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VOTER CONTACT METHODS



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VOTER CONTACT METHODS

What is Voter Contact?

The largest part of every campaign effort should be in voter contact - directly or indirectly communicating your message to targeted voters. Though planned well in advance, voter contact programs are executed in the last 30 days of the campaign, when voters are more likely to pay attention and some are still deciding. The more contacts you make with a voter, the more likely you are to increase awareness of your issue, persuade swing voters to vote your way, and get supporters out on Election Day.

Direct contact is more effective, but also more time consuming and costly than indirect contact. A well-trained volunteer going door-to-door on a Saturday morning is likely to be very persuasive with the voters s/he speaks to personally, but the number of actual contacts is much more limited than, say, a radio ad. There are other trade offs to think through as well. While phone calling is somewhat less persuasive with undecided voters than door knocking, it can be more reliable as a tool for identification of voter preferences. (People are more likely to express indecision or opposition on the phone than they are in person.) So, before choosing which methods of voter contact to use, decide on what your goals are.

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Other considerations:

- ❖ Is the district rural or more compact and “walkable”?
- ❖ Can you afford to do mailings? Or should you plan for door-to-door literature distribution?
- ❖ Do you have enough volunteers to put together an effective phonebank?
- ❖ Is there a radio or TV station covering your district with affordable ad space?

You’ll want to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of your voter contact efforts by making sure that individual voters get the kind of messages they need. Supporters get “thank you and please remember to vote” messages, while undecided voters get persuasion messages, and opponents are released without contact.

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The process of finding out where voters stand on your issue – called “Voter ID” – is done using voter contact methods and is tracked on the central voter database. With that information carefully organized, you can optimize your subsequent voter contacts by directing your persuasion efforts at the truly undecided and by pulling your supporters to the polls on Election Day.

Literature

Well-designed literature pieces focused on core message points are an important component of every successful campaign. Whether mailed or delivered door-to-door, brochures and flyers outlining the key reasons people should support your issue can be very effective tools, especially if care is taken to mix words and text with pictures and other graphic images. In local races where the district represents only a small portion of the total media market, this is the most cost effective method of indirect voter contact.

Standard literature formats include Question-and-Answer, Fact Sheets, Endorsement Lists, Single-Issue pieces, and Election Day reminders. Literature can take the shape of a tri-fold brochure, over-sized postcard, flyer,

single-fold self-mailer, door hanger, standard letter in an envelope, and more. The possibilities are virtually limitless.

It is common for members of a campaign team to disagree with each other about the style and amount of detail that should be given in written material, but those can often be settled by having more than one piece. If you have a graphic artist or designer on the campaign team, that's great. Ask for their professional help and take their advice. Otherwise, consideration should be given to adding a designer to your budget.

Some tips for maximizing the effectiveness of your campaign literature:

- ❖ Make sure to use tested and agreed-to message points.
- ❖ Every literature piece should directly ask: "Please vote for Issue X." This could be placed in several places on a standard piece of literature and be clearly visible to a voter looking at the piece for two seconds on the way to the trash can.
- ❖ Use lots of pictures, especially of children and senior citizens, and other graphic elements that tell your story.
- ❖ Bullet points and facts are unlikely to be read by many voters, but there is also value in being forthcoming with information. Make sure the facts or statistics you use support your key message points. Use bolding or highlighting to focus attention on a key point.
- ❖ Every piece of literature must contain a disclaimer. Make sure you are familiar with campaign finance laws.
- ❖ Think about messengers: if you have well-known and respected members of the community supporting your issue, ask for their signature on a letter, or use a picture or quote from them.
- ❖ Make sure voters have either a website or phone number to go to for more information.
- ❖ Make sure to have several people proofread your piece several times. Nothing stings like finding an error after you've printed a thousand copies of something.

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Literature drops

The term "literature drop" refers to the practice of delivering written campaign material directly to voter homes, without making an effort to speak to each voter. You may choose to blanket every house in a target-rich area, or leave literature only at the homes of likely voters. The goal of a literature drop is to save postage and get the message out. It should be employed by campaigns that have many active volunteers.

