



Ask The Campaign Doc

Craig Varoga



The High Road

Rabbi David Wolpe

When Robo Calls Work ... And Don't

Q: Why do campaigns continue to use robo calls when all evidence shows that they are not effective? Just see Green and Gerber's GOTV book.

A: Here's the background: Yale professors Donald Green and Alan Gerber recently updated their book, *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, and concluded (again) that GOTV robo calls are ineffective.

But here's the rub: Green and Gerber look at robo calls somewhat in isolation, emphasizing only their GOTV role and underplaying the efficacy of automated persuasion calls. Frankly, only a fool would defend automated calls that are either an afterthought or poorly integrated into a campaign's overall message strategy. In any case, it's not clear that "all evidence" points toward the waste or obsolescence of robo calls.

Michael Matthews, of the Democratic voter-contact firm LSG Strategies, explains: "Any tool used poorly or overused (billboards, yard signs, direct mail and, yes, TV and radio ads) is certainly less effective. In the final days before an election, much communication doesn't really break through. Campaigns are often better served when using phones in concert with all other forms of voter contact rather than as an afterthought. ("What do we do with the last few dollars? I know, let's put out another call!") Using auto calls in advance of door-to-door efforts, making pre-calls and/or 'chase' calls around direct mail pieces are smart uses of the tool. And, of course, auto (and live) calls remain the quickest rapid-response tools available."

Some critics—such as StopPoliticalCalls.org—protest that unwanted political calls constitute "partisan posturing" and merely contribute to negative campaigning. Maybe, maybe not. But if that's what you think, send us your thoughts so we can continue this discussion next month.

Q: What is the difference in priority between paid advertising and field operations? Which should we fund first and, if needed, cut first?

A: That's rather like choosing between the devil and the deep blue sea. Most campaigns need some combination of field and paid ads. In a high-turnout election, field efforts or GOTV may be secondary to either paid or earned media. Similarly, down-ballot statewide candidates may get faster name ID from advertising than from door-to-door canvasses. Conversely, most state representative candidates should focus on field rather than buying a few ads that will disappear before anyone notices. In any case, customize your plan to fit the race and, if forced to scale back, think first, war game the consequences and then adjust accordingly.

Q: I've gotten a lot of offers on races out of state, but I'm stuck in a non-battleground state without a lot of opportunities because of school and my apartment. Are there any other approaches to get some good experience in this situation?

A: Help at the local party headquarters. Offer to phone bank from home or on your cell. See which campaigns have online tools that don't require you to be in-state. Organize fundraisers for candidates you support. Go volunteer in a different state on a long weekend or during fall break. Stick with it. Your persistence alone will show folks you have what it takes to work on a future campaign. ■

Craig Varoga has run local, state and presidential campaigns for the past 20 years. He currently specializes in independent expenditures as a partner at Independent Strategies. E-mail questions to cvaroga@politicsmagazine.com.

Should You Stop Supporters From Going Negative?

Q: How far should a politician go in trying to stop an outside group from airing a negative ad about his opponent?

A: The larger question is, do you bear responsibility for those who act on your behalf? Assuming that they are controllable, the answer is surely yes. The candidate has at least the obligation—if he or she thinks the ad unfair, defamatory or otherwise illegitimate—to ask repeatedly that it not be aired and to publicly disassociate himself from the ad.

The question assumes, however, that negative ads are always wrong. I don't think we ought to take that position. A negative ad could be calling attention to a legitimate characteristic or deed; perhaps the guy did vote in favor of oppressive child labor, or maybe she really is a slumlord. Should that person's opponents, or by extension groups acting on their behalf, be barred from making those things public? I cannot imagine anyone would assent to this over-refinement that, in the end, does not serve the public good.

Q: How much personal medical information should a candidate release?

A: Medical information should be full and complete. Having myself survived both a benign brain tumor and lymphoma, I am no stranger to the desire of others to know more about one's medical condition. Questions that seem intrusive are, however, part of the price that one pays to be a public figure. Our fate, and the fate of our children, rests in the hands of those who hold the reins of public power. We have a right to know if they are enfeebled, at risk, or capable of fully discharging the trust they have asked of us. Anyone who has endured a life-threatening disease knows it does not leave one unchanged, and that is important information.

Paradoxical though it may seem, I don't feel that way about a candidate's private life. They have no obligation to disclose the state of their marriage. Such facts bear at best a distant relationship to the effectiveness of the public servant. FDR's performance at Yalta was less a result of his chilly relationship with Eleanor than his infirmities of age. Medical conditions? Those, I think, we need to know. But if you had an affair 20 years ago, so long as you do not perjure yourself or impugn another's character to exonerate yourself, keep it quiet. ■

Rabbi David Wolpe is the rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles.