

Smart phones, new politics

Purple Forge aims to juice campaigns with social networking applications

BY JAMES BAGNALL, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JANUARY 9, 2010



Brian Hurley, left, and John Craig are co-founders of Purple Forge, an Ottawa startup that uses social networks to kickstart political campaigns.

Photograph by: Julie Oliver, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

Purple Forge seemingly has the perfect pedigree and game plan for an Ottawa startup.

Co-founders Brian Hurley and John Craig have honed their skills at half a dozen firms in the region. And they've developed software for accelerating the impact of the city's top pre-occupation -- political campaigns.

It would have been a nice touch had they landed a federal party as their first customer.

But that's not usually the way things are done in Canada.

Purple Forge recently signed contracts with the UK Independence Party and Chuck DeVore, who is making a bid to become the Republican nominee for a California Senate seat. DeVore is running against former Hewlett Packard CEO Carly Fiorina.

Purple Forge has also negotiated deals with third parties, including Raise Digital of Herndon, Virginia and ID_Media Communications of Sacramento, California. These and other consulting groups will market Purple Forge's services as part of their own.

This activity has piqued the curiosity of Ontario municipal politicians and a Canadian federal party. These, too, are considering paying for services from Purple Forge.

The interest centres on an elegant piece of code written by Hurley, a former CEO of Liquid Computing of Kanata.

The MyPolitics application became available this week through App stores run by Apple. Hurley is developing BlackBerry and Android versions for the second quarter.

The hope is that the software will transform iPhones, BlackBerrys and other smart phones into social networking hubs that acquire a life of their own.

The Purple Forge system allows the campaign to forward news from paper, audio and video sources to the handsets, which offer quick links to Facebook or Twitter.

There is a mechanism for conducting polls on the fly about topics of interest -- in theory, providing candidates with an early warning system for troublesome issues or policy stances.

Mobile subscribers can also opt out of receiving flyers and other paper-based campaign literature that comes to them electronically.

The key difference between new political campaigns and old is this: where potential voters used to read candidates' literature in quiet solitude, they will now share their

opinions online and, increasingly, through their mobile phones.

"Americans are more progressive in their use of social networking tools," says Hurley.

He adds that he and Craig may adapt the concept to product marketing as well. "There are so many different ways we can go with this," he adds.

Certainly, politics provides a rich initial vein for Purple Forge to mine.

In the U.S. alone, politicians spend an estimated \$3 billion annually on advertising (all figures U.S.), with perhaps 10 per cent earmarked for online accounts.

The potential for Purple Forge is far from clear.

Individual campaigns pay \$8,000 to the startup, which sets up the generic MyPolitics application and tweaks it for the unique features of the politician.

The campaign also pays a monthly service fee.

Hurley believes the company can eventually achieve annual revenues in the "tens of millions" of dollars -- assuming Purple Forge successfully lines up key political and government relations agencies to help with its marketing.

That level of sales is likely optimistic, though the fact Hurley and Craig are generating revenues within months of their firm's launch last fall is encouraging.

The startup's name reflects the logo associated with one of their former employers, Bell-Northern Research, which was later folded into Nortel Networks.

The co-founders met in Ottawa in the mid-1990s when Craig, a co-op student at the University of Waterloo's engineering faculty, was hired by a BNR wireless unit run by Hurley.

Hurley, 48, left Nortel in 2003 to co-found Liquid Computing, a Kanata firm that makes technology for reducing the cost of corporate data centres.

He left early in 2008 over a difference of opinion with company investors over strategy.

Hurley set up a new firm that sold telecom services -- until key customers ran into financial difficulty. His wife urged him to get a real job.

Hurley ran into Craig at a local networking event last May. The 36-year-old has been steeped in high-technology all his life. His father, Ian, was a key Nortel executive throughout the 1990s.

After graduating from Waterloo, John worked at CrossKeys, Nortel, FirstHand Technologies and CounterPath. Along the way, he assumed senior sales and marketing roles and immersed himself in mobile technologies and their potential uses.

Craig left CounterPath last fall after Purple Forge secured a \$100,000 grant from the federal government's Industrial Research Assistance Program.

Thanks in part to Republican contacts supplied by his father, Craig got himself invited to speak at a panel at the Republican convention in California in October. His topic: social networking and mobile technology.

His presentation led to the meeting with the public relations team for candidate Chuck DeVore -- and the subsequent services contract.

Craig's hope is that MyPolitics will prove an important part of DeVore's ultimate aim of unseating current Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer.

That would certainly make Canadian politicians pay closer attention to Ottawa's newest startup.

E-mail: Jbagnall@thecitizen.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen
