

Beyond Red and Blue:

Insights into the Design of Presidential Candidate Websites

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CATALYSTGROUP

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Introduction

As the 2008 Presidential election approaches, much is being made of the increasing importance of the Internet as a communication channel between the candidates and their supporters, donors, and undecided voters. The prevailing wisdom at the moment (and the focus of much of the press coverage on this topic) is that the Obama campaign is doing a better job of leveraging the Internet to reach large numbers of people who might be interested in donating money to the campaign and participating in grassroots campaign activities. The Obama website is, at least, attracting more press attention. In just the past month, media mentions of "barackobama.com" outnumber "johnmccain.com" 431 to 80.¹ But does this prevailing wisdom actual reflect the real-world impressions of potential voters?

When we at Catalyst Group tested the two candidate sites against each other, one of the surprising results was that most people found the McCain site easier to use than the Obama site once they had spent time on both. This was the case, even though virtually all the test participants *initially* responded much more positively to the Obama site's design. Does this result suggest that visual flair and ease-of-use are not totally compatible? Does achieving some laudable goals (such as better usability or navigation) sometimes work against or "crowd-out" other important branding or design goals? It's a common debate in the web design field – essentially whether aesthetics trump function or vice versa. The question has particular poignancy in the case of political websites that need to be *both* informative regarding a candidate and his / her positions *and* reflective of the candidate's "brand."

The results of our research indicated that aesthetics play an important role in users' evaluation of a candidate's site, but that ease-of-use may ultimately carry the day as the quality that people value most.

Methodology

As user-centered design and usability practitioners, we at Catalyst are trained to look beyond the surface of a site's design and ask whether the design actually satisfies the core user and business objectives that it is intended to address. Given the apparent consensus (at least in the media) that the Obama site was far superior to the McCain site, we wanted to find out for ourselves whether one site was actually more *successful* from a design perspective than the other. So, we arranged a comparative Usability and Eye Tracking study to learn more about how voters would respond to the two sites. We conducted

¹ Source: Google News

the testing at our Usability and Eye Tracking Lab in New York, using the same proven research methodology that we use for all of our client engagements.

We recruited 15 “undecided” voters with a mixture of demographic characteristics and an even split of Republican / Democrat voting history.² Test Participants were interviewed, one at a time, according to a pre-determined script. However, spontaneous reactions and diversions from the core tasks were encouraged in order to capture a wide range of user feedback. The script focused on a small set of core site tasks on both sites (the order of presentation of the sites was alternated in order to avoid any order bias). The site tasks were:

- Initial **Homepage** and overall site design impressions
- Locate the Candidates’ **biographical information**
- Find the details of the **Candidates’ tax plans**
- Make a **campaign donation**
- Get the latest **campaign news**
- Sign up for future campaign **news via email**
- Locate an event where the candidate will be **appearing in-person**
- **Volunteer / get involved** with the campaign

Finally, we captured and analyzed participant Eye Tracking data during participants’ initial explorations of the two candidate homepages.

Note: The following images indicate the key areas and functions on both sites that are referenced in this report.

² Participants are referred to in this report as “Republicans” or “Democrats” based on their voting history.

