

Developing Your Message

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Successful candidates win the support of voters by effectively communicating their ideas, aspirations, and qualifications for office to the electorate. They communicate by developing a campaign message that establishes an emotional connection with the voters, so that the voters feel they know the candidate and share his or her beliefs.

Some voters will want to learn all about your issue platform and you should certainly respond to these requests. The vast majority of voters, however, lead busy lives that do not leave much room for becoming well informed about your candidacy or politics in general. Many voters will enter the voting booth knowing only a few pieces of information about you. Ideally, your name on the ballot will remind them of your experience and what you hope to accomplish in office. Making that happen starts with developing a succinct message that gives voters compelling reasons to support you.

Three Elements of an Effective Message

Campaigns are about persuading likely voters to vote for you. To do this, candidates need a compelling message and a strategy for communicating it. (See Chapter 6 for more on how to effectively deliver your message.) A message is not merely a slogan; it is a comprehensive summary of your candidacy. Political consultants advise candidates that there are three elements of a campaign message: (1) the campaign rationale, (2) the campaign theme, and (3) positions on key issues.

Developing Your Rationale

Your campaign rationale is the reason you are running for office. It should be a short (one- or two-sentence) answer to the question: Why are you a candidate? Your rationale should complete the statement “I am running for office because. . . .”

A convincing rationale will incorporate aspects of your personal, professional, and political biography that help to illustrate your reasons for running for office, what you hope to accomplish when in office, and the qualities that make you the best candidate for the office. For example, a

candidate for school board might include the following rationale in her campaign message:

As a parent of three, I've seen the facilities and quality of instruction at my children's schools go from good to bad to worse. I'm running for school board because I am motivated to restore a positive learning environment for our children and I have the ideas to get the job done.

This rationale explains how the candidate's experience as a parent has inspired her decision to run for office and informs what she hopes to accomplish once elected. Using your biography to explain your reasons for running is a good way to introduce yourself and your strengths to the voters and add credibility to your candidacy.

Choosing a Campaign Theme

A campaign theme serves as a bridge between the campaign rationale and the candidate's positions on policy issues. It is a phrase or sentence that makes your rationale for running for office relevant to the voters. Your campaign rationale answers the question: *Why am I running for office?* Your campaign theme answers the question: *Why should voters care?*

A campaign theme should be short and clear. It should be broad enough to encompass a wide range of issues and specific enough to be compelling to a voter who is not paying close attention to the election. It should also emphasize ideas with which most voters are familiar and with which they are likely to agree. For example, if you are running for a seat on the school board because you want to improve the quality of

■ BRIGHT IDEA: Ask Yourself the Important Questions

As you brainstorm what to include in your campaign message, here are some important questions to consider:

- What do I want to accomplish as a public official? Why is this important to me and why should it be important to the community?
- What are the key issues facing our community? Why are these issues important? What perspective do I bring to them? What ideas do I have for solving local problems?
- What's right about local government? What can be improved? What steps can be taken to make these improvements?
- What is my opponent likely to say about my qualifications for office and my positions on issues? What is my response?
- What key difficulties would I face if I won? How would I address them?

instruction and increase the resources provided by local schools, your theme might be, “Improving our schools, investing in our future.”

There are two sources of ideas for campaign themes: your stands on key policy issues and your personal characteristics. Is the office to which you are seeking election grappling with a major policy issue? Are there major points of contrast between you and other candidates in terms of leadership style, values, and experience? Anticipate the criticisms your opponent(s) might make of you and turn these potential “negatives” into positives. A lack of governmental experience, for example, may provide “a fresh perspective” from an average citizen. The important point is that, rather than listing your positions and experience, you develop a theme that provides a succinct, relevant, and memorable summation of your candidacy.

■ **ADVICE FROM PROFESSIONALS: “Cutting Through the Noise,” by Dan Schnur**

The greatest competition that you will face in your campaign won’t come from your opponent. Your greatest challenge will be competing for the attention of the voters.

