

Obama administration can use mobile to shape healthcare debate

By [Giselle Tsirulnik](#)

August 21, 2009



Barack Obama is the 44th president of the United States

The Obama administration used traditional marketing channels such as the Internet, email, events, print, telemarketing, outdoor, television, radio, public relations and door-to-door to propel Barack Obama to the American presidency. But it is mobile that brought the candidate closer to the people.

That said, some mobile marketers are truly perplexed as to why the White House is not using mobile to shape the healthcare debate. The healthcare debate has truly been impassioned and outraging many Americans, depending on party affiliations.

The reason the healthcare bill has not been sold to many Americans is because they do not believe that healthcare is a civil right. Surveys show that about 87 percent of Americans who have health insurance do not see it in their best interest to ensure that the uninsured become insured.

Mobile Marketer's **Giselle Tsirulnik, Dan Butcher, Jordan Crook and Chris Harnick** reached out to mobile industry experts and asked one question: "How can the Obama administration use mobile to shape the healthcare debate?"

Here's what the mobile executives had to say:

Shira Simmonds, president of [Ping Mobile](#), Englewood Cliffs, NJ

As previously demonstrated by President Obama, the mobile channel can be an effective and stimulating method of creating buzz among voters and disseminating important information throughout the country.

In fact, unlike traditional media channels, mobile is the only direct communication tool available between the president and the citizens of the United States. In a matter of seconds, the president can communicate a vital piece of information to the over 260 million U.S. mobile subscribers - something traditional media cannot achieve.

The mobile device can be used as a strategic political tool and could allow President Obama to collect information directly from the hands of the U.S. people, in order to shape his healthcare plan and important legislature.

Val Christopherson, president of [Global Results Communications](#), Irvine, CA
Mobile phones are all about instant, personalized, relevant information.

That makes them an ideal way for the Obama administration to get information out to supporters, journalists and bloggers immediately, instead of hours or even days later, when they're buried at the bottom of their PC's email inbox.

That immediacy is particularly important for the healthcare debate because both the legislation and rumors are continually evolving, and wireless is a way to set the record straight in real time.

Dave Everett, vice president and partner at [Kaogga](#), Newton, MA

President Obama knows how to create drama and impact with text.

Remember, he announced his candidacy to about 2 million followers via text.

What he clearly needs to do now is mobilize his supporters, and those in favor of his vast new federal initiative, to counterpunch against the town-hallers, those angry crowds intimidating congressmen and senators.

He could send out geographically tailored texts telling his supporters exactly how to reach their own elected officials to express their personal support for this legislation before it's totally eviscerated by the Republicans and Blue Dog Democrats.

Text is another way to reach young professionals - 25-35-year-olds - who may not be following the constantly changing healthcare story and frankly may not quite understand it either. Weekly updates with bullet point highlights could be a huge benefit in this battle.

David Wachs, president of [Cellit](#), Chicago

The healthcare debate is being clouded by the vocal right loudly protesting during healthcare town halls and discussions.

What is needed is a solution that allows all constituents to be heard, not just the grandstanders. Using mobile, forums can be created that allow Americans to "text in" or otherwise provide their opinion on healthcare options, and even polling/mock voting opportunities for Obama's solutions.

Adam Kerr, vice president of North America at [Bango](#), New York

Mobile provides the only nation-wide platform that enables every American citizen to actively contribute to the healthcare debate.

Some of the most important groups of people that Obama is targeting through these healthcare reforms have little or no access to politicians directly, to a personal computer and are both disconnected and disenfranchised.

But over 250 million Americans today can have their say through their mobile phone.

Mobile has been used with great effect in other markets to enhance healthcare information and access to the more vulnerable, such as low-income groups and the elderly.

The government-backed National Health Service in Britain uses mobile communications extensively to deliver information and services and to ensure all sectors of society can provide input on healthcare improvements.

Eric Harber, president and chief operating officer of [HipCricket](#), Kirkland, WA

President Obama and his team were masterful in using mobile during the campaign to inform and engage Americans. Approximately 3 million opted-in to stay in touch.

