

In Vancouver-False Creek, Liberal and NDP campaigns are teaching old dogs new tricks

In condo-dominated, lawn-free neighbourhood, door-knocking and lawn signs are much help to candidates

BY ZOE MCKNIGHT, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 25, 2013



NDP candidate Matt Toner was handing out campaign doggie jackets in Vancouver-False Creek on March 24, 2013

Photograph by: wayne leidenfrost, PNG

Candidates in the closely watched Vancouver-False Creek riding are reaching out to some unlikely constituents: dogs.

The riding is dominated by condo buildings with secure entries, meaning the usual door-knocking and neighbourhood canvassing strategies simply won't work. So campaign teams are forced to get creative with publicity stunts and social media outreach in the campaign for the May 14 provincial election.

New Democrat Matt Toner held a photo opportunity in the off-leash area of Hinge Park in Southeast False Creek on Sunday. He and campaign staff handed out bright-orange nylon doggie jackets in various sizes emblazoned with "Matt Toner for NDP."

His Liberal opponent, former Vancouver mayor and councillor Sam Sullivan can be seen out and about walking Boots, a Husky-Chow mix sporting a dog-sized hoodie proclaiming "Sam's my man!"

At Hinge Park, dozens of dogs — mostly apartment-sized terriers, pugs and poodles — chased each others' tails while the NDP's Toner discussed the constraints his campaign faces.

"The reason we do things a little bit differently in False Creek is because it's a different kind of riding. It's the youngest riding in the province, and it's the most condo-intensive riding in the province, and it's real hard to reach people. A sense of community doesn't happen the way it does in other places," said Toner, a digital media expert and an entrepreneur who said a sense of humour is also key to his campaign.

"Where do people gather? Dog parks. People joke about the latte-sipping Yaletown yuppies with little handbag (sized) dogs running around. But that is the constituency here, to a large part."

If dogs are the new lawn signs, which are non-existent due to the lack of lawns, social media is the new canvassing.

Toner's team is using Place Speak, a web platform that tries to connect voters to geography-specific municipal issues, as well as Twitter and Facebook ads and apps.

"Social media is the way to crack these condo towers," he said, adding it's a more authentic form of messaging and dialogue with voters than bulk mail and radio and television ads.

Social media is also integral to Sullivan's campaign.

"Facebook, websites, LinkedIn, Twitter, we do all that stuff," Sullivan said. (In the Twitterverse, Sullivan is leading with 860 followers compared to the Toner campaign's 360.) Sullivan has a "virtual office" and campaign workers can operate "pop-up phone banks" with an iPad or a smartphone and an Internet connection. "It's pretty necessary for this riding, absolutely."

The Liberal party even held a social media boot camp in February, to make sure candidates were on board.

The kind of dialogue that happens online can be better for democracy, said Sullivan's campaign co-chair Cristian Worthington. Traditional campaigns are boiled down into a very small number of messages, but online debates are broader, Worthington said.

"With the Internet, you can have different discussions with different people, and you can have more detailed discussions," he said.

Sullivan is still trying to talk to voters the old-fashioned way as well, including a bit of direct mail, and hanging around in front of buildings.

"Originally we had doughnuts and coffee, but we had to move to biscotti and chai lattes to keep people interested," he said.

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