You’re not just competing against the other candidates in your race: you’re competing against every candidate for every office on the ballot. You’re competing with candidates for president and for governor, for Congress and for the legislature. You’re competing with candidates for supervisor and for mayor, for city council and for school board, for county coroner and the mosquito abatement board. You’re competing with ballot initiatives and bond issues, and with every bit of political information available in this campaign season. And you’re competing for the attention of an audience that doesn’t care much for politics and politicians.

The competition doesn’t stop there. War in the Middle East? Hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico? Juvenile crime in the inner city? Problems with the space shuttle? They’re all competing with your campaign for the voters’ attention.

And that’s just hard news. If the local quarterback breaks his ankle, if there’s a new baby kangaroo at the zoo, if Jennifer Lopez has marriage

problems, you're competing with all of them, too. You're competing with HBO and professional wrestling and the Home Shopping Network. You're competing with chat rooms and home pages, with Nintendo and Napster.

Then there are jobs and families, car pools and Little League, Rotary, Kiwanis, and the PTA. Not to mention bills and chores and the million other things that fill up our lives every day.

Very few people are going to pay much attention to your campaign, and no one is going to care as much about your candidacy as you do. The reality is you're not going to get many chances to engage the voters: so when you do get their attention, you'd better be ready to take full advantage of the opportunity.

The best way to approach this challenge is to look at the voters' attention as a window. Most of the time, there are a lot of things going on outside that window for them to look at. Our goal is to get them to listen to you—even if just for a moment—and then to remember what they heard.

Some voters will never learn more about you than what they hear in this painfully short message summary. But if your message is sufficiently compelling, many people will want to learn more. Once you've lured them with that introduction, you can provide them the details of the issues, the goals, and the other priorities of your campaign.

In a nutshell, the easier your message is for voters to receive, the more likely it is they'll retain it. If the voters retain it, they're that much more likely to remember it. The more likely they are to remember your message, the more likely that they'll respond favorably to you when they get to the voting booth on Election Day.

Most people who know you will assume you're running for decent and honorable reasons. But most of the voters whose support you're seeking don't know you. To them, you're just another politician. (And we all know what people think of politicians, right?) Unless you explain to them the good reasons for your candidacy, they're going to assume the worst.

Hopefully, you are running because you believe you're better qualified to address the concerns of your community than others. Maybe you're running because you were inspired by Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton, by Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr. Hopefully

you're running because you think you can make a contribution that will make your community a better place to live.

No one knows that except for you, and unless you take the time to sit down and think through the reasons why you have decided to seek public office, you'll never be able to articulate those reasons to the voters. Until you take all those reasons and piece them together into a broader rationale for your candidacy, no one will be able to understand them. Here's the bottom line: unless you can summarize those reasons in a sentence or two, very few of those voters will stick around long enough to hear your explanation.

The most essential element of your rationale for candidacy is your own biography. Your biography—your life experiences—is what makes you the person you are. So it's important that voters who hear your rationale for candidacy learn something about you.

In a short one- or two-sentence rationale, you won't have the opportunity to tell the voters everything about your life history. What is important to tell them is the one thing that, more than any other, makes you who you are and makes you ready to lead.

Are you a parent? Maybe that has shaped your rationale for candidacy. Perhaps your profession has prepared you to run, and your experiences as a teacher or a farmer or a small businessperson provide the grounding for your rationale. Maybe you served in the military, or volunteered your time with welfare mothers, or heard a speech or sermon that inspired you.

As you build a broader message from your rationale, you can tell the voters other details about your life and your goals you think they need to know. In that rationale itself, make sure you find the one thing they need to know that will make them believe you when you tell them why you're running.

Many first-time candidates, worried about sounding vain or self-aggrandizing, are reluctant to talk about their accomplishments. Most of the time, you'll need to get past this reluctance. Remember this: no one will ever know these qualities in you unless you tell them.

It is only when you explain to them why that life experience helped make you the person you are today and how that experience developed the values that frame your life, that they can understand who you are and why they should be willing to support your candidacy.

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Selecting Key Issues and Formulating Your Positions

Your campaign message should include your substantive positions on local issues or other matters of public policy that you want to address when you are elected. Because many voters have a limited attention span for and low level of interest in political campaigns, consultants typically recommend that you identify three policy issues that matter to the voters and to you and make these the focus of your campaign.