The image shows a screenshot of the BarackObama.com homepage. At the top, there is a banner with Barack Obama's face and the text "OBAMA'08" and "I'M ASKING YOU TO BELIEVE. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington ... I'm asking you to believe in yours." To the right of the banner is a "GET INVOLVED" section with a "SIGN UP FOR EMAIL UPDATES" form containing fields for "Email Address" and "Zip Code", and a "SIGN UP" button. Below the banner is a navigation menu with links for "LEARN", "ISSUES", "MEDIA", "ACTION", "PEOPLE", "STATES", "BLOG", and "STORE", along with a red "DONATE NOW" button. The main content area features a large "UNITE for CHANGE" banner for a "SATURDAY + JUNE 28TH" event, with a "LEARN MORE" button. To the right of the banner is a "July 3" section with links to "Declare Your Independence", "Unite for Change", "AFL-CIO Endorsement", "New Energy for America", "Obama Fellows", and "Thank you Senator Clinton". Below the banner is an "OBAMA BLOG" section with a featured article "Barack In Fargo, North Dakota" dated "JULY 3, 2008" and a list of "OTHER STORIES" from July 3, 2008. To the right of the blog is a "BARACKTV" section with a "Play Video" button and a "VIEW MORE" link. Below the blog is an "OBAMA NEWS" section with a featured article "Obama, Clinton appeal together for party unity" dated "JUNE 27, 2008" and a list of "OTHER NEWS" from July 2 and July 1, 2008. To the right of the news is a "WELCOME HILLARY SUPPORTERS" section with a "GET INVOLVED" button and a "KNOW the FACTS" section with a "TAKE ACTION NOW" button. Callout boxes on the left side of the page point to the "LEARN" link, the "ISSUES" link, and the "UNITE for CHANGE" banner. Callout boxes on the right side point to the "DONATE NOW" button and the "Volunteer" link in the "MAKE A DIFFERENCE" section.

BarackObama.com Homepage



About
Dropdown

Issues
Dropdown

Content
"Flipper"

Contribute
Link

Join
Link

JohnMcCain.com Homepage

Results Summary

Barack Obama's site made a much better first impression than John McCain's site, mainly due to the Obama site's visual design (particularly the homepage). Participants also immediately felt that the Obama site was more "youthful" and "modern" than McCain's site, which was deemed too "boxy," dark and crowded. Eye Tracking data further showed that users were confused by the visual appearance and layout of the McCain homepage. By contrast, Eye Tracking on the Obama homepage demonstrated that the test participants were likely to quickly focus on the same high-priority functions, such as the Issues menu, the main content "Flipper" and the Make a Difference functions.

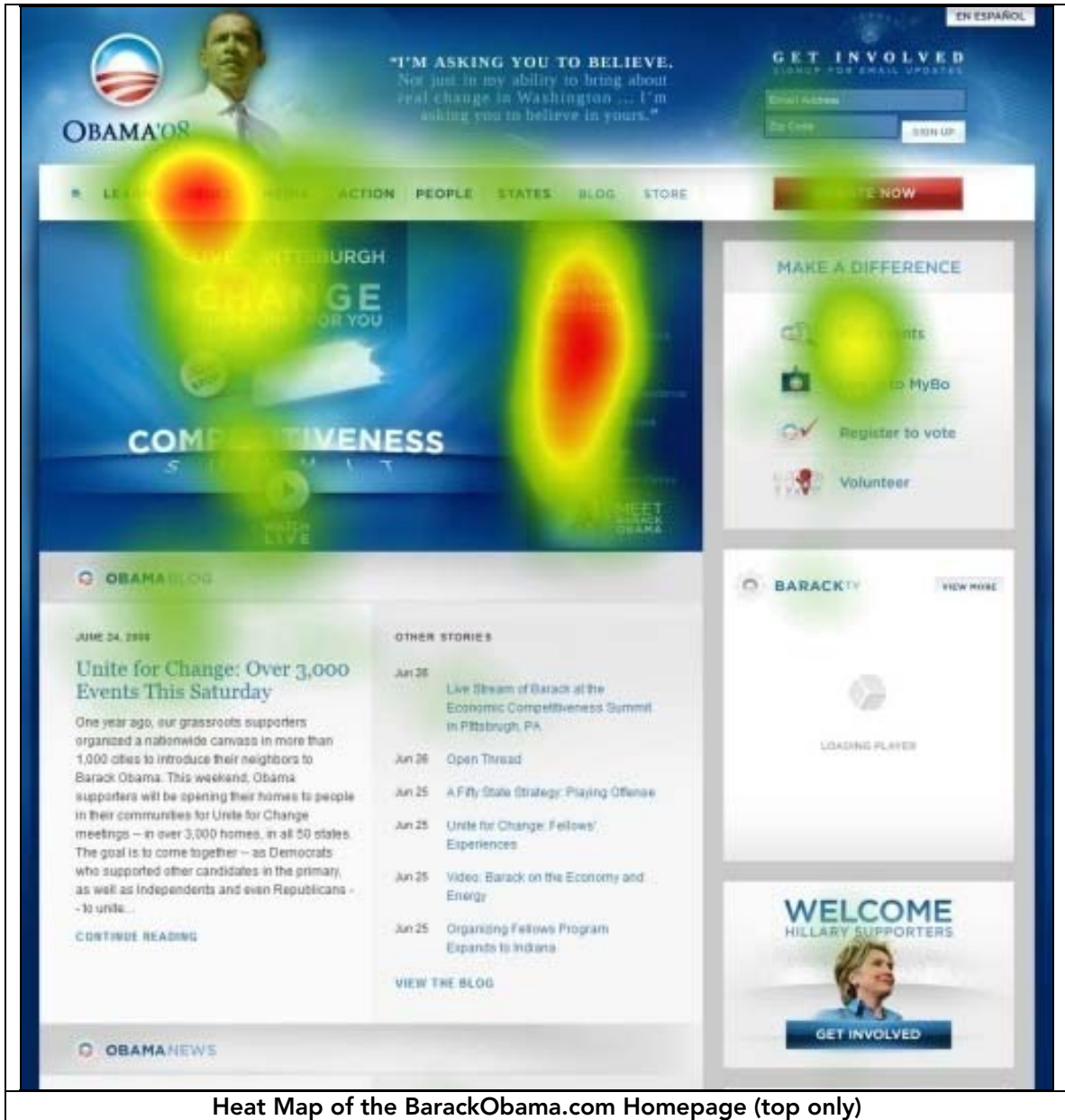
However, once test participants moved past their initial reactions to the two sites, they began to "warm up" to the McCain site – particularly the more straightforward navigation and clear labeling. When asked to accomplish a variety of core site tasks, most users found the tasks much easier to complete on the McCain site.

