

The Mercury News

January 5, 2010

Silicon Valley firm launches new smartphone app to gather initiative signatures

By Ken McLaughlin

Want something new to blame for all those arcane initiatives to sort out on Election Day?

A new Silicon Valley company launched a smartphone app on Tuesday that promises to get rid of the scroungy-looking guy begging strangers for signatures outside Trader Joe's by turning your finger into a pen and your iPhone into a political weapon.

The company, Verafirma, touts the technology as the ultimate grass-roots tool that would bring a smile to the face of Gov. Hiram Johnson, the California populist who nearly a century ago helped add "initiative, referendum and recall" to the state lexicon.

But some political observers fear that marrying the social-networking craze with politics — Hiram friending Facebook — will only further fuel California's runaway initiative industry.

The technology also works on an iPod Touch and the Verizon Droid and should soon work on other smartphones, said one of the firm's co-founders, Jude Barry, a San Jose political strategist.

But whether the idea will "work" for the California Secretary of State's Office is still very much an open question.

"The secretary of state does not endorse products," Nicole Winger, chief spokeswoman for Secretary of State Debra Bowen, said Tuesday.

Winger said Barry's firm had approached the staff in recent months about the technology, but that "there are still legal questions that need to be addressed" to see if the technology "aligns with state election law."

One question, she said, is whether a signature made on a touch screen meets the requirement that someone "personally affix" his or her signature on a petition. She said the issue may ultimately have to be resolved by either the Legislature, courts or both.

The app could get its test case soon. On Tuesday, Verafirma's technology began helping a conservative group gather electronic signatures for the "Citizen Power Initiative," which would ban political deductions from public employee paychecks. And, Barry said, a progressive labor organization is about to sign up with Verafirma to put a measure on the ballot.

The new technology is catching some serious buzz among local election officials, some of whom feel it could bring the signature-gathering process into the 21st century.

"I think it's transformative," said Warren Slocum, San Mateo County's chief elections officer.

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But at this point, he said, he doesn't know if it will make it much easier to put an initiative on the ballot. Sure, it will make it easier to sign a petition — but it also could discourage people from signing willy-nilly if they take more time to read them in the privacy of their own homes.

But, he said, submitting signatures electronically could make it a lot less expensive for county registrars to verify the hundreds of thousands of signatures needed to qualify measures.

"I think from our point of view, this is a good thing for the whole movement toward green voting because it reduces the carbon footprint and doesn't involve having a piece of paper shoved at you in front of a Safeway," Slocum said.

Michael Marubio, Verafirma's other co-founder, said the new app is an extension of the electronic-signature technology pioneered in Silicon Valley a quarter century ago. The technology, he said, is now in use in banking, the insurance industry and retail. He said there's no reason it can't be extended to gathering signatures — and perhaps one day voting.

Fifteen years ago, Marubio said, customers were cautious when they were asked to put their John Hancock on an electronic pad at a supermarket. "But now," he said, "they don't think twice about it."

The California initiative industry has grown into a huge business. The amount of money spent on initiatives increased from \$9 million in 1976 to \$330 million three decades later, according to the Center for Governmental Studies, a Los Angeles think tank.

"It's become a playground for very wealthy interests," said Tracy Westen, CEO of the organization.

The lavish spending has also increased skepticism among voters, who are increasingly inclined to vote no on initiatives when they feel the ballot is unwieldy. Many of those measures are placed on the ballot by professional signature-gathering firms, who pay the guys outside the supermarket a buck or two per signature — and sometimes more.

"This technology has the potential to educate signers, taking impulse-signing out of the equation," said Westen, referring to voters who might feel intimidated by signature gatherers. And if that happens, he said, people might become more thoughtful about which petitions they sign.

But then again, Westen said, the signature firms might see the technology as just another opportunity to collect even more signatures.

"It could," he said, "just become another tool in their arsenal."