Lessons Learned in the Campaign Trenches

A 10-Part Series Leading Up to Election Day

Lesson #1:

Successful bond campaigns have three things in common:

New Trier Township High School District 203, IL

Voters in District 203 strongly supported an $89 million bond referendum in 2014. Proceeds of the voter-approved bond measure helped fund an addition to the District's high school in Winnetka. The referendum passed with 65% support, which was a significant accomplishment given that their previous bond proposal had only garnered 35% support.

How did New Trier completely flip the results? They made a commitment to refine their request by carefully listening to local taxpayers, including those who were strongly opposed to the original referendum. New Trier Now, a citizen-led campaign committee, then expertly advocated for the updated funding proposal by raising sufficient funds, leveraging poll-driven messaging and allowing residents who had opposed the original referendum to serve as the face of the new campaign.

While money, message and messengers played a big part in delivering success at the polls, so did the District's unwavering commitment to listen to all community stakeholders and then take action accordingly.

Money

Enough funds to effectively communicate with the right target audience.

Jesse Unruh, speaker of the California Assembly from 1961 to 1968, coined the phrase, "Money is the mother's milk of politics." He was precisely right. Without funding, it's difficult to get the word out, especially in communities with a larger electorate. While some campaign tools are more effective than others, local bond campaigns that are hitting on all cylinders often rely on targeted direct mail, social media, print and digital advertising, canvassing, signage and phone banking. A good general rule when estimating the amount of campaign funds needed for a strong local bond campaign is $2 to $4 per registered voter.

Message

Branding and messaging that is guided by polling.

Campaign committees that have access to public opinion research do not need to guess when it comes to the priority that taxpayers place on various parts of a bond proposal. Furthermore, polling can define which messages resonate most with voters and how that may differ across various demographics: age, gender, parent versus non-parent, homeowner versus renter, party affiliation, among others. Crafting persuasive campaign messaging is both an art and a science.

Messengers

Advocates who can effectively deliver a winning campaign message.
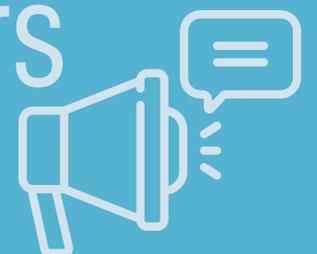
Voters often look for cues when it comes to how to vote on tax-related referenda. It's important to carefully select who will be the face of a campaign (chair, co-chairs, treasurer) as well as who may appear in direct mailers, print ads, the campaign's website and other campaign tools. Ideally, a campaign's messengers will represent a broad cross-section of the electorate. For example, committees advocating for a school bond will want to go beyond showcasing parents who are supportive of the referendum and include supporters who do not have school-age children, local business owners, fiscally conservative voters, seniors and other community members who are not perceived as an automatic "yes vote."

This 10-part series brings together some of the most important campaign lessons that members of the Beyond Your Base team have learned throughout the past 28 years. We also provide a behind-the-scenes look at strategies employed by citizen-led campaign committees that were highly successful.

Beyond Your Base (BYB) is a public affairs and pre-referendum consulting group of Wight & Company that develops and implements comprehensive public engagement programs that incorporate voter analytics, public opinion research and strategic communications.

BYB's focus is on engaging taxpayers and other stakeholders to deliver capital improvement projects that are truly community-driven.

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