

INVENTING • SOLUTIONS • TOGETHER

## MESSAGE



**mailing address**  
540 N. Lake Pine Drive, #2  
Marblehead, Ohio 43440

**office**  
419-732-1770

**cell**  
419-260-3949

**email**  
[cathy@creativeoptionc.com](mailto:cathy@creativeoptionc.com)

**web**  
[www.creativeoptionc.com](http://www.creativeoptionc.com)

# MESSAGE

## Introduction – What is Message?

“Message” is one of those words that is often used – and often misused. For our purposes, a message is a brief statement of the reason people should vote for your issue. It is a single substantive idea or theme that becomes the central touchstone for every campaign communication. It is the primary tool used for motivating undecided voters, and it therefore must be proven persuasive through research. It is positive and proactive, value-based, and truthful. To be effective, a campaign message must be clear, concise, and compelling.

We don’t mean to say that a campaign message is a slogan, though messages can be expressed as slogans, as long as they can be backed up with facts and a set of issues that are compelling to the swing voters. Effective campaigns take the time to do their research, develop their campaign message, write that message into their campaign plan, and then base all campaign communications from that message. Every literature piece, every set of remarks to the local Kiwanis, every script for volunteer phoning should be “on message.”

Not even the best message will convert the unconvertible negative voters. A levy campaign is not an opportunity to educate the public on the intricacies of state funding for organizations or the finer points of distinction between inside millage and outside millage. Those efforts should be part of an organization’s ongoing public engagement work, but once you are in the throes of asking people to vote for a levy or bond issue, you need a single, persuasive message. You are asking people to support your levy in order to “keep our community strong”, “to avoid a disruption of services”, or in order to “build for the future” – whatever is convincing in your community.

**Effective campaigns take the time to do their research, develop their campaign message, write that message into their campaign plan, and then base all campaign communications from that message.**

## Tully Message Box

Well-prepared campaigns develop not only that portion of the message that is proactively making the organization’s case, but also takes into consideration the points opponents or anti-tax activists might raise. The “Tully Message Box,” developed by the late Paul Tully, an innovative campaign strategist, helps campaigns prepare for the four parts of a campaign dialogue:

What you say about yourself	What your opponents say about you
What you say about your opponents	What your opponents say about themselves

During the campaign planning phase, care should be taken to prepare not just your main selling points, but also how (and sometimes whether) you will respond to public comments by those who oppose your issue. It may be unnecessary, for example, to reply to a whispering campaign about the organization director being from out of town if the innuendo does not motivate swing voters against your issue. And the only way to know what motivates swing voters is to ask them.

## Research/Polling/Focus Groups

A key mistake often made by ballot issue campaigns is to assume that those serving on the committee can determine on their own what messages will work and which won't. But it is important to remember that those of us who work on campaign efforts are usually not swing voters. We are not persuadable voters. We don't make up our minds late in the process. We are not disinterested citizens. We read a paper every day, vote in every election, and we know where we stand on most issues. The very fact of being involved makes it a challenge for a group of campaign organizers to get into the hearts and minds of those we seek to influence.

What is your most powerful selling point to those swing or undecided voters? This is what you must find out. When an organization is actively involved in regular public engagement activities that drill down below the level of community leadership, it probably has a sense of the various strains of thought among the public. Use your instincts to determine which messages to test.

**A key mistake often made by ballot issue campaigns is to assume that those serving on the committee can determine on their own what messages will work and which won't.**

- ❖ **Polling.** There is no substitute for the data that can be generated through polling. A good poll uses a scientifically-randomized sample of the group you are testing, and in that way is very different from and more valuable than the kind of mailed paper surveys that rely on respondents to "opt in" to the pool. A good poll can reveal not only how the organization is perceived by the public, but also what the likelihood of success is for different millage levels. It will determine who and where your supporters (and opponents) are, as well as who and where your persuadable voters are. It can provide very useful information about what arguments swing voters find persuasive, including those issues anti-tax activists might raise. A good pollster will provide a report that summarizes and analyzes opportunities for targeting and assigns priorities for the campaign, even recommending specific language.

**A good pollster will provide a report that summarizes and analyzes opportunities for targeting and assigns priorities for the campaign, even recommending specific language.**

There are many options for getting good survey research. Your organization itself or Friends group can commission a poll, as long as they don't test specific "vote yes on Issue X" themes. Some communities have joint surveys where different groups and organizations each purchase a few questions and are billed only for that portion of the survey. Make sure they are testing likely voters for the specific election you are interested in (primary vs. general, presidential vs. off year) as opposed to just the public in general.