Consultants also recommend that you choose issues where you and most voters see eye to eye and where there is general agreement on their importance for the office that you are seeking. It is much more difficult and requires many more resources to change a voter's mind on an issue than it is to persuade an undecided voter to share your position or to emphasize an issue about which you and the voters already agree. You should develop positions on a broad range of issues in case voters ask you about them, but you should focus on three issues when you speak to voters and produce campaign materials.

Three criteria should guide your issue selection:

1. The issues that you choose must be important to you and to your candidacy. If you are not passionate about what you are speaking about people will know.
2. The issues you choose must be important to voters. Just because you think an issue is important does not mean voters will share your point of view.
3. Choose issues on which you and the voters you are trying to reach and mobilize agree.

You may want to keep in mind several other considerations when selecting issues:

- **Your issues should be broad enough to encompass the major duties of your office.**
A candidate for city council with a background as a police officer, for example, may use her background to promote an agenda to reduce crime, but she should avoid being pegged as a one-issue candidate.
- **Your issues should fit with your rationale and theme.**
If you run on a smart growth platform, your issue positions would address mixed use, transportation, and density concerns.
- **Select issues that you can discuss in depth and where you have ideas for improvement.**
For each issue, it is important to feel comfortable elaborating on your ideas and answering a wide range of questions about your proposals.
- **Select issues where you can point to your relevant experiences or past successes.**
This will add credibility to your positions.
- **Do not avoid issues that are a prime topic of discussion or concern.**
Remember that your fellow candidates are selecting issues to focus on just as you are. If they focus on the issues that voters think are most important, so should you.

Communicating Your Ideas Effectively

Constructing your message is only the beginning of the process. You must communicate your message to voters, assess how it is being received, and hone your message delivery skills. Voters want substantive information, but they want it in an easily digestible format. As you start speaking to voters, follow these simple suggestions to make sure your message gets across:

- **Be clear**
Your audience must understand what you are saying and what you are asking of them. Your message must be straightforward, follow logically, and be heard above all the “noise” in the lives of your listeners. Do not assume the audience already knows your message. State it in a

straightforward manner and respond to any hint that some listeners are not following your argument.

- **Be focused**

Your message must be laser sharp and should not attempt to convey too many things at once. It must speak to the interests and concerns of your audience. Voter attention spans are short and getting shorter. If you cannot fit your message into a few sentences, it may be lost. Candidates who seek to be comprehensive may overwhelm their audiences and cause them to remember nothing. Because people often remember more clearly the first and the last thing you say, repeat your key point in your conclusion to improve retention.

- **Be compelling**

Clarity and focus ensure that your audience understands your message, but whether or not they respond depends on how compelling your message is. Tell your audience not only what you want them to do but why they should do it. Whether your method of persuasion uses common sense and logic, current evidence and statistics, or appeals to core emotions and values, your message should compel the audience to care, to believe, and to act. Do not be afraid to speak from your heart but remember you are attempting to persuade others who may not share your assumptions and priorities. Articulate all of the reasons to support your candidacy, not

■ WHAT VOTERS WANT: Information on Issues and Candidates

To determine what types of information voters want from candidates, our survey of 2000 adult California residents asked respondents, “What are the top two things you are most interested in learning about the candidates: stands on issues, experience, character, intelligence, party platform, campaign practices, or something else?” The candidates’ stands on issues was the clear favorite with 43%. “Character” was second with 26%, followed by experience (16%) and intelligence (8%). Very few respondents cited party platform (4%) or campaign practices (3%). When we asked focus group participants to describe what they dislike about campaigns, the lack of time and attention given by candidates to issues was a common refrain. Jeff said, “Instead of debating the actual issues, they’re just trying to attack the individual for some personal experience that they might have had that isn’t actually relevant to the job that they want to do, or the job that they will do.”

Most focus group participants admitted that they are unlikely to read a candidate’s position paper or even sit through a two-minute TV ad about the candidate. When asked if candidates should produce longer ads, many were skeptical that longer ads would be more informative (rather than simply longer attacks). Others bristled at the idea of being forced to watch anything longer than thirty seconds, even if the ad were more substantive. In general, while participants expressed a desire to learn more about the issues, it was clear that many do not want too many details, nor do they want to work too hard to get them.

merely those that underlie your opinions, and address potential counter-arguments.