A year later, mobile is absent as the White House offers Americans information primarily through the Web and email.

With such an important debate, this is an incomplete and antiquated solution. Mobile brings immediacy and produces involvement and action, exactly what the president and those around him are seeking from the American people especially as it relates to this important issue.

Jason Spero, vice president and managing director of North America, [AdMob](#), San Mateo, CA

By using social media tools like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), the Obama administration has taken the first step to engaging with people in a new way.

With the rapid growth of smartphones in the U.S., mobile has now become a critical part of engaging the public in an interactive way.

This is a huge opportunity for the administration to share information via mobile sites and applications, and to utilize mobile polls as an effective way to gauge public opinion.

David Rippetoe, senior product manager, [Neighborhood America](#), Naples, FL

To answer your question on how mobile can be used to shape the healthcare debate, I would suggest an integrated approach that not only informs the public of what the plan is about but also engages the public's feedback and opinion of how this affects them.

To do this I would utilize all aspects of mobile technology along with traditional media and social media.

For instance I suggest adding an SMS call-to-action in all the media outlets that they currently use to promote the plan such as TV, radio, print, et cetera as well as social media tools like Facebook, Twitter and MySpace.

The end-user - consumer - texts-in to receive subscription alerts on the status of the plan, town-hall meeting locations, and a link to a mobile Web site where they can get more detailed content on the issue. I would also buy banner ads on the traditional Web and mobile ad networks driving the consumer to the official healthcare reform site or a mobile version of the site.

Another way to engage the public is to utilize an integrated mobile/social media strategy. This could be an ideal elevator such as Neighborhood America's REVEAL which is what [Microsoft](#) uses in the public sector.

I believe our current administration could significantly benefit by making better use of these technologies to keep the public informed, similar to their outstanding efforts during the election period.

Matt Sternberg, president of Outlaw Critter Consulting, New York

While the Obama team has been applauded for its groundbreaking use of mobile and the Internet, I do believe that they could be utilizing both, particularly mobile, to help educate the public regarding the many contentious topics in the healthcare debate.

Mobile messaging may be the most personal means of electronically communicating with people and thus is a perfect medium to directly dispel myths, concisely and clearly explain complicated points and even poll engaged citizens on their thoughts.

I sincerely hope that both democrats and republicans use the mobile tools available to them to help the citizens of the U.S. understand and get involved with this truly vital debate.

Patrick Collins, president of [5th Finger](#), New York

Obama's challenge with mobile is the same as for many marketers.

Generating interest in the initial campaign can generate huge follow on opportunities, but maintaining a dialogue with a consumer which they perceive is valuable can get tough pretty quickly. And yet, this is where brand loyalty is cemented and brand zealots are born. Consumers demand some form of value in a dialogue.

During the presidential election the value was really worthwhile: "change," now continued investment is required to continue to provide a valuable exchange with the consumer.

Obama has a significant database of voters which he can communicate with, but he needs to move from the existing political dialogue and move to engaging us in supporting his policies, by doing things such as:

- Devise a true 1-to-1 dialogue with the people, which can help dilute the power of lobbyists and provide some tangible steps that help people know what action to take.
- Send a viral text message which loyalists can pass on to friends and relatives containing a link to a video which they can watch to hear Obama's side of the debate. This could make it into the hands of tens of millions of people if the viral effect came into full force.
- Send a blast-out SMS with a link to a really useful and informative wap site, sharing Obama's recommendation on the health debate. The WAP site could have a calculator allowing people to see how they or their family members would be affected by the proposed changes.
- Provide an iPhone application calculator which does the same and calculates the healthcare costs under the different plans being considered.

The goal is to create the crucial conversations not just between Obama and voters, but between loyalists and their friends, colleagues and families, where some real value and information is exchanged in both directions. After all one-to-one is the promised power of mobile, right?

Paran Johar, chief marketing officer of [Jumtap](#), New York

The Obama campaign already demonstrated the power and reach of mobile in creative and innovative ways.

As a highly personal medium, people tend to respond, especially when it concerns something relevant, timely and important.

