. When Markham’s York Regional Municipality confirms and updates the voters list, it must manually consolidate the master list with the list of voters who registered online. The list must be final before Election Day so Internet voting could only be offered during a seven-day advance polling period which ended the Friday before the Monday election. We expect that as Internet voting catches on, the guidelines will be amended to allow all voter lists to be managed and reconciled electronically.

Defining the Task

Delvinia was hired to deliver Markham’s 2003 Voter Outreach Campaign. Our task was clear: Encourage people to vote, let them know they can do so online for a seven-day period before Election Day and then track what they do.

But our task was not simple. We had to communicate with everyone of voting age in Markham — 158,000 people from 18 to 100 years of age, about half of whom were first — or second-generation immigrants. While we had no firm data, the town clerk’s office believed many of these “new Canadians” thought voting was too complicated and not worth the bother.

Designing the Task

Key Messages

“Make voting easy to understand” — that was the mission of Delvinia’s Steve Mast, vice president and managing director of interactive marketing, and Rachel Bandura, interactive marketing specialist and Markham project’s team leader. Under Mast’s strategic direction, Bandura and our Delvinia team began the brainstorming process by pretending we were Markham citizens who had never voted. Bandura and a creative team of four Web designer-architects, a graphic designer and a copywriter flip-charted everything a voter needed to understand and do in order to cast a ballot. We numbered all the steps and directions, and then found a way to group the information into broad categories. This eventually turned into the slogan: “Voting is as easy as 1-2-3.” Just Register, Choose and Vote. The graphic treatment reinforced the simplicity of the voting process by showing a large numeral knocked out of a block of vivid color. (See Figure A)

Step 2, Choose, focused on the second key message: You can choose to vote “online or in line.” Since the 2003 election marked the first time Markham had invested in a sophisticated integrated marketing communications campaign, we had the freedom to create an identity for the election materials that would be strong enough to brand future municipal elections as well. It was the sort of luxury marketers dream about!

Once Bandura and the team had a feel for the creative direction that would engage the electorate, Mast established detailed metrics to monitor the initiative’s progress. Campaign design and project management practices were

tracked against broad metrics categories including time, cost and human factors.

The Communications Mix

Our tactical plan had two objectives: Raise awareness and provide information about how to vote online. In the first instance, Delvinia employed a range of tactics. We conducted traditional advertising and media relations campaigns with community newspapers and local radio and TV. We also used both mainstream English media and ethnic media — those outlets catering specifically to the South Asian and Chinese populations, often in their own languages.

In addition, we 1-2-3’d everything in Markham, from the required voter registration cards to paraphernalia produced specifically for the campaign, including refrigerator magnets, letterhead, postcards mailed to all households, bookmarks, electronic bulletin boards, signs on town maintenance vehicles and posters hung in gathering places, such as libraries and community centers.

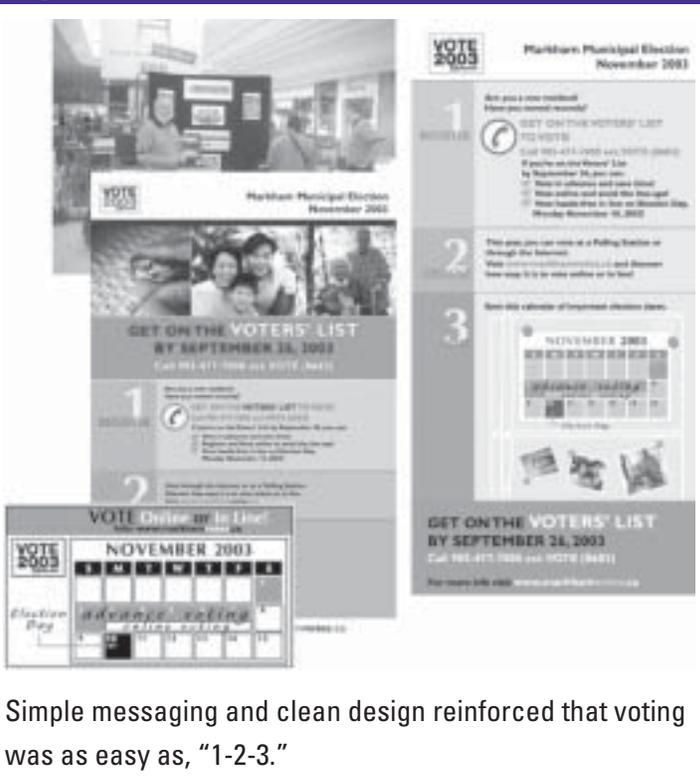
The Delvinia team also set up interactive kiosks in a major regional shopping mall and in

a mall that catered specifically to the Asian community. At these kiosks the public could try out the voter information Web site and a simulation of the online voting system.

We also used voicemail broadcast technology to send messages to all customers whose landline telephones were connected to Bell Canada’s voicemail network, reaching about 50,000, or 32 percent, of the 158,000 residents with voicemail messages.

All communication channels referred voters to the centerpiece of our campaign: a Web site with more detailed information about the 1-2-3’s of voting. Voters accessed the

Figure A



Interactive Guide, as it was called, through the town’s main election Web site, www.markhamvotes.ca. Local community groups, including local business and community online directories, also gave us permission to set up links to the *Interactive Guide* on their Web sites. (See Figure B)

The election Web site operated from September 8 to November 10, 2003. During that time, the site received more than 19,000 registered visits. From a user survey on the site we were able to collect valuable data about the citizens’ education and employment demographics, preferred methods for receiving information from the town government, level of computer knowledge and type of computer equipment used. This information will help Markham design even more effective communications campaigns in the future. For the few citizens who needed to upgrade their software to include the latest Macromedia Flash plug-in to access the Web site or voting programs, the *Interactive Guide* offered step-by-step instructions on how to access and install system upgrades online.

The Canadian government saw the potential of the Internet for election communications and partially funded the development of the *Interactive Guide* and the market research program through an applied research grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage and CANARIE Inc., a non-profit government and private partnership advancing Internet technology in Canada. The Town of

Figure B

Twenty-three percent of in-person voters and 28 percent of online voters visited the *Interactive Guide* Web site.

Markham paid for the non-electronic communications tactics used in the marketing campaign.

**The Vote Is In
Internet Works**

While the political winners were not much of a surprise — Mayor Don Cousens returned with 80 percent of the vote — the results of the Internet vote exceeded expectations. There was a 300 percent increase in advance poll turnout, and 70 percent of advance voters cast their votes online. Internet voters represented 17 percent of all voters in the election. (See Table Two)

**Table Two
Voter Statistics**

	Election 2000	Election 2003
Number of registered voters BEFORE registration deadline	135,724	157,810
Total number of registered voters	135,786	158,412
Number of votes cast at advance polls	3,135	10,543
Number of votes cast at online advance poll	--	7,210
Number of votes cast on Election Day in person	35,881	31,665
Total number of votes	39,016	42,198

Source: Clerk’s Office, Town of Markham

The impact of Internet voting is clear from the results of the 2003 election, where about 300 percent more people voted in advance of Election Day than had in 2000.

Table Three
Popular Sources of Municipal Election Information

Communications Channel	% of total respondents who voted	
	In-person	Online
Information received in the mail	28	66
Community newspaper	38	56
Posters	40	36
Candidates	21	22
Interactive Guide (Web site)	--	12
Broadcast voicemail message	3	6
Media/TV/radio	44	4
Magazine	1	3
Someone told me/from someone I know	7	2
Other Web site	1	1
Other	--	9
None of the above	--	1

Source: Delvinia Interactive

*Sample size for in-person survey was 994 voters. Sample size for the online survey was 3,655 voters.

The integrated marketing communications campaign reached virtually all Markham’s voters. The *Interactive Guide* was visited by 23 percent of in-person voters and 28 percent of online voters.

