

SOCIAL CAMPAIGNING: DISCLOSING POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON INFLUENCERS

By Caroline Schneider

A person scrolling through Instagram on any given day will likely see many sponsored posts from various influencers to promote a myriad of products. Another thing one might have seen over the past few months are an abundance of influencers endorsing or promoting different presidential candidates for the 2020 election. However, this election cycle is blurring the line between what a sponsorship and an endorsement might be.

With so many candidates running for the 2020 Democratic nomination it's taken more effort from campaigns and their PACs to stand out so their candidate can gain more traction. One method some PACs and campaigns tried using was setting up sponsorships with influencers to have them promote and create content for their candidate. This a tactic

was used by Cory Booker’s super PAC, United We Win, to help with fundraising. Bloomberg used a similar tactic to increase his already-significant web presence.

WHAT’S HAPPENING

There are a few different ways to get sponsorships on Instagram. Companies can contact an Instagram influencer directly based on the content on their page. Influencers can also take the initiative by offering sponsorship to companies. The third method is using a third-party site like AspireIQ to influencers with companies based on the company’s ad requirements.

In a removed post, the super PAC United We Win used the site AspireIQ to find influencers who would encourage their supporters to “keep Cory [Booker] in the fight with a small donation.” The Bloomberg campaign used the site Tribe to pay influencers \$150 to create memes and post things to make



The pitch from United We Win on AspireIQ

United We Win: Keep Cory Booker In The Fight

Keep Cory Booker In the Race

Available for Blog Facebook Instagram Pinterest YouTube Twitter

What you'll get (if approved)

Payment (USD)
Approximate Amount:
 sequinsandsales: \$110 - \$520

What we're looking for

Another four years of Donald Trump is unthinkable. Unfortunately, Democrats are in danger of letting the most extreme voices speak for the rest of us. We need a leader who can unite the country and get rid of Trump once and for all. Cory Booker knows that when our party reaches out to the whole country — left, right, and center — we win. Tell your supporters to keep Cory in the fight with a small donation.

Collaborate I'm not interested

Bloomberg seem “cool” as a means to getting younger voters to vote for him. The PAC NextGen America, a PAC founded by Tom Steyer and in turn supported his campaign, worked with about 3,000 influencers to promote his candidacy. The DCCC used this same tactic in the 2018 midterm elections (although they added a long disclaimer at the end of each post saying “Paid for by the DCCC”).

THE PROBLEM

Campaigns and PACs are going over to using influencers instead of advertisements because of the crackdown on political advertisements on social media. For example, Twitter said it would not allow any paid political advertisements on their platforms. Influencers are required to disclose when a post is sponsored by using the hashtags “#sponsored” and “#ad” by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). But when it comes to campaign advertising, there are no laws that address how influencers must acknowledge being sponsored by a campaign or PAC, and considering that many don’t properly disclose sponsored posts in the first place, you come across a problem of disclosure and ethics in social media campaigning.

Lifestyle and fashion blogger Amanda Johnson was one of the influencers who matched

with the United We Win PAC on AspireIQ but declined to take the offer, telling BuzzFeed “ I was intrigued...I didn’t know how to feel about it at first. But it felt off to me originally because it doesn’t seem like something politicians maybe should use. My thing is there are already a lot of influencers who aren’t disclosing their partnerships, even though the FTC requires them to. And now they won’t be disclosing partnerships [with politicians] and it’s even more iffy to me.”

Food and travel blogger Alycia Chrosniak was contacted by the Bloomberg campaign to create content for them and to personally endorse Bloomberg to her followers. Just like Amanda Johnson, Chrosniak turned them down, telling Reuters “It feels weird to put out an ad supporting a person versus a product.” She added that Bloomberg wasn’t her top-choice candidate.

United We Win defended their use of influencers, telling BuzzFeed, “Our organization is committed to using emerging digital tools to independently promote Cory Booker's candidacy

because we believe that he is the best choice to beat Florida Man and unite our country. This is simply another way to engage dedicated grassroots supporters online, and those supporters will be compensated for their time in the same way that more traditional campaign efforts like canvassing are also often compensated.”

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Tegan O’Neil, the director of communications for NextGen America, said to Morning Consult: “Something we know from doing this work for a long time is that we need to be layering tactics no matter what we’re doing. Google and Twitter’s ad restrictions are just another reason that we need to emphasize programs like this influencer program.”

GOING FORWARD

The rise in political sponsorship in influencer culture raises the question about public response to these posts and sponsorships. Some don’t think there is a difference between an endorsement and these

sponsored posts. Some disagree with this because of how it can alienate a person's followers if they don't agree with the politics these posts promote, even suggesting that one could lose other sponsorships based on gaining a political sponsorship. And again, there is the issue of properly disclosing whether a political post is a sponsored one or not.

With social media being a key means of reaching younger voters, there is no question that social media is going to continue to be a key player in elections going forward. As the saying goes, "meet the voters where they are." The voters are on social media, it's now just a matter of making sure the laws catch up to those soliciting the votes.