In the end, a clear majority of users preferred McCain's site to Obama's. Of the 15 users tested, 11 (5 Democrats, 6 Republicans) favored John McCain's site while 4 favored Barack Obama's (2 Democrats, 2 Republicans).

Homepage Comparisons

At first glance, several users (equally Democratic and Republican voters) responded favorably to Barack Obama's Homepage, especially its visual design. The light blue "warm" colors, abundant use of videos, animation, and interactive modules (especially the 'Social Networking' functions) gave users the impression that Obama's site was more "youthful" and "modern" than John McCain's. In fact, initial impressions of the McCain site were generally less positive overall than Obama's. Users said that they were not particularly impressed by the visual presentation of John McCain's Homepage, which seemed more "antiquated" due to its dark colors and "boxed off" areas. Interestingly, though, these same users considered the McCain site to have a more "presidential" appearance – as if they perceived an inconsistency between a more polished, youthful presentation and one that is appropriately serious and presidential.

The Eye Tracking "Heat Maps" of the two homepages reveal two very different patterns of attention. These graphics aggregate the relative attention of all the tested users. Areas in red indicate portions of the page that received the highest visual attention relative to other page areas.





Heat Map of the JohnMcCain.com Homepage

What the Heat Maps reveal quite starkly is that, when asked to browse around the page with no specific task in mind, users on the Obama homepage gravitated towards a select few high priority elements (the Learn dropdown, the Issues dropdown, the “flipper,” and the Make a Difference functions) and virtually ignored the rest of the page – including a very large amount of content and functionality below the fold. By contrast, users seemed to explore almost all the areas of the McCain site homepage and, as a group, exhibited less consensus on which areas – outside the Issues button in the main navigation – held the most interest.

The Heat Mapping results are consistent with the users’ stated initial impressions of the two sites. The more sophisticated design of the Obama site effectively guided user attention towards the high priority site functions, indicated by the attention hotspots in the above image. The design of the McCain site, which is flatter and more crowded with text and images, provides users with few visual cues to help them understand where they should focus their attention. The result is a pattern of attention that is diffuse and uncertain.