■ **BEST PRACTICE: Give voters the information they want.**

If you are regularly asked certain questions about your background or local issues, your answers to those questions should be incorporated into your campaign message. If voters have other things on their minds when they hear from you, their focus will always override whatever you choose to focus on. If you directly address their questions and concerns, they will be more attentive listeners.

■ **BEST PRACTICE: Make information about your candidacy easily available to voters.**

Provide documentation for your qualifications and issue positions on your Web site and in your campaign materials, but don't make the text daunting and difficult to read. Present information with bullet points and headings and highlight important information in bold or italics. If someone requests information via email or phone or at their door, make sure that you respond quickly with the information they request.

Presenting Your Positions and Those of Your Opponent(s)

Voters want and need information to help them decide which candidate to support. Contrasting your positions and qualifications against those of your opponent(s) satisfies that need. On the other hand, voters react negatively to name-calling, character assassination, innuendo, and stereotyping. Using such techniques increases the risk of alienating voters. You can earn the respect of voters by demonstrating respect for your opponents even as you present voters with reasons to support you over other candidates.

Keep any criticism of your opponent(s) respectful, fair, relevant, and truthful. Despite the public's aversion to negative campaigning, research shows that voters are accepting of candidates who draw contrasts with other candidates' positions on key issues, especially when they provide independent documentation of their claims. If you present your own and your opponents' positions and qualifications truthfully, you will be more convincing when you make comparisons. Avoid half-truths or twisting the facts to create a false impression, as this can backfire when your opponent(s) or third parties respond.

Voters pay attention to the tone and timing of the contrasts that you draw, and you should too. Voters may interpret last-minute attacks that

do not leave your opponent time to respond as an attempt to manipulate them. Creating a tone of civility among candidates leads to a more positive campaign. Voters are more accepting of comparative messages if they believe that the discussion is civil. The Golden Rule is relevant: if you do not want to be the object of negative campaigning by your opponent(s), avoid it yourself.

Some candidates choose to speak only of themselves, either because they believe that voters are averse to negative campaigning or because they believe it is unethical. You will need to determine the lines that you will not cross. However, refraining from contrasts can leave voters with little idea about what distinguishes you from other candidates (especially if your opponent is an incumbent). Political consultants advise candidates to provide voters with reasons why they are preferable to their opponents. If you choose not to draw contrasts, emphasize those qualities of your candidacy that distinguish you from the other candidate(s) in the race. If you are running against an incumbent, you can typically criticize current policies without making negative statements against him.

If you choose to draw contrasts, consultants advise that you find stark differences between your positions or qualifications and your opponent's. It is more difficult, for example, to emphasize slight differences on public spending than to point out that you favor a policy the other candidates oppose. When you do find areas of disagreement with your opponent(s), characterize your dispute truthfully. You may agree with your opponent's goals, for example, but not believe that she can achieve them with her proposal. Voters appreciate contrasts if they are stated as differences of opinion.

■ WHAT VOTERS WANT: Substance in a User-Friendly Format

Voters want substantive information about candidates, but they want it in a concise and accessible form. One focus group participant recommended that candidates use their ads to point voters to more information on their Web sites. The ad could "give a brief kind of positive message and say, 'If you'd like to learn more about this candidate, go to this Web site.'" At the Web site, the campaign would present bullet points concerning where the candidate stands on the issues. You can go through whatever issues may seem pertinent to you, you can go there and check them out."

Members of another focus group proposed the idea of a "candidate résumé" as an objective and efficient way to learn about and evaluate candidates. The résumé would list the candidate's stands on issues, experience, qualifications, and other highlights of the candidate's biography, and would be widely distributed to voters. (A candidate might send his résumé to voters in the mail, drop it on voters' doorsteps, or post it on his campaign Web site.)

