

Candidates get high-tech help

By KEVIN POST Business Editor, 609-272-7250

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In June's closely watched Republican primary race for the seat of retiring Third District Rep. Jim Saxton, winner Chris Myers had a secret weapon.

An Atlantic County firm with a dozen employees - First Tuesday in November - used its proprietary voter-tracking technology to boost turnout by Myers' supporters 15 percentage points, according to the campaign.

"FTIN technology put our turnout operation heads and shoulders above the competition, and played an important role in turning what was supposed to be a close election into a comfortable win," Chris Russell, campaign manager for Myers, said in a testimonial to the Galloway Township-based company.

Voter turnout operations are the backbone of political campaigns. Likely voters for the candidate are identified through phone surveying and door-to-door canvassing, and then on Election Day those target voters are tracked and every effort is made to ensure that they vote.

Until now, it was all done slowly on paper, which had to be gathered, processed, distributed and then gathered again for updating.

First Tuesday has invented a patented software system that gives all campaign workers constant access to an instantly updated voter database through Blackberry phones and laptop computers connected wirelessly to the Internet.

Poll workers just highlight the names of voters on their Blackberries and press a button. Canvassers can then ignore them and focus on those yet to vote. Campaign managers can reassign workers where needed. All information collected about voters becomes known to everyone in the campaign in real time.

"We've done dozens of elections, and we typically increase voter turnout for our candidates 15 to 20 percentage points," David Cerrone, managing partner of First Tuesday, said this week.

The other founder, former IBM sales executive Richard Young, saw the opportunity while waiting in

line to vote in 1999 - party volunteers were tracking voters on paper lists, which were occasionally picked up by other campaign workers.

The wireless technology didn't exist then to create the system they imagined, but when their previous business of helping landlords screen tenants was bought out in 2004 by a large competitor, the time was right.

Cerrone, a former computer analyst with a major credit bureau, wrote the applications needed and First Tuesday was launched in 2006.

Research for the patent on the system - including surveying the major cell phone providers and vote organizers in all 50 states - convinced the partners that they are the only company in the nation bringing instant wireless communication to voting efforts.

The firm is nonpartisan but will only work one side of an election, for whoever signs it up first. It serves both major parties, and recently boosted votes for a Brigantine ballot question on buying a former Catholic school to convert into a community center.

In November 2007, it helped Atlantic County Republicans dominate the results. Victorious Freeholder Joseph McDevitt offered this testimonial: "I can thank Rich and Dave for the extraordinary turnout in last November's election. I would and will encourage any person seeking political office to use this system."

"We swept everywhere in November, except for (state Senate candidate) 'Sonny' (McCullough)," Cerrone said.

First Tuesday's candidates don't always win, he said, because sometimes other factors outweigh the turnout advantage. He pointed to the recent failed mayoral primary campaign of Scott Evans in Atlantic City as another example.

But its successes have drawn the interest of politicians everywhere, including the Republican National Committee. It's currently working on a congressional race in Alaska. In March, it mounted a voter registration drive for Republicans in Nevada. It has even had inquiries from India, but Cerrone said it's too early to offer services internationally.

First Tuesday's technology also generates real-time reports that break down the vote demographically: party affiliation, age, gender, voting likelihood, etc. "You can really hone in on the different areas of your data to see where your candidate needs help," Cerrone said.

The Blackberries are also GPS units that allow campaign managers to see where their workers are at all times, he said.

The hardware requirements are massive. Cerrone said the company has more than 3,000 Blackberries and 750 notebook computers, and has negotiated special contracts with wireless service providers so the cost of operating them wouldn't be prohibitive.

In Egg Harbor Township, it maintains a call center where it can coordinate campaign operations and recharge all the portable technology.

Pricing for First Tuesday services is simple, Cerrone said - \$500 a precinct for election day programs. For a 200-precinct campaign, that would be \$100,000, he said. In Atlantic City, where there are 26 precincts, a campaign might track 20 of them at a cost of \$10,000.

For that money, campaigns get "reliable, secure, automated and intelligent voter tracking and data services for the purpose of increasing voter turnout," according to the FTIN mission statement.

But what they're really interested in is what that mission statement says next: "To put it simply, our mission is to help you win on Election Day."

E-mail Kevin Post:

KPost@pressofac.com