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CAMPAIGN VISIBILITY



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VISIBILITY

What is Visibility?

Everyone is familiar with campaign visibility because we **see** so much of it every Election Day. Yard signs, T-shirts on volunteers, bumper stickers, and the like help create a sense of momentum and broad community support for the campaign. Care should be taken, however, not to confuse visibility efforts with voter contact. Yard signs do not persuade undecided voters to support your cause, but they can persuade opinion leaders, donors, and other volunteers that you have an active campaign.

Visibility efforts serve to remind pro-levy voters that Election Day is approaching, and when done properly, they also point supporters to the ballot issue number. The flip side of this, of course, is that such efforts do the same for anti-levy voters. Though opponents are somewhat more likely to vote in an off-year election than supporters are, it is still important in campaign planning to weigh the pros and cons of generating a great deal of visibility for your levy. In any event, voter contact programs should constitute 70% of your campaign budget, so unless you plan to raise a great deal of money, funding for visibility items will be limited.

A further word of caution: Because it is so, well, visible, this part of a campaign can get people hollering at each other faster than anything else. Some of the worst arguments on campaign teams are about the color of the yard signs or whether or not to do bumper stickers. This is another reason why it is especially important to do your planning and make such decisions early, before the intense days of the final push.

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Lawn Signs

A proper lawn sign effort takes a great deal of planning and organizing. The most effective signs evoke an image of the story you are trying to tell, perhaps by using a graphic that is repeated on literature, but mostly lawn signs deliver the key campaign message: "Vote FOR Issue X." To make the biggest impression, lawn signs should sprout up overnight 30 days before the election and should be placed in areas of highest impact: more main thoroughfares, fewer cul-de-sacs.

Another common tactic is to save as many lawn signs as there are polling locations in your district until the night before the election, and then use these to "dress" the polling locations themselves. Of course, be sure to follow all legal distance requirements, but for this one day most folks do not mind if you post a sign on public property. If there is no place to put a sign in the ground, especially at a high-volume polling place, consider decorating a car and leaving it near the entrance of the location.

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Billboards and Oversized Yard Signs

Many outdoor advertising firms book their billboard locations months in advance, so this is one of those items for which early planning is a must. Plan to spend upwards of \$500 per billboard for the last 30 days of the campaign if you are going to do it. Of course, you are looking to place these at the most well-traveled places. They should have visual appeal, deliver your message, tell your story by evoking graphics and images repeated from campaign literature, direct people to the right place on the ballot, and ask for a yes vote.

Another option that can work well in low-budget, grassroots campaigns is large hand-painted signs, on the order of 4' X 8', that can be placed strategically throughout the district. Some volunteers love the challenge of painting the old plywood, and rigging up ways to set it up. Make sure to use the same colors and graphic images if possible, to include the key message, ballot number, and the important "Vote Yes" request. Disclaimers must appear on anything done for the campaign committee, even if donated by a volunteer. You can meet the requirements by simply sticking a label on the sign itself that says "Authorized by the Committee to Support the Anytown Campaign Committee, paid for by volunteers."

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Newspaper Ads

Though some might think of them as voter contact, we are putting newspaper ads in the category of visibility because they really function better—when they fit into the budget—as a means of communicating with opinion leaders. Though ads can be expensive, savvy organizers in some communities have learned that one way to build a relationship with a local newspaper publisher is to make sure he or she knows you are planning to buy ad space.

When you are writing your plan, if you have opinion leader goals that are best served by the placement of newspaper ads, by all means do it. Likewise, if you decide against buying ads but later find that you have raised more money than your budget requires, a well-placed and well-timed ad could be just the right supplement to your other efforts. As always, make sure the ad evokes a familiar graphic image, delivers your message, asks for a yes vote, and points people to the right place on the ballot.

Endorsement lists work well with newspaper ads: people like seeing their name in the paper (as long as it is spelled correctly) and long lists of supporters can be very impressive. Some campaigns have successfully raised money for the purpose of placing an endorsement ad. This is a good way to edify ad enthusiasts without diverting campaign resources from your voter contact program.

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Giveaway Items

Love them or hate them, giveaway items like emery boards, balloons, rulers, pens, and pencils seem to pop up everywhere at election time. Though they do not substitute for literature or other persuasion efforts, they can be a fairly effective way of connecting to people in the district, and might even constitute voter contact if they are handed out directly (rather than left in a bucket at a fair booth, for example, where children can grab them by the handful.) If you have a key supporter who is very keen to have them, and if you find a vendor with an affordable price for mass merchandise of this sort, and you can work it into your budget without hurting other efforts, go ahead and make the purchase. You might keep them generic, without reference to the ballot number or the date of the election, so that leftovers can be stored for future years.

Buttons, Bumper Stickers, and T-Shirts

On their own, a button, bumper sticker, or T-Shirt might make a way to deliver a simple message and provide visibility for the campaign, but their greater impact comes from being repeatedly seen on people or cars. Especially effective in large numbers, these visibility items can be purchased relatively inexpensively. Try not to buy more than you think you can reasonably distribute and take care not to cut in to your voter contact budget. Ask the people to whom you give them not to let them sit inside their homes, but to wear them proudly every chance they get.

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Events

Fairs, festivals, ball games, and parades are hard for campaign organizers to resist since they seem to represent large gatherings of people with whom to make contact. But the truth is most people attending such events have no interest in a campaign brochure or flyer, much less in a conversation about the issue. Well-organized visibility efforts work well here if they create a way to land the campaign's key message on voters without interrupting their day. Groups of volunteers milling about in campaign T-shirts or carrying signs will get noticed and won't create an irritation if they take care to not engage voters who wish to be left alone. Such volunteers can always have endorsement or volunteer cards to share with those who indicate an interest. A well-decorated festival booth can be a good place from which to distribute giveaway items or collect volunteers, donations, or yard sign locations, but they take a great deal of volunteer energy, so plan your involvement carefully.

Conclusion

Campaign managers who properly choose to focus time and money on direct voter contact through door-to-door canvassing, mailings, and telephone calls often find themselves faced with opinion leaders, donors, and volunteers who worry that the campaign is moribund because they don't see yard signs and a booth at every community fair. All things being equal, we advise you to spend limited resources on direct voter contact and to forego visibility – but you must balance the trade-off in terms of your supporters who want to **see** the campaign. Keeping volunteers and donors engaged and involved is an important goal, worth the investment of a few hundred dollars in newspaper ads, for example. Only you can decide what is right for your district. As always, make such decisions early in the campaign planning process and do your best to have everyone on board before the final crunch.