Healthcare is a hotly contested debate and the Obama administration could easily use mobile to send messages, survey and solicit input.

Mobile advertising could also be a powerful way to increase awareness and influence sentiment on the issues.

Chrissy Faessen, spokeswoman at [Rock the Vote](#), New York

Mobile is a key peer-to-peer communication tool for young people.

In regard to healthcare reform, young people have the most to lose - or gain - from healthcare reform, as they are the most uninsured age group and often can't afford coverage.

The content and calls to action must be relevant to young people - provide updates and education, and give them simple ways to participate in the process.

Check out our healthcare pledge and SMS widget here:

<http://www.rockthevote.com/issues/issue-actions/demand-health-care.html>

Specifically for healthcare the administration could consider:

- Receiving questions about healthcare via text
- Using mobile as a broadcast mechanism alerting people to what's happening with the latest legislation
- Using SMS messages to drive people to local town forums
- Creating a "call your senator" advocacy tool to get people to call their local representatives in support/opposition of the bill

Nick Macilveen, senior director of strategic corporate development and industry relations, [OpenMarket](#), Seattle

Text messaging and mobile applications can dramatically increase the interactivity of any public relations plan.

With the power to send instant information alerts or to take questions by text at town hall meetings, engaging the public in the mobile medium fosters debate and a host of awareness-building activities that efficiently brings light to an otherwise murky topic.

Text messaging offers staggering reach for relatively low cost. It's instant, always on and remains proximate to constituents.

Frankly, I'm surprised more political organizations, candidates and civil servants aren't engaging voters more with wireless when brands have seen such great results.

Mobile is transitioning from an era of one-off experiments to fully integrated programs that drive awareness, influence opinions and create action.

The mobile channel not only gives the administration the ability to disseminate information directly to the public, but it's a way to encourage participation in the debate. This is clearly a channel that brands have seen great value in.

Enterprises, financial institutions, and other organizations are learning to harness the power of mobile. Its immediacy and relevancy to both the individual and the masses are making mobile the medium of choice for skilled communicators.

Potential goals of Obama wireless healthcare debate program

- Disseminate information directly to public (without relying on media outlets to filter/translate)
- Receive real-time feedback from the public
- Encourage public participation in debate
- Increase touch points with public during debate process
- Obtain buy-in from public
- Enhance government's relationship with public by allowing them to participate in the process (return to "government by the people for the people" in the communication age)

Potential healthcare debate use cases in mobile

Broadcast/information alerts via text messaging

- General information and education
- Position points
- Alerts about debate
- Immediate counterpoints to opposing argument (both sides of debate can do this)
- Daily Q&A
- Calls to action ("Call your senator/congressperson")
- Updates for milestones and accomplishments (vote results and key dates)
- Thought of the day

- Healthcare stats (“Did you know...?”)

Opinion polls via text messaging, WAP and applications

- Opinion polls and results sent to public
- Specific questions regarding discussion topic allows government to better gauge true public opinion

Interactive messaging

- Text your question to a common short code
- Social networking-style discussion groups based on topic interest (limit participation of each group to fewer than 20 people)
- Extension
- Town hall debates can be facilitated by using text messaging to ask questions of politicians

Wireless applications and mobile Web: More in-depth information available

- Leverage the Obama team’s experience in building iPhone applications and connecting power users with their own contacts in key states or constituency groups
- Offer searchable information about the current plan
- Social-networking-style application will encourage debate for people on the go

Rana Sobhany, cofounder and vice president of marketing, [Medialets](#), New York.

One of the most successful examples of a mobile campaign executed in politics was Barack Obama's nomination of Joe Biden as his vice presidential running mate via text message. Obama's team gathered millions of mobile phone numbers and used SMS to broadcast the announcement. It is unclear as to why Obama's team did not utilize this same mobile component for the GOTV aspect of the campaign in order to mobilize voters on election day. Regardless, Obama's administration is clearly the most mobile-savvy group of marketers in politics, and it would be wise to take leverage this opportunity to poll constituents directly about their thoughts on healthcare in the U.S.

I previously worked in politics on the campaign and lobbying side.