Additional Design Observations

When the test participants were asked to explore the site Homepages more thoroughly, they identified several other interesting differences between the candidates’ approaches. These included:

- Several users found volunteering and getting involved in the candidate’s campaign easier on Barack Obama’s Homepage than on John McCain’s.
- A few users thought the font size of the body text was too small on Barack Obama’s Homepage. In contrast, users responded favorably to the text size on John McCain’s site.
- Users were mixed with regard to how they felt about the color scheme on Barack Obama’s Homepage. While some liked the abundant use of bright blue colors, others found it excessive and thought it distracted from the content on the page. Users were more unanimous about the color scheme of McCain’s Homepage; they did not respond favorably to the use of “dark colors.”
- The three rotating images located on the left-side of the McCain site Homepage distracted several users. Furthermore, not all understood how this area was supposed to function.
- Users generally did not like seeing the merchandise options or the prevalent “Donate Now” and “Contribute” buttons on the Obama site

without first having a chance to learn about a candidate. A few users responded negatively to similar promotional areas on *both* Homepages.

- Users for the most part were not interested in the “interactive” modules (i.e., My.BarackObama, Make A Difference, Get Involved). They mentioned that unless they were “die-hard fans” of the candidate, they would not really use them.

Ultimately, users’ opinions were about evenly divided when asked which of the two candidate Homepages they preferred. Of those asked, 6 (3 Democrats, 3 Republicans) favored Barack Obama’s Homepage while 7 (3 Democrats, 4 Republicans) sided with John McCain’s.

Core Site Tasks

As discussed above, initial impressions of the Obama site were more favorable than those of the McCain site. However, once they were asked to find different types of information (and attempted to do so), their enthusiasm tended to wane. In general, users had more difficulty navigating the Obama site to accomplish the tasks. McCain’s site, on the other hand, tended to have the reverse effect. Despite most users mentioning that it looked much more “presidential” than Barack Obama’s Homepage, users at first glance (roughly an equal number of Democratic and Republican voters) were not as impressed by its visual presentation. But after using the site a bit longer, they tended to warm up to it since finding relevant information seemed easier.

Although most thought Barack Obama’s site had greater visual appeal, they found John McCain’s site easier to navigate and ultimately this was the deciding factor for why they deemed the McCain’s site to be the better of the two. This impression was based on their experience with the following website tasks:

Task #1 – Find Biographical Information about the candidate

Although all users (7 Democrats, 8 Republicans) were able to find Barack Obama’s ‘Biography,’ they did not consider this to be an easy task. The section containing Obama’s biography, ‘Learn,’ confused users because they did not expect to find biographical information there. In contrast, almost all users (7 Democrats, 7 Republicans) were able to find John McCain’s ‘Biography’ page in the ‘About’ section and found this label to be more appropriate.

Regarding the actual Bio pages themselves, of the 11 users asked, many more favored John McCain’s (7 users - 3 Democrats, 4 Republicans) than Barack Obama’s (2 users - 1 Democrat, 1 Republican). 2 users thought that both pages were about equal (1 Democrat, 1 Republican).

Users responded particularly well to the photos on John McCain's 'Biography' page and were cited as the main reason for why they preferred McCain's page to Obama's. They found the variety of private and public service-related photos made the page more personal, something which most users valued. A couple users, however, did not respond favorably to the 'About Cindy' section and thought that the page should have focused solely on John McCain.

Task #2 – Find information about the candidate's tax plans

Users were asked where on the two sites they would be able to read out about the respective candidate's tax plans. Interestingly, neither candidate explicitly uses the term "taxes" in the 'Issues' navigation. As a result, users were generally confused regarding where they could find this information. On the Obama site several did not know to select the 'Economy' option listed under the 'Issues' section in the global navigation. Users were uncertain whether to look in 'Economy,' 'Fiscal,' or both sections. In order to make this distinction clearer, they would have preferred to have seen a designated 'Tax' option listed under the 'Issues' section. Still, some users managed to find the correct page (6 users - 3 Democrats, 3 Republicans).

