

Beating the Odds: How Kristi Noem Won South Dakota



Kristi Noem



Click Rain, a Sioux Falls agency

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—Paul Ten Haken, President & Chief Online Strategist, Click Rain

What do you do when you’re a first-time Congressional nominee, in a wide prairie state, and you’re up against a three-term incumbent who won her last two elections with 67% and 69% of the vote?

If you’re Kristi Noem of South Dakota, you turn to Google AdWords to spread your message online. And you get some surprising results.

Kristi Noem for Congress

A South Dakota rancher with three kids, Kristi Noem was only 38 when she won the Republican nomination for U.S. Congress in 2010. The incumbent was Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, a Democrat with a powerful South Dakota name: Her grandfather was Governor Ralph Herseth and her father Lars was a state legislator for 20 years.

The Noem campaign knew that boosting their candidate’s name recognition would be job one. They turned to Click Rain, a Sioux Falls agency, to help them get the word out online. And Click Rain turned to AdWords.

“Going up against a well-known incumbent, we had to build awareness for Kristi Noem,” says Paul Ten Haken, president and chief online strategist for Click Rain. Many months before the election, the Noem campaign began a nationally-targeted AdWords campaign on broad keywords like “Kristi Noem” and “South Dakota Congressional race.”

“These national buys on Kristi’s name helped build her email and contribution base,” says Ten Haken. That would prove extremely valuable very soon.

“South Dakota’s Main Advocate”

As the race began in earnest, Noem’s campaign focused on key audiences, like females aged 25–45. “With a competitor who was also a young mother, it was important to position Kristi in a similar light,” says Ten Haken. “We also knew Kristi resonated well with farmers and ranchers, a key demographic in South Dakota.”

But wait: farmers and ranchers? Internet ads in rural South Dakota? “Despite common misconceptions, South Dakota is very wired,” says Ten Haken. “This is 2010. We knew that strong online strategies would be critical to reaching voters—especially that crucial group of undecideds.”

As the race heated up, the campaign began to target individual counties with keywords for specifics like in-state issues and Herseth Sandlin’s name.

“Targeting, targeting, targeting,” says Ten Haken. “AdWords lets us target at a granular level and get maximum mileage out of our media spend. We geotargeted search terms that we knew were hot-button topics. That helped us highlight the key differences between Kristi and her opponent as undecided voters turned to the web for candidate and issue research.”

About Google AdWords

Google AdWords™ is a performance-based advertising program that enables businesses large and small to advertise on Google and its network of partner web sites. Hundreds of thousands of businesses worldwide use AdWords for text, image, and video ads priced on a cost-per-click (CPC) and cost-per-impression (CPM) basis. Built on an auction-based system, AdWords is a highly quantifiable and cost-effective way to reach potential customers.

For more information, visit:
www.google.com/adwords

“The AdWords dashboard let us re-allocate budget, change messages, and re-assign ad channels multiple times every day based on what we were seeing from campaign performance,” says Ten Haken. “Then video began to really kick in. Our ability to repurpose video content through InStream and TrueView ads was huge. So was the sheer reach of the Google Display Network.”



Ad example

“On November 2nd, Put South Dakota First”

“In the final four days leading up to Election Day, we wanted to blanket the web with Kristi Noem messaging in text, visuals, and video,” says Ten Haken. “The Google political team helped us develop a strategy that would do that while also making sure our budget would last through Election Day.”

That final “network blast” proved essential. “In those final 96 hours, we ensured that Kristi Noem’s message was top of mind with South Dakota voters. It was critical in getting voters to the polls and pushing the campaign across the finish line.”

Noem’s Google search and display ad campaigns generated a staggering 4.2 million impressions in those final 96 hours. In a state with a population of 850,000, that sort of saturation helped put Noem over the top.

Representative-Elect Kristi Noem

When the last ballots were counted on November 2nd, Noem had received 48.1% to Herseth Sandlin’s 45.9%. Kristi Noem would be South Dakota’s new representative in Washington.

It was an impressive win for a first-time Congressional candidate, and a triumph for Click Rain as well. “Google AdWords was huge for this campaign,” says Ten Haken. “Critical campaign issues can go from cold to hot quickly, so using search and display to launch campaigns in a matter of hours really helped us be proactive.

“Now we’ve got an entirely new set of strategies in our toolbox to take to future campaigns. With the growing number of options in the AdWords platform—from search and text ads to display to video—we’ll certainly be urging other clients to make more aggressive online media buys.

“It worked for Kristi Noem, and it will work for them.”