Some tips for maximizing the effectiveness of your literature drop:

- ❖ Try to avoid having your literature go out with material from other campaigns. While volunteers may wish to double up, it is best to not confuse the message.
- ❖ Identify areas that can realistically be covered by someone on foot. Rural areas create wear and tear on volunteers. Mail is a better option for some neighborhoods.
- ❖ Recruit more volunteers than you think you need, and make sure to train them well. Provide them with maps and written instructions. Ask them to return the maps marked with the areas they covered and also to return unused literature.
- ❖ It is often effective to let volunteers go out in pairs, covering two sides of a street quickly and efficiently. If you have teenage volunteers, try to pair them with adults.
- ❖ Stick to the sidewalks. Do not walk on lawns.
- ❖ Never put literature in a mailbox. Place it under a welcome mat, or inside a screen door. Consider using a "door hanger" format if you plan to do a great deal of literature dropping.

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Mail

A typical levy campaign will rely heavily on mail. One of the most cost effective and efficient methods of voter contact, the biggest chunk of most budgets will be printing and postage. There are two kinds of mail used in campaigns:

- ❖ **Direct mail** is designed to deliver a well-designed and well-written message to a mass audience of likely voters, either for persuasion or for turnout purposes. It should be targeted based on likelihood of voting, geographic area, demographic information, and so on. Because it goes out to so many, direct mail tends to be less personal and to go out bulk rate. It is your primary program.
- ❖ **Supplemental mail** consists of letters and postcards sent to lists of specially- targeted groups, such as a parent’s club, church group, or local reading circle. When we recruit volunteers to do handwritten notes to their neighbors, we are creating a special kind of additional contact that supplements the main voter contact program. Supplemental mail can be very personal, and generally goes out first-class.

Remember that repetition gets results, and three mail pieces can be sent to a smaller group of likely voters for the cost of sending one piece to every registered voter in the district.

When designing your mail plan, you will want to think through your campaign’s message, targeting, budget, timeline, and what photographs you will need. Remember that repetition gets results, and three mail pieces can be sent to a smaller group of likely voters for the cost of sending one piece to every registered voter in the district. Create a budget for each piece based on how many will be printed, whether it is one color or four, whether it will be folded, what the postage rate will be, and whether you are doing the mailing with volunteers using labels or whether you have a mail house available.

Know your timelines. In order to be in voter mailboxes on a certain date, a piece will have to be delivered to the post office by a certain date, finalized with the printer by a date before that, have approved copy before that and so on. Payment deadlines are also important. You’ll need to have sufficient money in the bank to pay for postage the day you take your mail to the post office.

Mail can very effectively be employed in combination with other methods of voter contact. For example, you might consider sending letters to a certain neighborhood the week before a Saturday morning door-to-door effort. Alternatively, you might use supplemental mail to follow up with voters after volunteers have spoken to them on the phone or on their doorstep. Building upon other contacts maximizes the effectiveness of your printing and postage.

Quality matters. To be noticed at that busy time before Election Day, mail must have a consistent, regularly-repeated message and an attractive look.

Tips for effectively using mail as a method of voter contact:

- ❖ When developing mail pieces, follow the tips in the literature section above.
- ❖ Make it look as personal as possible, using technology to put “Dear Mary” rather than “Dear Voter” on letters. Even when mailing bulk, you can still use a bulk rate stamp rather than a meter mark or pre-printed mail permit number.
- ❖ Quality matters. To be noticed at that busy time before Election Day, mail must have a consistent, regularly-repeated message and an attractive look.
- ❖ Studies have shown that mail arriving with a crooked label is less likely to be opened. Take the time to make sure the envelope is neat, even if you are doing 3,000 of them.
- ❖ Timing is very important – and very difficult. Most direct mail should be timed to arrive in the last 12 days before Election Day. Two exceptions to this rule are 1) the mail that goes out to supporters encouraging them to vote absentee, 2) the mail that goes to voters before a door knock or telephone call.
- ❖ Bulk mail must be pre-sorted and bundled before it is sent to the post office – check with postmaster, know the rules, and plan ahead!

Telephones

Though more and more of us are employing modern technology to control incoming telephone calls and minimize bothersome interruptions, the telephone remains an effective tool of voter contact, especially for small issue-based campaigns. When done properly, a telephone program can reach large numbers of persuadable voters relatively inexpensively. The key to planning a telephone program is to outline the goals you wish to accomplish. Are you trying to persuade undecided voters? Or are you identifying voter preferences?

You can use the telephone to ask voters one by one whether they support your effort while simultaneously delivering a brief persuasion message. The information is then recorded on the voter database and used to make decisions about future contacts with that voter – whether to send persuasion mail, to work to make sure they turn out on Election Day, or drop them from the list altogether.

