

IT company's marketing campaign capitalizes on political controversy

By R.C. BOURNEA
Daily Reporter Staff Writer

The events surrounding one of the closest and most hotly-contested presidential races in U.S. history has captured the nation's attention. A local information technology company, Fiber Network Solutions Inc., is receiving recognition of its own for a marketing campaign satirizing the debacle.

The campaign features a series of advertisements and postcards with the phrase, "The Internet, proudly brought to you by Al Gore. The moon, proudly brought to you by Fiber Network Solutions."

The purpose of the campaign is to gently poke fun at the vice president's alleged claims that he "invented" the Internet, said Fiber Network Solutions President and Chief Executive Officer David J. Koch.

"There's an enormous amount of media hype regarding the comments of Vice President Gore that he was instrumental in the formation of the Internet," said Koch. "It's basically saying if he invented

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To make our service to you less confusing, more efficient and structured specifically for your needs, please **vote**, and let us know how you feel by poking a hole in **ONE** circle and mailing this form back to us.

FNSI is an amazing service. I've never had a problem!

I like FNSI because of that awesome guy in the marketing department

Although the service has been ideal, I do have some questions.

I love the Internet so much I want more. OC3's for everybody!

I don't actually believe in any "Internet." And I am highly suspicious of anyone who does.

Even though I've never had a problem with FNSI, I'd still like someone to call so I can complain because I'm lonely.

Thank you for your cooperation. The results of this survey will be processed **after** we find all absentee ballots, all bickering is resolved, we recount the ballots by hand, tally the results using an abacus, and then vote again until we're happy with the results. Then we'll be on our way to serving you better!

SPOOFING THE ELECTION - This postcard distributed by Columbus information technology company Fiber Network Solutions Inc. features a mock ballot satirizing the allegedly misleading ballot that confused Florida voters.

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non-partisan programs. Both of them would be very good for our country, and that's why the election is so close. We have two men here who are both eminently qualified to be the president of the United States."

The now infamous ballot that confused some Florida citizens and allegedly caused them to vote for the wrong candidate has also been fodder for Fiber Network's marketing campaign.

Another postcard spoofing the Florida ballot says, "To make our service to you less confusing, more efficient and structured specifically for your needs, please vote, and let us know how you feel by poking a hole ONE circle and mailing this form back to us." Under the phrase is a list of options with a jumble of red arrow clearly intended to confuse - and amuse - the recipient.

"You've got all these people who said they couldn't understand the ballot. The marketing department said, 'How hard could this be?' so they created this postcard. It wasn't a political statement at all," Koch reiterated. "There's an enormous amount of talk about this ballot so we decided to capitalize on it and get some name recognition. If you can get yourself in the Super Bowl, it's something everybody's talking about it. And everybody's talking about this ballot."

Fiber Network is not the only company to use the election in its advertising. A television commercial for Snickers candy bars featured ani-

ated characters - an elephant representing the GOP and a donkey representing the Democratic party - trying to one-up each other on their so-called achievements.

"I wear the same pants as my dad," the elephant says, an apparent reference to Bush's father, former president George Bush. "I invented pants," the donkey retorts.

Companies must be cautious of alienating consumers when using political satire in advertising, said Franklin University marketing and communication professor Ken Ashley.

"Is there a risk of offending consumers by being satirical? Definitely. Using satire and humor is always a risky business," said Ashley. "Typically, such risks tend to run counter to an organization's goal of successfully encouraging a consumer - in this case, regardless of political affiliation - to purchase and use their products and services."

When skillfully done, however, a well-crafted satirical marketing campaign can win consumers over and increase a company's brand identity, Ashley added.

"Political satire has always been an animal with different stripes. It has long been considered acceptable, regardless of political affiliation or climate," he said. "Politicians, being public figures will always make good targets, targets who are highly recognizable, which is a key with good marketing"

Koch said Fiber Network

Solutions' campaign has elicited an overwhelmingly positive reception thus far.

"This has been the most successful advertising campaign that I have ever seen in my career, which spans 25 years. With a direct mail piece, if you get a 1 percent response, that's pretty good. We've had over 50 percent," said Koch. "We've had people asking for the full series because they want to collect them. We've had people request copies because they want to frame them. We have gotten unbelievable response on this."

Koch likens its campaign to a recent television spot by Apple Computer, which spoofed a commercial by competitor Intel that featured people dancing around in brightly-colored clothes to disco music.

"Intel spent millions of dollars creating brand identity and Apple came in and stole the show," said Koch. "I'm sure it didn't make Intel very happy, but they had to appreciate the genius of whoever thought about that at Apple."

The Gore postcards were designed far in advance, but the ballot postcard was an "emergency print job" rushed out to take advantage of the Florida controversy, Koch related. The company has typically taken a non-traditional approach to marketing, he said.

"The advertising that we do has always been real off-the-wall stuff. Our postcards, traditionally, have had nothing to do with our services. We're

known as the 'postcard people,'" said Koch.

"We try to do advertising that is a little tickly, because the service is either good or bad, there's no in between. It's very much a commodity. Advertising that yours is better, that's absurd. Our service, it is what it is. The things we promote is our company philosophy, our corporate culture."

Fiber Network Solutions is a net work services provider offering high-capacity Internet access, wholesale DSL services to Internet service providers, wide-area network services and data center collocation services. The company's unique corporate environment, such as its raise-a-month program for high-performing employees, has gained national attention such as a spread in the November issue of trade journal *Technology Entrepreneurship Quality*.

Recent polls have indicated that citizens across the country have grown weary with the drawn-out election, Koch said, so Fiber Network Solutions will be moving on in the near future as well.

"We have one or two more postcards (based on the election), and we've already designed a whole other series that has nothing to do with the election," he said.

As the election plays itself out, marketing executives at Fiber Network Solutions will undoubtedly be watching the headlines for their next big theme.

the Internet, then we invented the moon."

The campaign includes a total of six postcards with phrases such as "The wheel, proudly brought to you by Fiber Network Solutions" as well as "the doughnut" and even nuclear fusion.

While the campaign may be interpreted as a knock against Gore, Koch insists it was intended as good-natured, non-partisan humor.

"It's not at all a political statement. The postcards are nothing more than good marketing," said Koch. "Good marketing recognizes something that is happening in the public and capitalizes on it. Our marketing department saw an opportunity where there's an enormous amount of media horsepower, and they picked up on it."

The seemingly never-ending showdown between Gore and George W. Bush in Florida has been the subject of countless heated debates, but Koch says he has taken a neutral stance on the issue.

"Personally, I like Al Gore a lot. I frankly, like both candidates. If I had voted in Florida, there'd be no mark on my chad, or I would have voted for both of them because I like them both," said Koch.

"I'd almost like to see the court say they can both go to the White House. They both have some excellent