- ❖ **Focus Groups.** Focus groups are great tools. A focus group is generally a two-hour facilitated discussion of some 8-10 people drawn from your pool of undecided voters as identified by your pollster or by volunteers working from voter lists. It should be a rather homogenous group (women-only, for example) in order to encourage the greatest degree of sharing. It should be held in a neutral location and conducted by a neutral third party facilitator, not by someone associated with the organization. Notes or transcriptions are then furnished by the facilitator to the committee. Test your own draft messages as well as the opponents' projected line of attack – will what they say about themselves hurt us? Will we need to respond to it when they say what they say?

## Message Discipline

The messaging part of the campaign is often less about the creative burst that gives rise to a great core message than it is about the ability of those involved to repeat it over and over and over with mind-numbing regularity. As the campaign drags on to its conclusion, most people grow weary and bored with saying the same thing time and again – but that is when it is most important to do so. Undecided voters will be making up their minds at the end and are unlikely to give your issue much attention at all. If your campaign plan requires you to persuade significant numbers of swing voters to support your issue, then you must make sure they hear your most persuasive message at whatever moment they happen to tune in to the campaign. If you are distracted, you risk losing them.

**The messaging part of the campaign is often less about the creative burst that gives rise to a great core message than it is about the ability of those involved to repeat it over and over and over with mind-numbing regularity.**

Targeting the message means getting it out to the right people at the right moment for least cost of money and effort. Every campaign communication should be tested against the message statement. Everyone who speaks for the campaign should be able – in 30 seconds or less – to say clearly and concisely why people should vote for the issue. Talking points should be distributed, outlining the key messages, and providing supportive facts or illustrations. Anyone can learn to stay on message: overcoming the tedium of constant repetition is a skill that can be learned. Regular campaign meetings where members review the message in light of incoming information from focus groups or opponent activities help keep everyone on track.

Campaign season is noisy and difficult, with many candidates and issues competing for the attention of those undecided voters. Your most important tool for breaking through the clutter is a clear and compelling message that has been proven effective. Don't miss your chance to impress a voter favorably by talking about something random at the moment they are paying attention.

**Everyone who speaks for the campaign should be able – in 30 seconds or less – to say clearly and concisely why people should vote for the issue.**

## A Word about Messengers

People respond to people. In fact, in almost every situation the messenger is nearly as important as the message itself. The most compelling message ever crafted will not motivate undecided voters to support your cause if the person or people delivering it are not trusted or considered credible. Care should be taken when choosing a campaign chair (whose name is on the letterhead), the treasurer (whose name appears in the disclaimer on every piece of literature), and the official spokesperson. People may base their decision on the credibility of the people supporting the issue.

In the early stages of a campaign, as you work to recruit community leaders and others to endorse your issue, begin thinking about who among your supporters may be most influential with the segment of the public you are trying to influence. If you have the ability to do polling or focus groups, test your messengers when you test your message. A simple question like "Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for Issue X if you knew that John Brown endorsed it?" will yield the information you are seeking.

Some generic messengers generally test pretty well with the public: teachers, law enforcement officials, doctors, nurses. To the extent that you can recruit individuals and groups with those job descriptions to be the ones who ask your voters for support, you are probably serving yourself well. Use women to ask for women's support, senior citizens to ask for seniors' support, and people of modest means to ask people of modest means.

**The most compelling message ever crafted will not motivate undecided voters to support your cause if the person or people delivering it are not trusted or considered credible.**

## Conclusion

Convincing people to raise their own taxes is not easily done. Anyone seeking a yes vote on a levy or bond issue carries a heavy burden of proof that the issue matters. Some voters will never vote yes, others always will. To be successful, a campaign must motivate sometime supporters to be supportive this time. The organization must have a message that is more compelling to someone than keeping money in his or her own pocket. To do that, the campaign must know what motivates undecided voters and repeat that message in every campaign communication.

### *The Law of Unintended Adversaries*

Almost anyone who has worked on any kind of campaign effort can tell a story about when someone with a vested interest in the success of the campaign nonetheless caused damage. Often, these well-meaning supporters are trying to help, trying to make a point they think is very important... but they end up very off base.

Consider the case of a school levy effort in a small district in northern Ohio. Though the teacher's union and the administration had been at odds for some time, everyone agreed on the importance of passing a levy and the campaign committee was comprised of multiple stakeholders. But with the hectic pace of meetings and activities, no one really noticed that the teacher's union representatives were quite passive about the campaign message (vote to keep academics strong and give our children a leg up in a competitive world) and the special-election campaign plan (send persuasion messages to people likely to vote and drag all parents to the polls.) In the closing days of the campaign, convinced that the plan being implemented was inadequate, the union sent letters to every registered voter in the district, defending their higher-than-average wage and benefit packages. Needless to say, the district saw an unprecedented level of turnout for an August election and the levy was soundly defeated.

The teachers meant well, but were off message and off plan. They may well also have violated campaign finance laws by making such an "independent expenditure" even though they were part of the campaign committee. Campaign organizers must take care along the way that key stakeholders are not just present at meetings – but that they understand and agree with the campaign's plan and message.