■ BRIGHT IDEA: Be Careful in Drawing Contrasts with Your Opponent

Before you criticize your opponent in public, ask yourself:

- Is it **truthful**? Can you document the truthfulness of your claims or the untruthfulness of your opponent's?
- Is the subject of the attack **relevant** to the office for which you are running? Why or why not?
- Is it **fair**? Do your attacks or those of your opponent constitute half-truths that leave a false impression? Is the timing suspect?

You are more likely to get credit from voters, and be seen as credible, if you preface your critique with politeness. For example, if you disagree with a proposal made by your opponent, state that you want the campaign to be a discussion of proposals and you appreciate any that your opponent puts forward, even if you believe that this proposal is flawed. Or you might admit that there are positive aspects to your opponent's proposal but explain why the costs outweigh the benefits.

Voters appreciate your pointing out areas of agreement between you and your opponent(s), especially if your opponent is better known for her support of a particular issue on which you agree. You might preface the contrasts that you draw between you and your opponent(s) with an acknowledgment of where you agree.

There is likely to be information that voters want to learn about your opponents that your opponents are unlikely to provide. There is no shame in sharing that information if it is relevant to the election. Voters are tired of attack campaigns, however, and hold negative information to a higher standard. If you present it in the course of a primarily positive discussion about you, they are more likely to be accepting of it.

Contrasts are most effective when they highlight major differences that are obvious given factual information. For example, if you have experience that your opponent lacks or if you have developed a proposal for a solution to a problem that your opponent has ignored, pointing out these differences naturally follows from your emphasis on your own record and positions.

■ WHAT VOTERS WANT: Truthful, Relevant, and Fair Discussions of Candidate Differences

To assess public attitudes towards criticism in campaigns, our survey asked a balanced question about negative campaigning that would give voters reasons to oppose and support criticism between candidates:

Some people say that in general, political candidates should never be critical of their opponents because campaigns have gotten too negative, while others say that candidates need to criticize their opponents because it is important to know the strengths and weaknesses of all candidates. Which of these comes closest to your view?

The question produced an evenly divided response, 51% said that the candidate should not criticize and 49% said they should.

Comments offered by focus group participants indicate that voters have a nuanced approach to criticism in campaigns, which may explain why half of the survey respondents said candidates need to criticize one another. Though focus group participants expressed their dislike for negativity in campaigns, they drew a distinction between acceptable criticism and unacceptable attacks. Some participants indicated a willingness to accept a negative campaign message if it provides useful information. In fact, many participants suggested that criticism is an acceptable and even necessary part of campaigns (for example, it is a candidate's responsibility to vet her opponent), as long as it is fair, relevant, and truthful.

Here is what voters considered to be **fair** criticisms:¹

- A candidate who talks one way and votes another (71%).
- An opponent's voting record (68%).
- Not paying taxes on time (61%).
- Accepting contributions from special interest groups (57%).
- An opponent's business practices (53%).

The following examples voters perceive as unfair criticisms*:

- The actions of an opponent's family member (89%).
- Past personal financial problems (81%).
- Financing your campaign yourself (76%).
- Past troubles such as alcoholism or marijuana use (69%).
- Marital infidelity (57%).

¹ These findings are from a poll commissioned by the Institute for Global Ethics' Campaign Conduct Project and conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Assoc. and Deardourff/The Media Co. from June 6-11, 2002. Eight hundred likely voters were surveyed (sampling error is +/- 3.5%).

Protecting Yourself Against Attacks

No matter what kind of campaign you choose to wage, you can never control the actions of your fellow candidate(s). You have to be prepared for the likelihood that both your opponents and third parties will attack you during the course of the campaign. Research shows that ignoring these attacks or being unprepared for their arrival can be detrimental to your campaign. You should prepare the voters for any attacks that may be coming, do your best to answer the claims of your opponent(s) included in the attack, and bring the discussion back to your campaign message.

The best way to avoid a problematic attack is to release any negative information that your opponent may use against you yourself. It may sound counterproductive at first but political consultants advise that voters are less likely to react to a negative attack from your opponent if you have addressed it in advance. You should make a list of issue positions, aspects of your background, and potential scandals that your opponents may point to during the campaign.

■ **BEST PRACTICE:** Keep criticism relevant, truthful, and fair.

If you think that negative information is likely to come out, especially if it is available as part of the public record, you are better off getting it on the table prior to

it being raised by your opponent. The media is less likely to consider the release of negative information about you news if you have already made an admission. Moreover, by releasing this information before your opponent does, you will have a chance to explain yourself or apologize for your actions before it appears to be politically expedient.

Sometimes you can use negative information about yourself to your advantage. You can argue, for example, that you have overcome a struggle in your past or that, like most voters, you are not perfect. If you have made a mistake, admit it forthrightly and tell voters what you have done to correct it and what you have learned from the experience.

Responding to Negative Claims

You cannot anticipate all negative attacks or inoculate yourself against all criticism. Be prepared to respond to negative information as it arises in your campaign. Political consultants recommend that you leave no attack unanswered. Provide as much information to counter an attack

as quickly as possible. Issuing blanket denials is less effective than explaining how and why your record or proposals have been misinterpreted. Explanations are often complicated or cumbersome and it is your duty to make them as easy to understand as possible to the average voter.

Stating that the facts are complicated or referring people to elaborate documentation does not work as well as offering clear and simple explanations. Admit some fault where it is necessary and explain all distortions. As soon as an attack is made, you should enter a rapid-response mode of campaigning by releasing public statements and press releases. It may be helpful to demand that your opponent rescind an untruthful attack or ask the media to report that your opponent made an untrue accusation about you.

If you pledge to run a positive, issue-oriented campaign at the beginning of your campaign, this may help to discourage your opponent from launching negative attacks. The goal is to have such attacks look conspicuously discordant from the positive and informative tone that you are setting with your own campaign. Ask yourself if your opponent's attacks are truthful, relevant, and fair. Then do what you can to get the message out on why the attacks are untruthful, irrelevant, and unfair.

It is not at all clear that negative attack campaigning works. A 1998 study, for example, found that nearly half of the studies on political advertising show that positive advertising is more persuasive than negative advertising. Nearly a third of the studies found that negative

■ WHAT VOTERS WANT: Contrasts Rather Than Personal Attacks.

What are voters looking for in candidate communications? A 2002 survey* revealed:

- 88 percent think candidates should agree not to make any personal attacks.
- 78 percent think candidates should demand that outside groups pull unfair ads.
- 88 percent believe that candidates should refrain from using language or images that define other candidates based on their race, sex, or other personal characteristics.

*The poll was commissioned by the Institute for Global Ethics' Campaign Conduct Project and conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Assoc. and Deardourff/The Media Co. from June 6-11, 2002. Eight hundred likely voters were surveyed (sampling error is +/- 3.5%).

■ BEST PRACTICE: Respond to attacks, but don't counter-attack.

advertising may backfire.¹ If you don't respond to negative attacks, however, voters may believe the information.

Whatever you do, resist the urge to respond in kind with an irrelevant counterattack. You run the risk that the counterattack will backfire, and you leave the original attack unanswered on the merits. If the attack is about an issue position, you may want to explain the true distinction between your position and your opponent's.

■ LEARN MORE ON THE WEB:

Use our contrast message worksheets to prepare for interactions with your opponent. We provide exercises with instructions to help you think through the likely contrasts between the candidates in your campaign. Learn more at campaigns.berkeley.edu.

State it as a simple contrast, however, so that you get credit for running a more civil campaign.

If you have been attacked, voters are more willing to accept a response that draws a contrast between you and your opponent than they are if you initiate the confrontation. You do not want to get into a cycle of attack-counterattack, however.

Make sure that your counter-statement

contains all the relevant information on both sides of the dispute.

■ ADVICE FROM PROFESSIONALS: "The Perils and Pitfalls of Negative Campaigning," by Jonathan Wilcox

Given the widespread view that campaigns and elections are negative enterprises growing even more divisive over time, it may seem like quite a stretch to provide an entire thesis about the dangers, drawbacks, and difficulties associated with this political strategy.

