

Ben Carson's Rebellious Image Could Be Deceiving

U.S. presidential candidate Ben Carson may be the farthest Republican voters can get from the party's establishment: A retired neurosurgeon with a penchant for inflammatory comments who has never held, much less run, for elected office.

While many of his rivals are concentrating on hiring staff and renting offices in key states like New Hampshire and Iowa, Carson is pursuing a more unorthodox campaign, sometimes less visible to the naked eye, that has fueled his rise to the top of the polls. He is just behind Donald Trump, the front-runner for the Republican 2016 presidential nomination.

Helping Carson position himself as the answer to Americans' frustration with Washington gridlock is Barry Bennett, 52, a Washington insider, who is running a decidedly non-traditional campaign to build his client's brand.

Under Bennett's guidance, the campaign enables supporters to connect with Carson with unusual intimacy: they can get emailed or texted questions personally answered; or huddle on his Facebook page every day; and donors can even have their children's names posted on the campaign's bus.

Carson's campaign relies heavily on the Internet to get his message across, more so than the campaigns of his 13 rivals. The campaign's Facebook page has more than 4 million followers, while Carson's Instagram account has 127,000.

One popular Facebook feature shows fans holding handwritten explanations of their support for Carson. Bennett says urging supporters to take more of those photos was his idea to drive voter engagement.

Starting this month, the campaign began using a computer

program that lets one staffer answer up to 9,000 questions per day. Supporters will be able to text or email Carson a question and get an individual response. The program uses an algorithm that groups together questions that may look unique but are actually similar enough to elicit a single answer. Bennett says using the program was also his idea.

In an interview at Carson's campaign headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, Bennett saw no contradiction in a long-time Washington political operative helping a candidate whose main selling point is that he has never worked in Washington.

"We both believe Washington needs to be turned upside down," he said.

He also said he has no problems with some of Carson's more controversial statements. Carson has faced sharp criticism for comments suggesting the Holocaust could have been diminished if Jews had been armed, and that victims of a recent mass shooting in Oregon should have fought harder against the gunman.

"He doesn't speak in a way that Washington politicians are trained to speak, so to some people that sounds crazy but to me and most of America that sounds refreshing," Bennett said.

Indeed polls show that Carson has not been hurt at all by the comments. In fact, he may even have grown stronger.

An Insider's Story

Bennett, who has worked for 30 years as a political operative for hire, has also helped to mastermind a data-collection operation that has enabled Carson to tap into an army of small donors and out-raise his rivals.

As of Friday, Carson had raised more than \$37 million, from 725,000 donors, with the average donation size at \$51, according to a tally provided by Bennett. His nearest

Republican fund-raising rivals, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Florida Senator Marco Rubio, had each raised about \$25 million by the end of September, according to Federal Election Commission filings.

Bennett's career began when, as a student, he started doing data entry for President Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign. After working in the Ohio state legislature, Bennett moved to Washington, where he worked for the Republican National Committee and Ohio Senator Rob Portman and founded a media analysis firm. In short, he became a Washington insider.

"Who with a 202 (Washington) area code on their cell phone would even think of working for Carson?" said New Hampshire Republican strategist Dave Carney.

Carney said most veteran operatives would have balked at what many see as Carson's moonshot bid for the presidency. He gave Bennett credit for seeing something in Carson when others didn't.

"He saw an opportunity where most folks would turn their nose up at it."

Carson has used the opportunity to play with some out-of-the box ideas, like appealing to supporters for donations in exchange for having their children's names displayed on a campaign bus. The bus is now covered with hundreds of little stick figures whose shapes are filled in with names written in tiny script.

"He's got outsized talents with a moderate-sized ego," said Republican strategist Matt Schlapp, who knows Bennett. "Usually it's the other way around."

Romney Film

Until now, Bennett was probably best known for having produced *When Mitt Romney Came to Town* during the 2012 Republican

primaries, when he was working as an independent consultant. It was a 28-minute collection of interviews with people who lost their jobs after Romney's private equity firm Bain Capital took over their companies.

The film dampened voters' enthusiasm for Romney and forced his campaign to go into damage control mode, said a former Romney staffer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

"I wished he was on our side," he said of Bennett.

In 2015, Bennett has been on the other side of political attacks, defending Carson's controversial statements.

On Carson's comments encouraging people to fight back against gunmen, Bennett invoked the victims of the al Qaeda-hijacked airplane Flight 93, which crashed into a Pennsylvania field on Sept. 11, 2001. Investigators believe the passengers thwarted a planned attack when they stormed the cockpit and attempted, unsuccessfully, to regain control of the aircraft.

"That's what you hope you'd do in that situation," Bennett said. {eo}

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