

Lessons Learned in the Campaign Trenches

A 10-Part Series Leading Up to Election Day

Lesson #3:

It's extremely difficult to run a successful referendum campaign if the ballot measure comes as a surprise to taxpayers.

If properly done, public entities will have done the heavy lifting before the adoption of the ballot question. This includes facilities master planning,

the roll-out of a comprehensive public information program and public opinion research.

Citizens advocating for a referendum should not be put in a situation in which voters are not familiar with the ins and outs of the funding proposal.

Again, that should have been addressed by the public entity via informational mailers, webinars, earned media and other non-advocacy outreach efforts.

A campaign committee should NOT have to simultaneously educate and advocate.

Furthermore, campaign committees should not have to guess as to whether a referendum has a strong chance of success at the polls. That should have been vetted by the public entity prior to the adoption of the ballot question.

Stealth campaigns should be forever shelved. They don't build long-term taxpayer trust and they are the reason many referenda are unsuccessful.

In the Spotlight



Kirtland Community College, MI

Kirtland Community College successfully obtained voter approval for two important funding proposals over the past six years, one of which funded a new Health Sciences Education Center.

Garnering strong public support for tax-related referenda in an area with an aging, fiscally conservative voter base was not an easy task. Kirtland's back-to-back wins were driven by a commitment to involve taxpayers in the planning process well in advance of Election Day.

The College's pre-referendum efforts included numerous community outreach meetings over a six-month period, vetting of the proposals via a citizen task force, informational mailers, social media updates and public opinion research. These efforts allowed the campaign committee to focus its time on advocating versus educating.

Pre-Referendum Toolbox

Non-Advocacy Tools & Strategies Used by Public Entities to Develop Community-Driven Capital Improvement Proposals



- Facility Condition Assessment
- Demographic/Enrollment Study
- Strategic Plan
- Master Facilities Plan
- Citizen Task Force to Vet Proposal(s)
- Board/Staff Communications
- Informational Mailers
- Informational Presentations/ Open Houses
- Webinars
- Earned Media
- Website/Social Media
- Public Opinion Research

Campaign Toolbox

Tools & Strategies Used by Citizen-Led Campaign Committees to Advocate for Capital Improvement Proposals



- Banners
- Billboards
- Cable TV
- Canvassing Materials
- Car Magnets
- Community Events
- Digital Advertising
- Direct Mailers (Microtargeting)
- Earned Media
- Emails
- Fact Sheets
- Fundraising Tools & Events
- Mobile Canvassing App
- Palm Cards
- Personalized Postcards
- Phone Banking
- Print Ads
- Public Opinion Research
- Radio
- Signage for Retailers
- Signature Cards/ Envelopes
- Social Media
- Stickers/Buttons
- T-Shirts
- Text Messages
- Voter Analytics/Lists
- Voter ID
- Voter Tracking
- Website
- Yard Signs



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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