But that's the point. The best political professionals know all about the powerful and delicate force that negative campaigning represents. The fact that they don't talk about it much says quite a bit about the strategic importance of knowing that they don't call it "negative" for nothing. Yes, people do respond to the negative—but they do so in two

¹ Brad Rourke, Wayne Saucier, and Matthew Krumme, *Clean Campaigns: How to Promote Candidate Codes of Conduct* (Institute for Global Ethics, 2001).

distinct ways. One can help you win a campaign. The other can help you lose it.

This is not to say that campaigns should be designed as Oxford Society debates governed by Robert's Rules of Order. Elections in America have always been rough and tumble contests that require skill as much as courage, decisiveness as much as devotion. That's never going to change, and it requires that political professionals serve up negative tactics like fine wine: never before its time.

Why is this? Because no aspect of campaigning is more widely misunderstood and consistently misused. Still, it remains the popular path of least resistance for many election efforts. The challenge is to know when to be clamorous *and* when to be contemplative. Remember: No one ever voted against any candidate because what he or she said or did was overly fair, considered, and balanced. This is that rare political virtue that can endure over literally decades of the dynamics of campaigns, issues, and personalities.

At the same time, the political cemeteries are lined with campaigns that, in thinking they were being tough and challenging, were instead obnoxious and unappetizing, giving voters little to vote for and plenty to vote against.

The contemporary political landscape provides three key reminders to consider when carefully evaluating the advantage of "going negative."

1. "Everything changed after . . ."

If you work on only a few election contests, you are almost certain to meet him: the Campaign Commando. This individual seeks to inspire a political parallel with combat and the military arts, employing the jargon of the enlisted officer: Campaign tactics are "opening fire," "carpet-bombing," "utilizing guerilla warfare," "playing on enemy turf," and, for measured restraint, the occasional threat to "go nuclear."

But, as the cliché goes, everything changed after September 11.

Now that America is engaged in a real war, political strategists have wisely laid down some of their rhetorical arms. Those that haven't—and they are legion—risk using language that may inspire the campaign team, but offend the voters. Better to place the campaign effort in its rightful context: an important—even vital—contest of ideas and beliefs that will help determine our future course as a society. Campaigns are all those things; war, they are not.

2. Beware of D.O.G.

Almost every candidate shares a high-minded belief in seeking public office. They enter politics to make a difference, advance ideals, and ensure a better future. Too often, this noble inspiration is left at the campaign door, and once inside, a playbook labeled “How to Win” guides the election effort. A better way is to capitalize on the candidate’s initial impulse and let it guide and inform the cause.

This should not be seen as an invitation to a more righteous way of living, but rather as a way to avoid the pitfalls of D.O.G.—Distracting Our Guy. The inevitable urge to play hardball often takes a campaign in a new and different direction, and the campaign morphs into a negative enterprise.

Once a campaign goes into attack mode, it is compelled to involve the candidate in ways large and small. Negative campaigning can then become a diversion from the campaign’s central purpose and alter its course. The temptation for the candidate to take the lead in delivering a negative message completes a transformation that many campaigns do not intend.

3. It’s not the blast, it’s the fallout.

There’s really only one place you don’t want to be when a bomb goes off: anywhere within the range of the explosion. Think of negative campaigning this way: When a campaign strikes with a negative charge, it means to do serious damage to the opposition. At least that’s the plan. But, get too close to your target, and the shock of the blast is sure to injure you, too.

Understood as an attempt to injure rather than inform, an attack is almost certain to backfire. The most effective negative tactics are informative rather than insulting, and it is imperative for great care and caution to go into their execution. It’s not as easy as slinging mud. That splatters, too.

Consider this the negative campaign two-step: Land the blow, *and* be out of range.

Conclusion

Negative campaigning is as old as campaigning itself. It’s a legitimate tactic if done right, a potentially lethal one if done wrong. There is, today, a certain romanticizing of the negative nature in campaigns, cred-

iting this or that charge with making the critical difference. This has happened, of course, but it almost always requires that the negative assault be part of the battle for a larger truth.

A negative campaign that meets the standard of a best practice is one that's based on facts, on real issues that satisfy the inherent common sense of voters. Seen in this light, maybe they're not so "negative" after all.