Even though a 'Tax' option is also absent on John McCain's site, users were generally more successful finding this information than on Barack Obama's (8 users - 2 Democrats, 2 Republicans). Unlike Obama's site, the McCain site presents users with only one viable option: 'Economic Plan' listed under the 'Issues' section in the global navigation. As a result, users were more confident that they would find tax-related information in this section.

Several users thought that the topics discussed on Barack Obama's 'Economy' page were not thorough enough and that lengthier explanations would have been preferred. Additionally, a couple users thought that some topics were missing altogether. With John McCain's 'Economic Plan' page, users' opinions were equally divided. While some felt that it presented the right amount of information and more in-depth than Barack Obama's, others found it too short.

Of the 8 users asked in regards to which of the two candidate's 'Economy' pages they preferred, more favored John McCain's: 5 (2 Democrats, 3 Republicans) vs. 1 for Barack Obama's (1 Democrat). Additionally, 2 users thought that both pages were about equal (1 Democrat, 1 Republican).

Task #3 – Make a donation to the candidate's campaign

Not surprisingly, given the importance of this function and the prominence given to it, all users were able to successfully donate money to the candidate's campaign on both sites. On the Obama site, all users chose the prominent red 'Donate Now' button (15 users - 7 Democrats, 8 Republicans) and on the

McCain site, all users successfully completed this task by either choosing the 'Contribute' button in the global navigation or selecting the 'Contribute' option in the 'Get Involved' module (15 users - 7 Democrats, 8 Republicans).

The donation pages themselves are simply forms that collect the amount of the contribution, method of payment, etc. However, the Obama site automatically loads a video of the candidate discussing his perspective on campaign finance. Some users had mixed opinions about seeing this video on the 'Donate' page. While some liked that the video helped to reinforce their beliefs before going ahead and making a donation, others found it somewhat intrusive and off-putting. For those users who liked the idea of featuring a video, some mentioned that they would have preferred it to have been some kind of "thank you" message rather than a policy speech. Some users also disliked that the video started automatically -- they would have preferred to have had the option to start it when they wanted. John McCain's 'Contribute' page is a simple form and a "thank you" message. Users responded particularly well to this sentiment and added that this was something which they wished Barack Obama's page had contained.

Task #4 – Find the latest campaign news

When asked to find the latest campaign news, most users were not able to successfully complete this task on Obama's site. Instead of choosing one of the two possible correct paths, they chose 'Media' in the global navigation (i.e., they associated 'Media' with news). In contrast, all users were successful completing this task on John McCain's site and thought the process was easier (15 users - 7 Democrats, 8 Republicans). Most users found this section by clicking on 'News & Media' in the global navigation but a couple of users also accessed this page by clicking on the 'In The News' section on the Homepage.

Task #5 – Sign up for campaign news via email

Almost all users were able to locate the E-mail signup section in the top-right corner on Barack Obama's site (13 users - 5 Democrats, 8 Republicans). Several users, however, found it "hard to find" because of its placement on the page. On McCain's site, almost all users of those asked found the 'Join The Team' option in the 'Get Involved' module (12 users - 5 Democrats, 7 Republicans). Of the nine users asked in regards to which of the candidate's "latest news" task process they preferred, all sided with John McCain's (9 users - 4 Democrats, 5 Republicans).

Task #6 – Find an in-person candidate appearance

As far as completing this task was concerned, neither of the two sites satisfied users. On the Obama site, most users clicked on 'Find Events' in either the

'Make A Difference' or 'my.BarackObama' modules but they were not able to specifically target an event at which Obama would be present (this required further navigation to the Advanced Search link and the 'Official Event with Barack Obama' option in the textbox). Instead, on the 'Events' page, they entered in their zip code, bypassed the 'Go To Advanced Search' link, clicked on 'Find Events' and came to a local 'Events' page that featured a local map and a list of events in their area – without the ability to specify an in-person event.

