

INVENTING • SOLUTIONS • TOGETHER

## OPINION LEADERS



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# OPINION LEADERS

## *Who are Opinion Leaders and why do they matter?*

As the next Election Day approaches, take a moment to ask your barber or hairdresser how many conversations he or she has had about issues on the upcoming ballot. Chances are they will tell you that the school levy or the zoning issue has been a subject of conversation in the shop. In fact, more likely than not your hairdresser has shared her opinion with 10 to 15 of her customers. The same is true for your minister, your mayor, the owner of your local diner, the secretary of your civic organization, and the principal of your son's elementary school. These people are opinion leaders. They are known to be active citizens and other people ask them what they think about issues. Because they are hugely influential, influencing them is an important part of the early stages of your campaign.

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## *Phase 2 – The Opinion Leaders Campaign*

We suggest that there are three phases of a campaign: 1) preparation, 2) opinion leaders, and 3) voter contact. Phase 3 is very intense and lasts for the final 30 days of the campaign. For the 90 days before that, however, your focus is on influencing your community's opinion leaders. You are working to make sure they understand your levy request and know your key arguments for supporting it. You are asking for individual and group endorsements and keeping their names on a list for later use. You are attending community events, speaking to all civic organizations, writing and placing articles in the newsletter of any group who will allow it. You are having individual meetings with elected officials, school leaders, business and industry leaders, editorial boards, and others.

But, these activities should not be confused with voter contact. Sadly, most voters are not actively engaged in the life of the community. If your campaign's only focus is to make sure to attend every Kiwanis luncheon and every church picnic, you will not in the end have gotten your word out to very many voters. Though they are time-consuming and necessary, these activities are not a substitute for the expensive mail, phoning, and door-to-door work the campaign must do to reach your targeted voters. Your voter contact programs are enhanced by your opinion leader work, however. Not only are you priming the pump, but you are also generating much useful material for your literature and phone scripts.

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## *Identifying the Opinion Leaders*

Basically, anyone who has an interest in your decisions, or who has the power to inhibit implementation of your plans is a stakeholder. Opinion leaders are identified in very much the same way – anyone who has the ability to influence the decision of your targeted voters. In some cases, these will not be specific to a unique group. Popular elected officials, for example, can be influential with a wide variety of people. In other cases you are looking for business leaders to influence business people, union leaders to influence union members, senior leaders to influence senior citizens, women leaders to influence women, and so on.

**If you don't know who others in your community respect, ask around.**

Many constituent groups have their own natural leaders. Whether they are demographically-based, issue-based, or circle-of-influence-based, every group is comprised of individuals who follow the lead of others. Use your judgment and ask around when determining who those people are. It may seem like a natural that having the support of the president of the local chamber of commerce will help your case in the business community, but perhaps not. Maybe the support of the past president would be better, or maybe it is someone from the Rotary board. If you don't know who others in your community respect, ask around. The point here is to be deliberate about building your list of opinion leaders whose support you want to cultivate, and that the list be tied to your targeted voters.

## ***Influencing Opinion Leaders***

Once you have developed your list of key community leaders, you'll want to begin grooming them for their support. If you have employed the basic principles of community engagement you will be ahead of the game. If not, you'll need to begin immediately to set up individual meetings, ask for opportunities to address their groups, add them to your newsletter mailing list, whatever you do with your other key supporters. Your job is to 1) keep them in the know about what you are doing, 2) make your case for your issue, and 3) ask them for their support. Once open, the line of communication must go two ways: you must listen as much as you speak.

**Don't forget to recognize and reward your early supporters.**

Like a stone thrown into a pond, every community has paths of influence that resemble concentric circles rippling outward from the center. Think of your local school system as an example. If you have identified that the superintendent is hugely influential with the building principals and with the leaders of the parent group, you'll want to make sure he understands your levy and is supportive. Ask him to sign an endorsement letter. Then, ask him to introduce you to the rest of the administrative team, so you can ask for their support as well. Send a letter announcing his endorsement to the parent group, or ask him to put a short letter in their newsletter. Have supportive building principals mention your levy in teacher staff meetings, or on Parent's Day. Move the influence out from the center.

Don't forget to recognize and reward your early supporters. In addition to being influential members of the community, they are also potential sources of volunteers and perhaps of financial support for the campaign. Keep the communications flowing throughout the campaign and avoid letting them feel taken for granted. By sending out insider information, asking their opinion, and recognizing their support at every opportunity, you will be keeping your friends on your side or at worst will know first hand if their opinion should change.

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## ***Speakers' Bureau***

Boards members are effective volunteers to use as part of the campaign's speakers' bureau. The coordinator of the levy speakers' bureau should obtain a list of organizations with which each trustee is affiliated. The levy speakers' bureau coordinator needs to make sure that speakers get some training and a background packet before they are sent out to speak.

The speakers' bureau coordinator needs to begin targeting audiences early enough in the election process to get speakers to a meeting of each group. Even though it is a big job, it is one that can be managed from a desk and phone in a home. The coordinator does not need to be a speaker, just someone with good organizational skills. The coordinator may delegate specific tasks to some volunteers, but the speakers' bureau will be easier to manage with only one coordinator. To coordinate a speakers' bureau one must:

- (1) Find target audiences. Target audiences may be selected from a wide variety of sources, including your list of supporters.
- (2) Contact the audiences. Each targeted group should receive a letter offering a speaker for one of the group's meetings. Offer the group two or more options, such as a speaker for the entire program or a five-minute explanation of the levy issue. Many groups will respond to the letter; however, most will need a follow-up phone call to schedule the meeting.
- (3) Assign speakers to the schedule. You will need a core group of speakers. All speakers need training, which should include:
  - Talking points,
  - Background information,
  - A display/chart to use for the discussion, and
  - Handouts for the audience.

**Since a public refusal may be very damaging to a campaign, know the likely outcome before asking for the endorsement resolution.**

At a public meeting, such as a city council meeting, make a short presentation regarding the facts of the issue and ask them to adopt a resolution of support. The resolution may be used in other campaign publicity. Since a public refusal may be very damaging to a campaign, know the likely outcome before asking for the endorsement resolution.

## **Campaign Endorsements**

One of your campaign's most important assets is the perception that you have a broad base of support for your issue. As individual voters are making up their minds about how they will vote, they will often look to see who is for an issue and who is against it. If they see that someone they respect has endorsed you, they may be persuaded to do the same. Indeed, all that a voter may know about an issue is that someone they trust to be in the know is supporting it.

**It is your job to make sure that the voters in your community know who your supporters are.**

From the beginning of your efforts you should be seeking the endorsement of groups and individuals. Whenever you get a positive answer to the question "Will you support us?" get a handshake on it. When someone tells you that you may publish their name as a supporter, go ahead and get a signature on an endorsement letter or petition. In general, people take their word very seriously. Once they have committed their support to you, they will usually follow that through all the way to the ballot box. Get that handshake or signature early.

It is your job to make sure that the voters in your community know who your supporters are. For very important endorsers, such as a labor union official, or a popular mayor or county commissioner, you may choose to endeavor media coverage by conducting a press event or at least doing a release. You can also do this for a large, diverse collection of endorsers. Signature ads are another way to get the word out to others. Sometimes people who agree to have their names used will be willing to contribute some small amount, like \$25 or \$35, in order to purchase an ad in the newspaper listing the names of all supporters. Finally, campaign brochures and flyers mailed to targeted voters can be designed around quotes from and pictures of key endorsers or big lists of supporters.

## **Conclusion**

Like anything else, the best opinion leaders campaign is planned, organized, executed with precision, and followed up with careful evaluation. By taking care to map out who influences whom in your community, and working from the center of concentric circles of influence outward to the targeted voter groups, you will be preparing for the success of your issue. The more influential supporters you have, the better off you are in the final phase of your campaign, when you turn your attention to active voters.