

Politics on the Internet

Hillary's housewarming warms website

By Jamal Ahmed Anjum

POLITICAL website Evote.com is taking a stab at the first lady with an online parody lampooning newly elected Senator Hillary Clinton's alleged taste for expensive gifts.

Peter Markel, Evote's senior news producer, has been quoted in the media as having said that the idea cropped up to hold a mock fund-raiser for Hillary, dubbed HillaryAid 2001, after she reportedly purchased a home for \$2.85 million and registered for housewarming gifts at registries in Washington and New York.

The website has experienced a revival of fortunes in the wake of the latest gimmick, not just in terms of 'hits', but also in terms of coverage in the print media and the word of mouth.

"Hillary finds herself short of pocket money to furnish" her home, says the website. "Evote.com ... is offering you the opportunity to be a small cog in the great wheel that is Hillary Clinton's new career."

Hillary fans can send a housewarming gift for her new pad by logging onto Evote's site and taking a look at some of their quirky gift selections, such as lawn flamingos or Tasmanian devil bath mats to decorate all their bathrooms. Evote has a handy-dandy search box if pink flamingos just aren't housewarming enough. The site also provides a link to Amazon.com, which has a pre-existing marketing relationship with Evote.

The political website warns donors not to buy anything that

have been a first lady ... So she is a target."

The big way in which US politics has taken to technology also came to fore in the recent US presidential elections. As the election day approached and the race between Al Gore and George W. Bush remained neck and neck, get-out-the-vote email campaigns got all heated up.

Stung by so-called spam scandals in the past, candidate supporters were no longer sending bulk email messages in attempts to sway voters. Instead, they were getting friends to do it for them. In an eleventh-hour push, Democratic Party staff members said some 30 million people

Trends

were sending emails on Gore's behalf between. The mail seeking volunteers read: "We ask for only a few hours of your time each day for the next six days ... Here is what you can do ... Forward this email to everyone in your address book — and ask them to help get out the vote for Al Gore!"

For its part, the Republican National Committee accumulated an email list of more than 80,000 addresses of party faithfuls. They used that core community to forward out emails to friends and family.

Taking a cue from an age-old advertising technique known as viral marketing, these supporters were canvassing their cyberspace neighbourhoods, getting out the vote message. As victory

costs more than \$200, which is the limit that individuals or organizations can contribute to an elected official. "It is tongue-in-cheek and poking fun at" Hillary's gift registry, Markel said in one of the several interviews he has given in recent times.

"We are highlighting what is a pretty interesting sort of campaign fundraising scheme ... obviously if you are a Clinton-hater, you hopefully will get a chuckle out of this (website), and if you are a Clinton supporter, you will potentially have a vehicle to show your support."

He said that Evote believes it is also a commentary on campaign finance reform in which the gift registry is Hillary's "clever" way to circumvent the Senate rules regarding contributions to sitting senators. "Whatever rules you put together, someone can figure out a way to get around them," Markel said. "And this is a heck of a way to get around them."

Not everyone has been able to see the funny side of the deal, however. Sonia Arrison, director of the Centre for Freedom and Technology at the San Francisco-based Pacific Research Institute, for instance, says she is not surprised to see someone take a "cheap shot" at Hillary on the Web. "She is the first senator to

in the election was known to be hanging by a thread, the pressure was that much more, for every one knew even a few extra supporters could decide the winner.

Whether the emails had any practical impact on the result is not yet known or even assessed. But politicians, at least in the US — have come a long way in understanding the ins and outs of stumping on the Net. Few now resort to spamming, for example, a reviled marketing technique that targets thousands of random email addresses with unwanted messages. Such methods were quickly proven ineffective as political campaign tools.

Georgia state Senator Steve Langford, a Democrat who ran for governor in 1998, learned his lesson the hard way. He sent bulk unsolicited emails to some 500 voters and the next day was forced to apologize after receiving dozens of angry complaints.

Nonetheless, the power of email did not go unnoticed when in 1998 Jesse Ventura was elected Minnesota governor as a third-party candidate. He used email to organize his campaign.

Marketing experts agree that the key to effective email campaigns is reaching the appropriate audience. And the politicians did just that.

Targeting is crucial. To make the emails pay off, you have to fine-tune the formula to get the right audience. Once you do that, you can email the message all day long. Viral campaigns are supposed to achieve that by putting friends in touch with friends who share the same political views. The goal is not necessarily to persuade someone to vote a different way, but simply to motivate a candidate's supporters to hit the polls.

Voter apathy is notorious in US politics; even the presidential election can be expected to draw only about half of all qualified voters. A small boost could be enough to tilt the balance in the campaign.

The last-minute email marketing pushes, however, stood in stark contrast to the candidates' limited use of the web as an advertising platform. Neither party spent significantly on banner ads since the party conventions were held months ago, according to a recent report by research company Jupiter Media Metrix. □