With John McCain's site, all users (15 users - 7 Democrats, 8 Republicans) clicked on the 'Campaign Calendar' option listed under 'Events' in the global navigation. However, users needed to read through all upcoming events to attempt to learn if McCain would be attending in person. Ultimately, users were uncertain on either site whether the candidate would be present at the events they saw listed. In fact, users also did not get the impression that John McCain would be present at any of the events listed on his 'Campaign Calendar' page.

Task #7 – Get involved in the campaign

Of the two possible correct paths on Barack Obama's site, all users (15 users - 7 Democrats, 8 Republicans) were able to successfully complete this task; some choosing the 'Action' button in the global navigation while others selecting the 'Volunteer' option in the 'Make A Difference' module. Of the two possible correct paths on John McCain's site, almost all users (14 users - 7 Democrats, 7 Republicans) successfully completed this task; some choosing the 'Action' button in the global navigation while others selecting the 'Spread The Word' option in the 'Get Involved' module. However, most users found how to "get involved" easier on Barack Obama's site than on John McCain's.

Upon landing on each of the candidate's 'volunteer' pages, most users (12 users - 5 Democrats, 6 Republicans) preferred Barack Obama's version since it seemed to provide them with more details about the volunteer process (e.g., information about what happens after signing up, a list of different ways to volunteer etc.). These options were absent on John McCain's 'volunteer' page.

Suggestions for the Candidates

As noted in the Introduction to this report, each of the candidate sites is successful in different ways. The Obama site conveys an impression of being polished, sophisticated, modern, and more youthful than McCain's. However, upon further use, most participants found McCain's site easier to use when they attempted to accomplish a variety of core site tasks. On the other hand, McCain's site seems stodgy and visually less interesting than Obama's at first

glance. But, ultimately, the McCain site was deemed by the test participants to have delivered a more usable experience overall.

So, what could either of the candidates do to address the areas in which our testing revealed their sites are lacking? As it happens, we think that both sites could, with some targeted improvements, provide their visitors with intuitive navigation, overall usability AND a sophisticated and contemporary visual design. Specifically:

BarackObama.com

- Although the visual polish of the site was appreciated by our test participants; several also remarked that the very monochromatic nature of the design was distracting and made the page difficult to read. Obama should consider introducing additional color and design elements that would help visually break up the homepage.
- Consolidate the site architecture into a smaller number of more clearly labeled navigation options. Navigation labels should closely relate to primary user objectives, and should, where possible, make use of industry standard terminology and / or be “action oriented” so that visitors will know what content is located where. For example:
 - Use a more standard label, such as “About” instead of “Learn” which confused several users.
 - Move “In the News” from the “Learn” dropdown to the “Media” dropdown, where most users expected to find news about the campaign; better yet, include a “News” option in the main site navigation.
- Replace the overly subtle Home icon in the main navigation with the word, “Home.”
- Increase font size and legibility.

JohnMcCain.com

- The primary issue with the McCain site is the cluttered, “homemade” impression of its visual design. Correcting the following would dramatically improve the site’s appeal:
 - Decrease the use of boxes and hard borders between site elements,
 - Introduce more space into the design to allow users to more easily fixate on the important links and content
 - Limit the number of font styles, sizes, and strengths. Too many fonts create a cluttered impression
- Eliminate the 3-image “slot machine” element on the homepage, which confused users as to its function and causes visual clutter.

- Increase the prominence of the Donate and Volunteer buttons/links. Obama's targets are red and stand out. McCain's targets blend in with green and blue.
- Remove the Select Edition bar; it doesn't help the user and only distracts from the overall sense of how the site is structured.

About Catalyst Group

Founded in 1998, Catalyst Group (www.catalystnyc.com) improves websites and software applications through insights into and testing of key audience behavior. The firm specializes in user-centered research and design that extends from core interface architecture into visual design and branding strategy.

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