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Ethical Promises and Codes of Campaign Conduct

One way to inoculate yourself against attacks and make voters aware that your campaign is different from those that have angered and alien-

■ WHAT VOTERS WANT: Pledge to Run an Ethical Campaign

Voters respond favorably to candidates who pledge to run ethical campaigns.

- 77% of the voters we surveyed said they would feel somewhat or much more favorably towards a candidate who signed a code of conduct pledging to "run a truthful, fair, and clean campaign."
- 71% said they would feel somewhat or much more favorably towards a candidate who signed a pledge to run an "issue-oriented campaign."
- 57% said they would feel somewhat or much more favorably towards a candidate who signed a pledge "not to use race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or age as a basis for attacks."

Our focus group participants strongly supported codes of conduct. Some said that campaign codes would improve the tone and substance of a campaign by serving as a check on candidate behavior. For others, candidates who sign the code provide a valuable cue for assessing their candidacy. One participant said, "If a candidate signed something like this, then you'd look at that and say, 'That says something about him or her.' It helps you make a judgment about that person."

Our survey found that even pledging to avoid negative campaign behaviors is likely to elicit a favorable voter response. Of course, the key then is for the candidate to walk-the-talk of running a positive, issue-oriented campaign. By following through on your pledge, you demonstrate to the voters that you are a person who keeps his commitments, even when the going gets tough.

■ BEST PRACTICE:

Sign a code of conduct or make a public statement pledging to run a truthful, fair and clean campaign. Encourage your opponents to do the same.

■ BRIGHT IDEA: Insulate Yourself From Potential Attacks

The best way to ensure that you are not unfairly attacked is to acknowledge your weaknesses and “hang a lantern” on your problem. If you are open from the beginning about your weaknesses, you will get credit from voters for your honesty and reduce the effectiveness of attacks. One famous example is Ronald Reagan’s statement in the Presidential Debates: “I promise not to make age an issue in this campaign. I will not hold my opponent’s youth and inexperience against him.” With humor, Reagan addressed the issue of his age, put it front and center, and made clear that any attack was unwarranted.

ated them in the past is to sign a code of conduct such as the Code of Fair Campaign Practices set forth in the California Elections Code, or make a public pledge to run an ethical campaign. These pledges help voters and the media keep you accountable and help you produce an image of responsibility.

You can set the tone of the campaign and make attacks less likely if you make such a statement and ask other candidates to follow suit. Your statement should include enforceable guidelines for what will be unacceptable, for example, forbidding attacks that are not about issues or qualifications. Ask the media to cover your and your fellow candidates’ public pledge to run an ethical campaign and to follow up on whether you and your opponents have kept your promise.

The benefit of a written code is that you can establish enforcement criteria and make sure that all candidates are following the same rules of engagement. If you sign a code presented by a community organization, it can serve as a symbol of your commitment to engage in civil discourse.

Conclusion: Five Things to Know About Developing Your Message

1. Focus on your message.

To win, you will need to give voters a clear reason to support you. Presenting a list of your issue positions or accomplishments is not enough. Develop a clear, concise, and compelling message that serves as the centerpiece of your communications with voters.

2. Develop a rationale, a theme, and an issue focus.

Your campaign message should include three elements: (1) a rationale—your reason for pursuing office, (2) a theme—a succinct statement of why voters should support you that links your rationale to your issue positions, and (3) your positions on a few key policy issues that voters care about and on which you and the voters you want to mobilize agree.

3. Make your presentations simple and concise.

Design your message in a way that will appeal to voters who have scarce time and attention to give to your campaign. Focus on a few major points and present them clearly and repeatedly. Give voters a chance to learn more about you and your issues positions, but get them interested with simple and concise presentations.

4. “Hang a lantern on your problem.”²

Inoculate yourself against attacks by alerting voters to your potential weaknesses before they become the subject of an attack. Explain your actions, apologize for past mistakes, describe how you have made amends, and tell voters what you have learned from the experience.

5. Leave no attack unanswered.

If your opponent attacks your record, proposals, or character, respond quickly with relevant information. Explain any inaccuracies or misinterpretations, admit any fault, and point out how the attack contrasts with your approach to campaigning.

² See Chris Matthews, *Hardball* (Simon & Schuster, 1988), chapter 10.

