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Recommended Citation

USU Jon M. Huntsman School of Business and Eaton, Steve, "Company With Huntsman Roots Predicts 91% of Political Races Correctly" (2012). *Jon M. Huntsman School of Business News Collection*. 175. https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/huntsman_news/175

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Company With Huntsman Roots Predicts 91% of Political Races Correctly

By Steve Eaton



After traveling by bus for three months to 48 states logging 18,000 miles, contacting more than 3,000 politicians, participating in a drag race with a pig bus and a “slow walk” with a presidential candidate, the leaders of Politicl decided to take a break this week.

While many of us felt battered, worn, and exhausted by the long presidential campaign, with its gaffes, attack ads, and debates, few have become as immersed in an election cycle as the Politicl crew. Four members of the Logan-based, start-up company, which monitors online buzz and predicts political races, traveled the country in a customized mobile home looking for politicians to interview, reporters to interest, and the credibility they will need to take their entrepreneurial efforts to the next level.

It looks as if they have earned some of that credibility already. On election night KUTV and KSL in Salt Lake City asked to have Politicl people available for interviews as the results came in. They were asking about the company’s “IT Scores,” indicators Politicl uses to predict which candidates will come out on top.

Politicl uses “machine-learning algorithms” to analyze massive amounts of data, taking into account what people do or say on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Wikipedia, along with several other factors to come up with a number that they say is indicative of a candidate’s digital influence. The more positive buzz the candidates are generating, the higher their IT Scores. Politicl predicted 477 federal races along with most of the gubernatorial contests. In 91 percent of the races they followed the candidates with the highest IT Scores won.

Josh Light, the CEO of the company, compared it to the number-crunching story behind the baseball movie “Moneyball” where statistical analysis of batting records helped the Oakland Athletics create a winning season.

“It’s crazy,” Josh said. “We were predicting races we knew nothing about with our machine-learning algorithm. It just blows my mind. It’s like the Moneyball of politics.”

The Politiclt crew found itself in Kansas on Sunday, Nov. 4, with last-minute numbers to crunch and thousands of miles to travel if they were going to end up back in Utah by Nov. 6. Josh said he spent all Sunday night working on the Politiclt data, making sure the final data they would have on election eve would be accurate and reliable. The next day they had to drive 21 hours straight to make it to Utah so they'd be ready for election night in Salt Lake City. They arrived in Cache Valley at 5:30 a.m. the day before the elections, Josh said. He said they went to bed for a few hours and then went to work crunching data all night long again to get ready.

"You have to understand that all these intense days happened after three months of being in a bus, and in the bus we would be getting up at 8 or 9 in the morning and going to bed about 2 a.m.," Josh said. "It was constant work."

Sleep deprived, Josh ended up on camera, along with Sterling Morris, chief marketing officer, giving their analysis of the election until after the time that President Barack Obama gave his acceptance speech--a race they predicted he would win. John Johnson, a Huntsman professor who has supported the group financially and in many other ways, is the chairman of the company.

He and the company's chief technology officer, Britney Johnson, and John David Johnson, a programmer, were the go-to experts for KSL TV. Britney is John Johnson's daughter, and John David is his son. Josh said Britney and John David stayed up all night on Nov. 7 to compile the election results.

Josh said it was rewarding to see their strategy pay off.

"It feels good," Josh said of the credibility they were accorded on election eve. "It feels like our marketing has worked correctly. That was part of our marketing plan, to create relationships with media."

That marketing plan now includes selling software the company has developed to the politicians and political operatives they met on the road. With the new software, each campaign can do its own detailed analysis of its online presence.

They wanted to interview as many of the candidates for national office and governor as they could, but discovered that incumbents who felt confident they would win were not as interested in being interviewed for an online video. Candidates who faced steep odds, however, were often happy to get additional exposure.

They struck out trying to interview President Barack Obama or Mitt Romney. They did get an interview with the Libertarian candidate, Gary Johnson, and they got him to help them make their own "slow walking" dramatic video. You can see that by [clicking here](#).

Sterling, an accomplished videographer, documented the trip and made a number of other unusual videos with politicians as Politiclt tried to create its own online buzz. Here are some of the other videos that are posted on their website:

- They challenged Pennsylvania Senate candidate Gene Stimp, a Democrat, to a slow-moving drag race in front of the Pennsylvania state capital buildings with a pink bus that had been modified to look like a pig. Candidate Stimp drives the bus around Pennsylvania to spread the message that he wants to ferret out government waste. You can see the race by [clicking here](#).
- They filmed Barry Hinkley, a candidate for the Senate from Rhode Island, doing pushups with a voice-over that says, "When Barry Hinkley does a pushup, he isn't lifting himself up; he's pushing the earth down." Watch the video by [clicking here](#).
- One video features Josh in a bench-press competition with Missouri Senate candidate Jonathan Dine, a Libertarian. [Click here](#) to see who won.
- They got Tennessee Congressional candidate Pat Riley to run through downtown Nashville to a Rocky soundtrack, demonstrating his fighting spirit. You can see that video by [clicking here](#).

Josh and Sterling were joined by Huntsman intern McCade Child, and Shelby Sonnentag, marketing and communications director. Lauren Johnson and Shai McDonald, creative designers, are still in school and did not go on the trip. Miles English, a Politiclt programmer, who is working on his degree in computer science, also stayed in Logan.

The trip was hard work, Josh said. The vehicle had to be maintained, washed and prepared. Josh said that most politicians dream of traveling around in their own campaign bus, so when they saw that Politicl had a bus it gave the company added credibility.

The bus almost became a convertible on the New York Parkway, however.

Parkways are designed for cars, and Josh said they didn't know that. When the Politicl bus became packed-in, surrounded by cars, and heading toward a tunnel that only had 8-feet-11-inches of overhead clearance distance in the outside lanes, Sterling, who was driving, found himself swerving to the middle of the road in the hope of not tearing off the top of the vehicle, which is 12 feet tall.

"All the cars basically gave us tons of room because they were like, 'Oh, my gosh, this guy is in trouble,'" Josh said. "So, he swerved to the middle of the tunnel, and we barely cleared it. We came out the other side and saw that another RV had just gone into the tunnel in the other direction, and the low ceiling had ripped off the top of their RV."

They were immediately pulled over by police who said, "What were you guys thinking, driving on a parkway?" Josh said, and we said, "We don't know what a parkway is! We're not from New York."