

Politics

Winning the political game: Basic elements of a campaign

Details

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2017 is a municipal election year in Idaho, which actually features more candidates than an even-year election.

The election season won't heat up until the late summer and fall, but it's not too early to be planning campaigns for mayor or city council slots. Here's a reminder of basic campaign elements that candidates and campaign managers should be reviewing, not necessarily in order of importance.

1. **Issues research/positions, white papers.** What do you stand for? What are the issues of most concern to you? How will you solve the problems your jurisdiction faces? You need to develop your positions and be able to talk about them and debate articulately. You will need to produce white papers, press releases, talking points and social media posts about the issues and your philosophy of government. This includes opposition research. Issues really matter in campaigns, and you want your campaign to be substantive.
2. **Survey research.** Use qualitative and quantitative research to determine your strengths and weaknesses with voters, including geographically and among demographic groups, how you stand vis-a-vis opponents, how voters feel about the key issues. Use research also to test messages and positions. Never run an advertisement without testing it first with focus groups.
3. **Fundraising.** Figure out a campaign budget and put together a plan to raise sufficient funds. Be aware of and carefully comply with campaign finance laws. Have a good accounting system. Develop a list of potential donors and go after them. The candidate is the best fundraiser. Understand municipal campaign finance rules.

4. **Targeting.** Figure out who the real voters are, who is likely to vote for you, and who can be persuaded. Spend all of your resources and efforts focused on them, not with people who never vote. Determine your 50% plus 1 number so you know how many votes you need to win and where you will get those votes.
5. **Scheduling/Events.** Schedule all campaign activities, including walking neighborhoods, speeches, appearances, etc. Schedule as much as you can for the entire campaign so you can see the campaign unfold in a timeline. Work back from major events/milestones like primary elections, to schedule all your activities and emphasize the big things that must be done.
6. **Grassroots organizing.** You should recruit a campaign captain in every voting precinct in your election district. That captain will run a mini-campaign in that voting district for you, distributing literature, making phone calls, defending you against criticism, encouraging neighbors and friends to support you, etc. Where do you get these people? Develop a system to communicate with and receive feedback from these voting district captains. Keep track of all contacts made, including those by district captains and other surrogates.
7. **Endorsements/coalition building.** To give your campaign credibility, develop a list of prominent people who endorse you; encourage organizations with members or employees to support you and work for your election effort. Ask them to run mini-campaigns on your behalf within their organizations or associations. They have their own communications channels. Keep track of all supporters identified through grassroots organization and coalition building.
8. **Communications.** This is a big one. Develop a communications plan for earned media, paid media, and direct-to-voter contact with a campaign web site, direct mail, social media, brochures, press kit, press releases, e-mail newsletter, white papers, etc. Gather as many e-mail addresses of voters in your district as you possibly can, and communicate frequently with them. Plan paid advertising (newspaper, TV, radio) carefully, staying within your budget. Target carefully with direct mail. Look for opportunities to place stories and positive mentions in the news media. Pay attention to your on-line profile and aggressively use tools such as Facebook and Twitter.
9. **Get out the vote.** Develop a plan to get your supporters out to vote on election day. In close races, this can make the difference between winning or losing.