The Apathy Antidote

Most gratifying of all to people who fear for the future of universal suffrage, Internet voting captured the interest of disinterested and young voters. Of the 25 percent of Internet voters who had not voted in the last election, half of them were between 18 and 34 years of age. The even better news is that 93 percent of them said that they are likely to vote again online in the future. And there was more good news from our in-person exit poll surveys: 70 percent of those who voted in person said they would consider voting online in the next municipal election.

The integrated marketing communications campaign strategy — simple key messages tailored to individual targets and graphics repeated in all media to drive voters to the Web site for more detailed information — was, in the words of Mayor Cousens, “An over-the-top success.”

He added, “Delvinia’s communications campaign

reached virtually everyone in Markham. By offering the *Interactive Guide* on the town’s Web site and the opportunity to vote online for advance polls, I think we gave our citizens absolutely the best in customer service.”

IMC Surprises

As integrated marketing communications practitioners, we do our research, know our audience, build a plan and manage the details. And yet, we’re often surprised by something we learn in the analysis at the back-end of a project. We assumed — and wouldn’t you? — that the people who were technologically savvy enough to vote online would have learned about the online option online or at least through broadcast media. Our exit survey data reveals, however, that most online voters found out about the electronic option from direct mail or community newspapers. Therefore, one of our take-aways is to involve as many media channels as possible in an IMC campaign to reach voters. (See Table Three)

Should You Try This at Home?

Based on the Markham experience, we feel confident in recommending Internet voting for communities with

Internet Raises the Bar on Exit Survey Response Rates

Delvinia asked market research firm Millward Brown to help collect field data for the in-person exit surveys and analyze the survey data for in-person and online surveys. Millward Brown advised that a representative sample would require a minimum target of 300 participants for each survey instrument.

The target was well exceeded both in-person and online. The nine interviewers at polling stations collected 994 complete surveys. The process required that an interviewer with a questionnaire intercept a voter as he or she left the polling station. As always, in-person surveying is labor-intensive and slow.

However, online surveying is something quite different. An incredible 50 percent of all Internet voters voluntarily chose to answer the "five- to seven-minute exit survey," far exceeding our target.

populations of up to half a million and Internet penetration of at least 50 percent. That size community represents the critical mass needed to support the cost of a blanket integrated marketing communications campaign, yet is still a manageable size to coordinate logistics. The Internet penetration point is almost moot these days, as access rates nudge to 70 and 80 percent in the United States and Canada, respectively.

Word of Markham's success is spreading. Delvinia's Internet Voting Report, which can be found at www.delvinia.com/egov.html and summarizes our research findings, has been downloaded more than 1,000 times by organizations across Canada and around the world. And based on Markham's success, city councils in several jurisdictions are considering Internet voting for the 2005 and 2006 elections.

Markham officials have been asked to speak at conferences in Canada, the United States and internationally to share their experience. The municipality was also awarded the E.A. Danby Award from the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) in recognition of their outstanding achievement in fostering administrative excellence in local government.

The courage and vision Markham showed in pioneering Internet voting is already shaping the future of democracy.

Adam Froman is president and managing director of applied research at Delvinia Interactive, one of the leading digital agencies in Canada. Delvinia designs and manages interactive marketing communications and research projects for a range of Canadian businesses, including RBC Royal Bank, AOL Canada, Harlequin Enterprises, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Foster Parents Plan. Adam has pioneered the development of Canada's interactive industry. He testified before the 1998 Canadian Radio and Television Commission New Media Hearings and regularly advises all levels of government. He has led research initiatives to validate the communications potential of new media. He is past-president of the Interactive Multimedia Arts & Technologies Association and also sits on the board of directors of the Canadian Independent Film & Video Fund and on the e-marketing and research councils for the Canadian Marketing Association. Adam is a licensed professional engineer with a Bachelor of Science from the University of Toronto and a Master of business administration from the Schulich School of Business at York University. Adam can be reached at Delvinia Interactive, 44 Victoria Street, Suite 1910, Toronto, Ontario, M5C 1Y2, Phone (416) 364-1455, www.delvina.com.