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Same-sex marriage movement looks to 'Obamify'

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As gay marriage supporters prepare for a noon demonstration today in Sacramento, a growing number are planning their next ballot campaign. Their new strategy: "Obamify" the gay marriage movement.

Obamification, organizers say, is more than just connecting supporters through social networking sites such as Facebook and building mile-long e-mail lists. It would involve pairing new media technology with old-fashioned, door-to-door outreach - two tactics that were not used well in the unsuccessful opposition to Proposition 8 in November, according to a report by Marriage Equality USA, an Oakland-based organization that supports gay marriage.

The strategy means ditching scripted phone-bank calls and TV commercials that Marriage Equality say "lacked heart." Instead, gay families - and their friends and sympathetic clergy - would be encouraged to get out of the state's big cities and knock on doors in places where they have little support, such as the Central Valley. It would mean allowing supporters more leeway to tell their own stories.

While gay marriage supporters wait to see whether the California Supreme Court decides in their favor, some of this new strategy will be implemented this spring.

Next month in Fresno, gay marriage supporters will learn how to tell others why gay marriage is personally important to them at the second Camp Courage, a training event hosted by the Courage Campaign (www.couragecampaign.org), a 400,000-member online hub that supports a variety of causes. Equality Camp, a volunteer-led event that will cover some of the same training ground, will take place sometime in April in Oakland.

Online, social networking has intensified. The National Center for Lesbian Rights has commenced an online rally on Facebook to galvanize support in advance of March 5, when the California Supreme Court will hear arguments on the validity of the gay marriage ban. (The court has 90 days to issue a ruling.)

In early February, a four-minute online video funded by the Courage Campaign featuring same-sex married couples was released, and in a week was viewed more than 537,000 times. The men and women in the video - some accompanied by their grandchildren and friends - hold up signs that read: "Please don't divorce us."

On the ground, groups are focused on a pro-gay-marriage rally today in Sacramento and a lobbying effort Tuesday.

In late January, the gay rights group Equality California started a "Tell 3" campaign in which it encouraged lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks - or those who love them - to tell three people "what it's like to be LGBT."

"These are difficult conversations to have, but at this stage, this is what is needed," said Equality California executive director Geoff Kors, a member of the No on Prop. 8 campaign executive

committee. "When undecided voters get to know us, they will become comfortable with us, and that is what is going to push us over the top on this issue."

It's that sort of grassroots outreach to undecided or opposition communities that helped the Obama campaign win longtime red states like North Carolina.

"Barack Obama believed in the power of the people during his campaign, while the official No on 8 campaign relied on consultants and focus groups," concluded the Marriage Equality USA report. "We must support grassroots organizing today to ensure marriage equality tomorrow - it is the right thing to do and the only way to win."

Adina Levin, a Palo Alto software company co-founder and gay marriage supporter who is not gay, recalled a friend telling her that Prop. 8 supporters were holding signs on a corner in his San Carlos neighborhood. When Levin asked the campaign if she could use the micro-blogging service Twitter to quickly gather a counterprotest, No on 8 organizers said no, because it might tip off the opposition to their movements.

"But if we're talking about Obamification, we're talking about more than just using technology," said Levin, an Equality Camp organizer. "Personal connections are what change minds, not arguments."

Jason Scott tried for weeks to volunteer for the campaign, but the 29-year-old Fresno Web developer didn't get calls or e-mails returned. When he eventually connected with organizers, he said his group of friends were told "to go to the No on 8 offices in L.A."

"The bottom line is that the No on 8 campaign had neither a competent nor an effective grassroots movement," said Torie Osborn, an Obama campaign volunteer whose activism in the gay community stretches back 40 years. "If we're going to do this again, we're going to have to do it radically differently."

Gay-marriage opponents already have an organizing structure, largely through churches. Proponents, meanwhile, come from a patchwork of established gay-rights organizations, new online groups and straight progressive networks.

The problem for Prop. 8 opponents wasn't money. They raised \$45 million - \$5 million more than the measure's supporters, according to campaign finance reports. It was how they spent it, critics say.

"The (No on 8) campaign was a command-and-control, top-down campaign that was done by people who came from legacy LGBT organizations," said Rick Jacobs, founder of the Courage Campaign and a former Howard Dean organizer steeped in online, grassroots activism.

But while Obamification is an intriguing concept, some who helped run the anti-Prop. 8 campaign say it is useful only to a point.

"We are fighting deeply-seated homophobia against gay people," said Dan Hawes, director of organizing and training for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "It isn't the same as getting people to vote for a candidate."

Hawes, a member of the No on Prop. 8 Campaign Executive Committee, agreed with several of the criticisms in the Marriage USA report. But he said pollsters told campaign leaders that phone banking would be the most time-efficient way to reach swing voters.

"Looking back, I would have provided more resources to build and train a team of volunteers there" in the Central Valley, Hawes said.

The challenge now is to corral the grassroots organizations that formed in the wake of the passage of Prop. 8 last fall. Many of the anti-Prop 8 rallies that attracted thousands of supporters in Los Angeles and San Francisco were organized online. Levin is pulling together a Wiki-style database of pro-gay-marriage groups, so they will be able to better communicate in time for the next campaign.