



Best Practices: Message

Elements of a Successful Message

- A Message should answer the basic question: Why should I vote for you?
- You should be able to convey this in 2-3 minutes if necessary. This is often referred to as an elevator speech – you should be able to communicate your message by the time people reach their floor on a shared elevator.
- Focuses on distinctions
- Must be clear, consistent, understandable and relevant
- A message provides a context for how the candidate’s beliefs and issue positions reflect values that tell a voter who the candidate is – and define the candidate’s image and identity. Issues matter, but people vote for people – the candidates.
- A successful message is delivered through every part of the campaign, and is reflected in scheduling, earned media, organizational efforts, and candidate appearance – as well as paid communication.
- A message is much more than an issue, a theme, or a sound bite, although all these things are essential to a good message.
 - Themes: “Opportunity”, “Change”, “Integrity”
 - Issues: “Protecting Social Security”... “Investing in our Public Schools”
 - Values language: “I will support policies that honor our parents, nurture our children, and provide opportunity for every responsible individual who is willing to work hard to succeed.”

Developing your message

- Research is key to message development (both opposition research and self-research).
- Learn about the voters in the district. What issues are important to them?
- Figure out which groups of voters your message needs to resonate with in order to win.
- Inventory your strengths and weaknesses.
- Inventory your opponent’s strengths and weaknesses.
- Draw lines of distinction between your strengths and the opponent’s weaknesses.
- Always draw upon your personal experiences/values that are relevant or tell voters the kind of person you are and what kind of elected official you would be.
- Write down a sentence or short paragraph that summarizes the reason the voters should elect you.
- Don’t change messages mid-stream. Your message needs to be broad enough to see you through to the general election.
- A motivational message is essential to a successful base vote effort. Winning campaigns give base voters a reason their vote makes a difference. Our base voters usually know where and when to vote, so when they don’t turn out it’s because they “chose” that it doesn’t matter.
 - Walk the talk and get involved in community activities with key constituencies.

- Develop relationships with “constituency” media and organizations and give them a reason to cover your campaign activities.
- The persuasion message must be consistent with the motivational message. Polling shows that the same issues are most important to voters of all races, ages, men and women, Democrats, independents, and even some Republicans. A winning message brings those elements together and does not speak from both sides of the mouth.

Delivering a Disciplined Message

Even the best organized and most resourceful campaign can be overcome or undercut by a failure of message discipline. Message discipline poses a tremendous challenge for a candidate in a diverse district.

- Message discipline requires the candidate and the campaign to focus on “our message” and deliver it in an effective manner.
- The important elements of message discipline are simple. For example, if the message of the day focuses on how the candidate’s values make education a priority, the campaign can not go off subject and talk about something else, even if asked.
- Message discipline does not mean everyone has to say the same thing the same way every time. Based on research and knowledge of the target audience, there may be different points of emphasis for the same basic message.
- Tailor the message to match the targeted audience. This may sound like a no-brainer, but in the crush of campaign scheduling activities, a common mistake is going to the wrong place at the wrong time on the wrong issue.
- Practice, Practice, Practice. Allow others to critique your delivery.
- Repeat, Repeat, Repeat. Regardless of how expanded your speech is, make sure your message is repeated often.
- Choose the appropriate medium.
- Developing your stump speech
 - Your stump speech is nothing more than an extension of your message.
 - Once you’ve defined your main message, develop that into a 5 – 7 minute stump speech that reflects your message, the issues you are running on and the contrasts between you and your opponent. Regardless of how long you are given to speak at any forum, you must always be able to tie everything back into your message.

Message Delivery Basics and Tips

- Know your audience and use themes of “sound bite” length that relate to the issues the audience cares about.
- Know the subject and illustrate issue themes with specific examples, local facts, and personal anecdotes that “bring the message home” at an individual level.
- Use “values language” to connect the issues and themes to the overall “message” that incorporates all our issues priorities into a core statement of principle.
- Issues used to illustrate the campaign’s message should have a “Local Angle.” Voters will relate to the local impact and tangible examples of how an issue relates to their lives far more than global discussions about abstract information.

- Message is an essential part of building a winning organization. Again, a message is not something limited to press, mail, radio, and TV – it is essential to building an enthusiastic organization.
- Effective organizational/message campaigns reach out to “allies” who share common priorities to deliver a message with broad appeal.
 - Work with allied groups, get to know their leaders and members, and get them involved in campaign efforts, invite them to events, conduct press events on “shared priorities,” etc.
 - Identify allied leaders to serve as “credible third party spokespersons” who can “verify” the campaign’s message
 - Encourage allied “non-partisan” groups to hold “bipartisan” forums on their issue priorities, providing an opportunity to deliver the campaign’s message to the broader membership and the media

Reminder

We live in a culture of celebrity with a short attention span, so a message must be repeated with discipline, short themes, and meaningful local facts or individual anecdotes. A winning message does not digress on every issue, no matter how interesting, at the expense of communicating with voters about the values and priorities that shape our daily lives.