Political Campaign Model/Case Study

Today's concept for running a winning campaign has moved steadily from issues to an overwhelming focus on how much money a candidate can spend. In many races, the monies allocated for a campaign far outweigh the annual salary of the position the candidate is attempting to win. Why? The obvious, of course: power and prestige.

As a result, fewer and fewer dedicated and capable persons who embody all the positive attributes for public office, but lack the capital for a modern campaign, are not pursuing office.

Several years ago I was asked to become involved with a re-election campaign for a Commonwealth's Attorney race. The race, expected to be heavily contested by the opposing party, was considered to be a "line in the sand" battle to either maintain, or wrest, control of the most visible Constitutional office in the area.

The incumbent's campaign committee had established a campaign fund and had begun the process of developing media schedules and campaign materials. The media options under consideration included all of the "normal" avenues: radio, television (including cable), newspaper, yard signs, flyers, posters, bumper stickers, even refrigerator magnets.

The candidate's opponent was backed by the full resources of his party, a cadre of political consultants, a "slick" advertising campaign using a variety of media, and the support of out-of-market celebrities. Needless to say, his campaign was extremely well funded.

After reviewing the available funds, the level of awareness the incumbent enjoyed, the incumbent's record, the issues in the race, and the geography of the area in relation to media coverage, it became apparent that traditional media would not be a cost-effective or particularly effective strategy to pursue due to a combination of factors: media fragmentation; media reach exceeding the limits of the campaign geography; media cost; lack of ability to target effectively; the high incidence of transient population; and the high incidence of ineligible voters.

The strategy that began to evolve focused on: maximizing message impact; reaching as many actual voters as possible; generating as much frequency against the targeted reach as possible; and keeping advertising costs to a minimal level.

So what were the choices?

The strategy boiled down to maximizing the willingness of the candidate's supporters to perform grass roots efforts (placement of yard signs, brochure and bumper sticker distribution, word-of-mouth) and a modest, but highly efficient, media campaign employing outdoor, newspaper, and direct mail.

Modest? Highly efficient?

Sure.

We determined that three insertions in the local tabloid section of the area newspaper would be sufficient, timed to reinforce the candidates' record and reputation just prior to election day.

An outdoor board became available a month prior to the election located on the major highway in the area facing commuters inbound to their jobs in the adjacent city. The message was simply an adaptation of the candidates' bumper sticker.

The essential element of the campaign was the direct marketing effort, but this was a direct marketing campaign with a great deal of forethought in the planning process.

Step One

An analysis of the voting history for every precinct was conducted over the preceding five elections to determine whether any significant trends could be identified.

Step Two

Each precinct was matched to the postal carrier routes for the area, and current demographic and lifestyle information was compiled (the data were developed using the Carrier Route Marketing Information -- CRMI -- file from R. L. Polk) and reviewed against the voting history.

Step Three

It became apparent that certain trends and characteristics were predictive of which carrier routes within each precinct would be opportunity areas for our candidate. Those meeting the criteria were included in the mailing program, those outside of the criteria were excluded.

It was also determined that we would concentrate on homeowners and long-term residents in the area, eliminating apartments and group quarters (a direct correlation to the analysis), with specific household incomes, home values, education levels, and other information gleaned from the analysis.

Step Four

Identify within each precinct that had carrier routes matching the criteria and which civic groups, churches, and fraternal organizations fell within the target areas for the candidate to conduct his door-to-door campaigning as well as scheduling speeches and "meet-and-greets". Those areas not meeting the criteria were excluded to eliminate wasted dollars and effort.

Step Five

Execute creative against the demographics and lifestyles identified and schedule the direct mail drops.

The whole effort was coordinated and tied to the party's polling of registered voters on how they intended to vote in the upcoming election. As the polling continued, the media reach was compared to where the polling occurred and the results obtained. At this point it was up to the campaign committee to decide whether more marketing was needed, or not.

In the meantime, the candidates' opponent's media campaign was continuing with a broad mix of media and a creative focus that was – for all practical purposes – "slick".

As the march to election day proceeded, as the polls reported the positions of the candidates, as the percent of "undecided" voters continued to shift, the intellect of the strategy said "stay the course" while the emotion of the campaign committee said "spend more!". The ultimate decision was to go with the recommended strategy and *not* spend more money.

As the campaign approached the 11th hour, the apparent closeness of the campaign caused the campaign committee to become especially concerned. After all, our candidate was *being outspent three-to-one*, a Hollywood celebrity had been brought in to bolster his opponent's campaign, and the polls were indeterminate.

Being responsible for the data analysis, the direct marketing campaign, and general consulting on the campaign strategy, I advised the campaign committee that the campaign was won. That the "undecided" vote would swing in our favor and that the

strategy was working. In fact, I told them that I had predicted the margin our candidate would win by and wrote it on a piece of paper and handed it to the candidate to be revealed only after the campaign was over.

Results

Election night was the typical "nail-biter" for the first part of the evening as precinct results began to be reported. The precincts we had agreed to "cede" went, as suspected, to our opponent. The ones we targeted showed that we had been correct. As the night wore on, the "win" margin began to grow… and grow… and grow.

Before the night was out, our candidate had been declared the winner _with 60% of the vote_ and his opponent conceded the election. After reviewing statewide results, it was determined that our candidate had won with the second highest margin in the entire Commonwealth for any contested race.

Oh, and how did the prediction hold true?

It didn't. I missed the actual margin of win by 2/10 of 1%.

And, based on expenditure reports from the Electoral Board, we had been outspent by our opponent by at least $3 to every $1 we spent for the campaign.

Update

The model that was created for this campaign is still applicable. There are, however, refinements that can make the model even more accurate and predictive.

Today we have the advantage of taking the actual voter files and doing a segmentation analysis based on the actual households voting. The data contained in this approach has both demographic and lifestyle traits that are "dynamic" (i.e., they are not census-based but founded on actual information that is constantly updated). Therefore, the direct marketing effort need not be against an entire Carrier Route, only specific households. Too, with the expanded demographics and lifestyle data for each segment, it's possible to craft a campaign message to each potential voter based on their cluster code traits. More targeted, more efficient, more effective.

Who knows, maybe I could predict the outcome more precisely the next time using this approach.

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