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Brown team to apply winning strategy elsewhere

By MICHELLE R. SMITH and GLEN JOHNSON Associated Press Writers

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) - The political team that helped Scott Brown stage his improbable victory in the Massachusetts Senate race wants to apply its winning strategy elsewhere this election year. First stop: Rhode Island.

The Shawmut Group, led by aides to former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, is helping GOP congressional candidate John Loughlin, who's campaigning to replace retiring Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I.

The handiwork of two Shawmut Group principals, Eric Fehrstrom and Peter Flaherty, was evident in Loughlin's campaign announcement speech, staged shortly after Brown's win on Jan. 19. Loughlin, like Brown a state legislator and longtime member of the National Guard, said suspected terrorists should be handled in the military justice system, not civilian courts.

"When it comes to terrorists, we should be getting information from them, not the other way around," said Loughlin, reprising almost verbatim one of Brown's campaign lines.

It also was a shift for Loughlin, who previously had focused on taxes and his belief that Kennedy, the son of the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, the man Brown replaced, had lost touch with average people.

The Shawmut Group also is working with New York gubernatorial candidate Rick Lazio, Long Island congressional candidate George Demos and Massachusetts state auditor candidate Mary Connaughton. A relationship with Connecticut Republican Tom Foley ended when he switched from a U.S. Senate to gubernatorial campaign.

Their marquee "product," Brown himself, was in Arizona over the weekend, campaigning for Sen. John McCain. The 2008 GOP presidential nominee is facing a primary challenge from former Rep. J.D. Hayworth.

"I think the Brown campaign really was a perfect storm, but they learned a lot of lessons about the Internet, raising a lot of money and sharpening a message that can be taken to other states and races," said Scott Reed, a Republican political consultant who managed Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign.

"These consultants are hot, and it's logical to try to re-create the magic in another state. And all that is a warm-up for the main event, which is another run by Romney," said Reed.

Fehrstrom declined to comment about the firm's new campaigns. Flaherty, meanwhile, briefly considered his own race against the Democrat whom Brown defeated, Attorney General Martha Coakley, before deciding to stay focused on his family and his business.

While Loughlin's message on terrorism aligned him with one of the central tenets of Brown's campaign, it was a surprise in deeply Democratic Rhode Island. Here, in a state where the unemployment rate has neared 13 percent, the economy has been a hot topic.

A recent WPRI-TV poll found just 5 percent of respondents saying national security was the most important issue. More than half said jobs and the economy were most important.

The remainder of Loughlin's Feb. 4 announcement speech hewed closely to the Brown campaign playbook: terrorism, taxes, health care and government spending, as well as transparency in Washington.

Loughlin, like Brown, also complained that President Barack Obama's \$787 billion economic stimulus plan had not created a single job in Rhode Island, although the state's Republican governor has credited the program with creating or saving about 1,500 jobs. Loughlin later said he meant no "net" new jobs in a state where job losses have risen for years.

Loughlin says he was in talks with the Shawmut Group even before Brown's win, but settled on the firm because of its proximity to Rhode Island and understanding of the nuances of running in New England.

The common threads between his message and Brown's are coincidental, he said.

"Those similarities existed long before the Shawmut Group came on board. They haven't really changed at all," he said. "What they help you with is figuring out the best way to present information, more than anything else."

Fehrstrom and Flaherty were part of the brain trust behind Romney's unsuccessful 2008 presidential campaign. After Romney dropped out of the race, they joined Romney's campaign manager - and Karl Rove colleague - Beth Myers in founding the Shawmut Group. The trio has since added Rob Cole, once political director to former New York Gov. George Pataki.

They also were assisted in the Brown race by Beth Lindstrom, who now runs the new senator's Massachusetts office.

The Shawmut Group initially was headquartered out of the same Lexington, Mass., office building where Romney has his political action committee. Also located there is the

venture capital company founded by Romney's eldest son, Tagg. Shawmut now has a "virtual" office through the Internet, but its members regularly congregate in Lexington.

The concentration has created something of a campaign-in-waiting, with everyone working interchangeably on their own ventures but in unison on a second Romney run expected next year.

The Brown campaign gave the Shawmut Group a venue to test 2010 and 2012 campaign themes. Heading one state south to run against Ted Kennedy's son was a natural first stop. Cole functioned as Shawmut's point man there the day Loughlin announced his candidacy.

Cole's adherence to the Shawmut Group's belief in message discipline was evident when he twice tried to cut off reporters after a handful of questions following Loughlin's announcement speech - an unusual pivot for a candidate who provides his cell phone number on his campaign Web site and who makes it a point of pride to be accessible for questions.

Loughlin ended up staying until the last question was answered.