

Indian elections – how is technology transforming them?

Contributed by ValueNotes

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Today's™ buzzwords are mobility, big data, analytics, social media, and digital. These technologies are expected to drive the future competitiveness of corporations (and the profitability of IT providers). But the application of such technologies goes far beyond the business world – to every type of consumer facing organization.

India's™ general election 2014 is the latest example of how today's™ technologies can provide enormous competitive advantage.

The use of social media as a means of generating visibility and influencing opinion are well known, and now pass. Barrack Obama's™ campaigns and the Arab Spring convinced us of the power of these platforms. All Indian political parties have adopted this, but this is only the tip of the iceberg.

According to opinion polls, the opposition BJP is likely to record a historic win (we will know in a few days). What is less understood is how they have taken the use of technology to a new level.

Apparently, their analytics team crunched data from several past elections and integrated this with socio-economic, demographic and census data. On top of this, they've overlaid information from their own opinion polls and market research. According to some press reports, this has enabled them to derive a highly refined snapshot of voting patterns, local issues, voting blocs, and such like. And this has been done at the level of polling booths, not just constituencies. This analysis has helped to raise funds, micro-target messaging and advertising, select appropriate communication mediums, enroll volunteers, and even decide on routes to be traveled by candidates! Mr. Modi's™ speeches (hundreds of them) have been customized for each audience. All of this is constantly tweaked based on changing ground realities and ongoing market research, for example, the impact of a speech by an opposing candidate.

Apart from traditional style speeches, road shows and targeted knock-on-door efforts, the social media blitz has been unprecedented. According to one report, there are 2 million volunteers driving this effort. In addition, Mr. Modi's™ campaign has included innovative digital initiatives like "Chai pe Charcha", where the candidate has live chats with groups of voters at remote tea stalls – facilitated by satellite, DTH and the Internet.

Then there have been virtual rallies where Mr. Modi simultaneously addresses large numbers of voters using hologram technology. The technology creates a 3D illusion for the crowd, and has enabled him to reach a few million additional voters, and no doubt, impress quite a few of them with this rock-show type pyrotechnics. This has also been used by some local parties in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

There are many more such examples, including use of voice recognition technology to allow voters to dial in and listen to the party's™ pre-recorded messages on a variety of issues in multiple languages.

We're still a few days away from knowing the results, but if the BJP wins big – the power of modern information technology as an unparalleled marketing tool will be established. We're not talking of a few million well-heeled customers – but 800 million people, speaking different languages, mostly not tech savvy, a significant percentage of which cannot even read and write.

All this is good news for the technology and outsourcing industry, not least for numerous Indian start-ups, many of whom were unheard of before this election.

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