



THE NEW BREED OF CAMPAIGN MANAGER

DON BAKER

Joseph L. Cowart is a veteran in a new corps of campaign computer consultants. An IBM PC user since 1981, Cowart customizes direct-mail targeting and database applications from commercial software packages for statewide and local campaigns, or combines database management software with dedicated campaign packages. These applications might seem routine to an experienced PC user, but, according to Cowart, they can turn around a small campaign. By automating fund raising, tracking volunteers, and streamlining

opposition research, "PCs become extremely important for lists of up to 20,000," he says. "That's their advantage. That's the level at which campaigns are fought. It is our ability to communicate with the foot soldiers that wins campaigns."

At 44, Cowart has 41 statewide and 100 smaller contests under his belt. A campaign manager for two decades, he now consults for one campaign at a time. He describes himself as "a kind of gypsy," doing "everything from computers to administration, accounting, issues management, and handling the press."

Politics is Cowart's family business. Born in Lexington, Ky., he grew up in a household where his mother was active in voter registration, at first turning out people to vote at the precinct level, eventually holding "every position a Republican woman could hold in Kentucky." No doubt

influenced by her enthusiasm, at age eight Cowart was handing out literature for Wah Wah Jones, a baseball player from the University of Kentucky who was running for Fayette County sheriff; Cowart went on to become an envelope lick, precinct captain, and ward captain (a ward is a collection of precincts or voting districts), among other roles. "She encouraged us to think indepen-

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dently," Cowart adds, "so I became a Democrat."

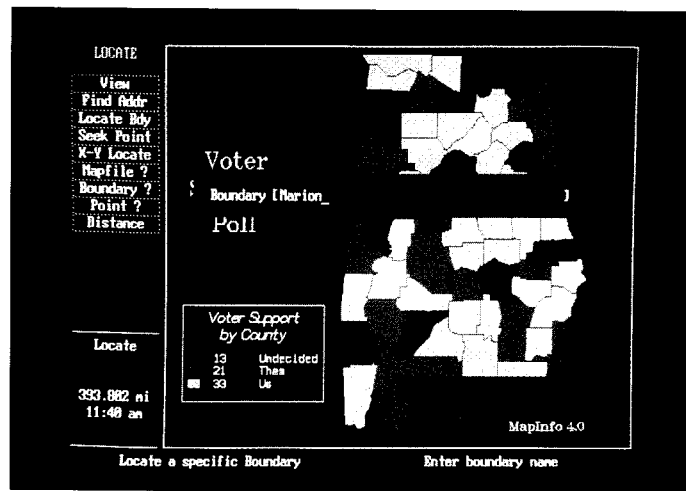
Cowart studied economics at the University of Kentucky, but moved to Atlanta in the early 1970s, where he married a member of then-Governor Carter's Administration. When Carter moved to the White House, the Cowarts moved, too. Cowart pursued his education at American University, combining his interest in economics and economic modeling with computer science electives. Shortly after he graduated, the IBM PC was unveiled and Cowart snapped one up along with a copy of dBase. He bolstered his knowledge at continuing education seminars on application languages, but for the most part he is self-taught. Today he can program in Clipper and is an Ashton-Tate developer.

In 1984, Cowart formed his own campaign consulting company. Because he needed business during off-campaign years, Cowart took on non-political clients, like the Navy and the International Monetary Fund. But he tired of regular business applications and sold the business to his partner. Next came a brief stint with Creative Computer Services in Dallas, which serves statewide campaigns with voter lists stored on mainframes. Finally, Cowart opted for full-time campaign consulting. He finds that "politics is more creative."

To get his job done, Cowart usually sets up a system with one percent of a campaign's budget (larger campaigns are likely to take relatively smaller bites). For statewide campaigns he typically spends \$500 to \$2,500 for software and between \$10,000 and \$40,000 to link IBM compatibles with a small Novell network. Cowart seldom recommends spending more than \$25,000, however; at that point, outside contractors should bear the brunt of staff training time and free campaign workers to pursue the true purpose of a campaign—communication with the world outside.

Cowart consults only for liberal causes and members of the Democratic Party. Although he is particular about his clients' politics, Cowart finds vendors who sell software only to their parties puzzling. "I never really understood that," he muses, "I can see how a consultant might limit his approach to one field, but software is non-ideological."

One advocacy group Cowart assisted with politically neutral software is Catholics for Free Choice, a pro-choice lobby in Washington, D.C. Their approach to membership records needed updating (they were using Wang word processors) and their literature had to be sent out more promptly—but, like many nonprofits, their resources were limited. Cowart set them up with dBase III and two IBM XTs to permit the group to communicate more regularly with their members, alert them to key events, and inform them of pending legislation, so that members can immediately send letters to congressmen.



This county map of Alabama (generated using MapInfo Corp.'s MapInfo software) is typical of the type of output that will be used in the 1990 campaign.

Cowart's most recent project involves a more high-profile client: Bo Torbert's 1990 campaign for the Alabama Democratic gubernatorial nomination. Using PC File III Plus in conjunction with the Politech Software System by Political Technologies, Ellington, Conn., he is tracking potential contributors to Torbert's campaign and maintaining financial records. The contributor database helps the candidate decide who to call on the fly, explains Cowart. "He knows not to call the guy from East Elephant Breath," he smiles.

A second application for the Torbert campaign, using Politech alone, is managing the database of supporters, which includes donors, politicians, campaign workers, and volunteers. Cowart uses it to generate call lists and labels for personalized letters and newsletters. That leads to full voter contact, and follow-up letters based on voter response.

Cowart also plans an application that's never been done before—refining voter databases by matching them with data garnered from the 1990 national census and statewide voter lists. "You run a regression analysis that nails people against the polling data, combining geography and demographics," says Cowart. For example, they'll be able to find women age 25 to 34 who earn between \$25,000 and \$40,000 and have a college education. End result: a very finely targeted list of excellent voter prospects. Such a list could be specific enough to include the locations of potential supporters who agree with the candidate on certain issues.

Although software is vital for harnessing PC power, printers are the muscle behind direct-mail appeals. For a city council race that cannot afford TV advertisements, PC-generated print is the most efficient way to communicate. But a statewide campaign like Torbert's in Alabama, one which has amassed a list of 800,000 potential voters, moves beyond the practical reach of even laser-printed mailings. Cowart calculates that even 80,000 one-page letters, "at 6 pages per minute, would take 13,000 minutes or 216 hours of Hewlett-Packard laser printing. And if we used 10 printers, that's an immense administrative problem for just 10 percent of our targeted Alabama voter list."

What direction will computer campaign management take? According to Cowart, applications will become even more routine. "Already, people can't remember campaigns without computers," he says. "It gets easier and easier."

What's more, candidates themselves can become more closely involved. "It's much easier to turn a politician into a computer wiz than it is to turn a computer scientist into a politician," Cowart comments, "Computer people design for the ideal. The ideal hardly ever exists in politics."

—Karen A. Frenkel