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Another very effective use of telephones is to follow up on invitations to campaign events like fundraisers, town hall meetings, support rallies, and the like. These are easy calls for volunteers to make, and even without doing a hard-sell script, you can deliver the message to the voter household that you have an energetic campaign going on.

Some tips for maximizing the effectiveness of telephone-based voter contact efforts:

- ❖ One centralized phone bank is easiest to manage, but there will always be volunteers who offer to make calls from home. You never want to turn away a volunteer, so use home phoners to supplement the main program.
- ❖ Installing phone lines is expensive, so look for someone willing to donate use of their phones for this purpose: car dealers, union halls, realty offices, insurance companies, banks. Remember that the use of phone lines represents an in-kind contribution that should be reported on the campaign finance forms.
- ❖ Always recruit more volunteers than you think you need. If you have more volunteers show up than available phone lines, see if some people are willing to use cell phones. Sometimes campaigns can purchase these inexpensively or even get them donated.
- ❖ Make sure your volunteers have sufficient training and instruction to make them feel comfortable on the phones. Provide beverages and snacks.
- ❖ Some volunteers prefer working word for word from a script, others have a chattier style. As long as they are using agreed-to message points, let them go.
- ❖ Ask volunteers to avoid getting into long discussions with voters and certainly to never argue with a voter. You don't have to persuade every voter in order to win.
- ❖ Messages left on an answering machine or voice mail system by a volunteer can be very effective at delivering a persuasion or voter turnout message.
- ❖ Consider contracting with a professional phone vendor, especially if you don't have a large corps of committed volunteers. While "robocalls" probably have little use as a method of persuasion in small districts, most professional phone vendors have a live call service that may well fit your budget.
- ❖ Campaigns are excluded from "Do Not Call" registries. (Politicians wrote the laws!) Still, some people may grumble at a volunteer who calls. Instruct your volunteers to apologize and get off the line quickly. Mark the voter as an opponent on your list and don't call them back.
- ❖ Most voter files you get from the Board of Elections will not have phone numbers. If your district is small enough, you might recruit volunteers to look up numbers. Otherwise, you might consider paying for a phone match service from a vendor.

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- ❖ The best times to call people at their home are 4:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m. on weekdays, and 10:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. Pay attention to any important events that will involve many people in your area (i.e. don't call during OSU football games.)
- ❖ When budgeting, expect a volunteer to complete 12 calls per hour. If you need to identify 3,000 voters who support your effort, expect to recruit 250 hours of volunteer time. If you have five lines, you'll need to set up 25 two-hour shifts to make your goal.

Door-to-Door

Nothing leaves a bigger impression on an undecided voter than getting a visit from a neighbor or board member who asks them to support an issue. Even if they aren't inclined to support you, and even if they don't particularly take the time to learn about your issue, just knowing that someone cares enough to go door-to-door talking to neighbors is persuasive. Of course, these efforts take lots of volunteer time to organize and manage, but if you have enough people it can be well worth the effort.

To maximize the use of volunteer foot canvassers, make sure you are putting people in precincts where there is a high concentration of persuadable likely voters. After your targeting is complete, some precincts will be identified as "walkable" while others will have to be reached by your phone or mail programs.

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Because face-to-face conversations are so personal, it is especially important to make sure your volunteers have proper training. You will want to give them both verbal and written instructions about the issue and talking points, but also about the rules of going door-to-door: Don't walk on lawns, don't put literature in mailboxes, don't get into arguments with voters, etc. In addition to instruction sheets and scripts, volunteers should get maps, voter lists, and campaign literature. Make sure your script contains a request to supporters for a yard sign location, a donation, or help as a volunteer.

As with other voter contact methods, door-to-door effectiveness can be increased by doing it in conjunction with other contacts. Send a letter in advance letting people know volunteers will soon be in their neighborhood. Arrange for undecided voters you meet to get a follow up phone call from the director or a board member offering to answer questions.

Some tips for maximizing the effectiveness of your door-to-door voter contact program:

- ❖ The volunteer kit is a fundamental component of your door-to-door effort and preparing materials is time consuming. Each walker should have a name tag and a clip board with: written instructions, script, maps, voter list, and literature.
- ❖ Other things walkers might have with them include: endorsement cards, sign-up sheets for lawn signs, and donation envelopes to give to supporters they meet.
- ❖ Recruit more volunteers than you think you need and let volunteers go out in pairs. Match teenagers with adults.
- ❖ Ask volunteers to return to a central location when they are finished to turn in their marked-up lists, maps, and leftover literature. Debrief with them to learn what they heard.
- ❖ Try to find one volunteer to be responsible for organizing the door-to-door part of the campaign. This is a huge effort and merits designated personnel.

Radio/TV Ads

Paid advertisements, whether radio or TV, can be an important part of some campaign efforts, depending upon the size of the district relative to the media market, the number of voters you need to reach, and your budget. Such ads can reinforce your main message and enhance your other voter contact efforts. Care should be taken to ensure that ad campaigns are not regarded as a substitute for direct voter contact. While they can serve an important purpose, newspaper ads do not fall into the voter contact category because only a percentage of voters read a newspaper regularly.

There are two phases to broadcast advertising: producing your spot, and purchasing the air time. Obviously, your ad must be on-message and ear- and eye-catching. You are competing with many other efforts to attract voter attention, especially at a General Election. If you can't afford professional help producing a spot, check with your local stations to see what services their staff might provide. Radio can usually be recorded at a radio station, and they will often agree to feed the recording to other stations you designate. (It is all done electronically these days.) TV spots are more difficult to produce locally, but it can be done. Schools and colleges are great places to seek help.

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Generally speaking, cable TV is more affordable than broadcast TV. Even more importantly, cable TV systems will help you appeal to your targeted voters. (If you are appealing to women, for example, your spot could run during Oprah or during the morning news.) Again, if you are unable to afford the assistance of a professional buyer, contact your local cable company for more information. They will be delighted to assist you with understanding costs, etc. and maybe even with production. Don't be afraid to call other campaign committees who may have run ads in your area.

Other tips for producing and placing broadcast ads:

- ❖ Most ads are produced in 30- and 60-second blocks, and those seconds go by quickly. Rehearse your script several times before going to the studio to make sure you fit the allotted time segment.
- ❖ All ads must have the "paid for by" disclaimer. See the section on campaign finance laws for more information.
- ❖ As with print media, you'll want to take care to pick a messenger who is well-respected in the community.
- ❖ Make sure your ad includes an "ask" such as "Please vote FOR Issue X." It is most helpful for your supporters to know where to look for you on the ballot, so including that issue number is important.
- ❖ Stay on message, stay on message, stay on message.

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Events

It's true. Very few voters show up to events designed to teach them about the issues they'll be facing on Election Day. You can organize town hall meeting after town hall meeting, house party and after house party, and still only meet a tiny portion of the electorate – and then it's usually just preaching to the choir (plus a heckler or two.) But does that mean you have failed? Absolutely not. You may well have achieved some important campaign goals.

Voters who receive a personalized invitation to a neighborhood information session about the organization's issue may well choose not to attend, but the invitation itself counts as voter contact. Additionally, events make a great excuse to call voters on the phone – another positive campaign contact.

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Announcements about such events are often printed in the paper, letting your community leadership see you are out there “working it.” Journalists and other opinion leaders will note that you are forthcoming with information and doing all you can to get the word out. It shows you aren't afraid of the public. They may not show up, but they've quietly noted you are running an energetic campaign.

Some tips for using events as a method of voter contact:

- ❖ If someone is willing to throw a house party or coffee, ask them if you can invite targeted voters from the surrounding precinct. Few will come, but they'll note the invitation.
- ❖ Make sure your invitation contains key messages like “Vote FOR Issue X” and “Election Day is November 4.”
- ❖ Follow up invitations with phone calls, and make sure to note anything you learn about voter attitudes on your database.
- ❖ When supporters do come to events, try to convert them into a volunteer, a donor, or at least a yard sign location. People who show up for these things often expect to be asked to help. You don't want to let them down!

Conclusion

To be most effective, the various voter contact methods should be planned to work in coordination with each other. As with everything else in a campaign, the more you plan and organize before implementation, the better off you will be. Once you have done your targeting, have determined the magic number of voters you will need on Election Day, and established your campaign goals, you will have a clearer idea of which methods of voter contact make most sense for you. Make sure you are using realistic estimates of available resources money-wise and people-wise before finalizing your plan, and put the time in to make sure everyone associated with the campaign is on the same page before you get to the critical last 30 days.