Political Communication

An Introduction To Message and Media in Politics

by

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The Art of Political Communication
Our candidate might be the greatest thing to happen to our district, but if the voters don't know about it, we will lose our race. This material will help us find the best techniques to deliver our candidate's message. These are not hard and fast rules. Some races will differ, but if we think analytically about our message and our voters, we can apply these principles to any race.

Always remember that we are advocates for our candidate and issues, and our opponents are advocates, too. We should not feel compelled to do their jobs. We will make our case unabashedly, Emphasizing the arguments for our point of view and minimizing those that work against it.

The first job is building a message, so we will cover some basic principles that distinguish most effective political communication.

**A narrative, not a laundry list**

We have a tendency to address voters by telling them the issues we stand for. This seems the only ethical way, laying our principles on the table and being willing to reason with our opponents and the voters, methodically listing every policy position we hold. I call this the “laundry list” approach to message. A laundry list message might look like this:

> I support ending the war in Iraq, establishing universal health care, and protecting the environment.

The pressure over the course of a campaign to make this as comprehensive as possible becomes irresistible, and the 'message' becomes cumbersome. There are three problems with this practice: We will have exhausted the voters' attention; We will have lost those voters whose core issues are not in our list; and events change and make those policy choices less timely.

The human mind works by allegory, trying to match the information it's given with a preexisting narrative. Effective communicators have learned to speak to their audience aware of this tendency and use their preconceptions. This can be done by telling voters a story, or narrative, that does not conflict with their worldview and that explains your policy positions implicitly. A narrative message might cover the same policy points this way:

> The corrosive power of money in public life created a policy environment that prevented us from ending the war in Iraq, establishing universal health care, and protecting the environment.
Narrative messages can resonate with swing voters by establishing a principle that might be congruous with different ideologies, while a comprehensive laundry list which included controversial positions on contentious and essentially meaningless socio-cultural issues might alienate Independent and Republican voters who are otherwise reachable through a problem-solving narrative.

By taking the “what” for granted and addressing the question “why,” we can actively engage our audience. They can follow our logic and project their own pet issues into our narrative. If the power of money in politics can influence environmental policy, then it can influence education, financial regulation, and other issues of interest to voters we need to win. We can thus address a critical mass of voters that would require volumes of text to reach with a laundry list. Less is more.

**It's the voters' concerns that matter**

We run for office and work for candidates for many reasons, but usually we are motivated by policy. We want to improve health care, end wars, educate children, protect families, or fulfill some other function associated with government. This, along with our personal loyalty to the people in the campaign, is what keeps us going.

But voters may not share our concerns. They may follow politics, if at all, only distantly. They may have completely different priorities. Our message has to be general enough to encompass their concerns. It has to represent their fears and aspirations. Then they will not only listen, but internalize our narrative. Again, we have to persuade them that the things that concern them are explained in our narrative. An agenda that emphasizes reform and transparency, for example, is likely to resonate with voters convinced of the corruption of government, as long as we are believable when we promote it.

Don't be afraid of polls and other tools to gauge public opinion, as long as our message and not our convictions are being shaped. Remember that all such tools are notoriously prone to error, and depend a great deal on how the questions are asked.

**Message Discipline**

Everyone we speak to, every viewer of our TV spots, should be able to recite our message. It should be omnipresent in every form of communication our campaign produces. When using an issue-specific forum, address the issue from the viewpoint of our overall narrative.

When someone asks a question, answer it within our narrative's framework. A common aphorism advises:
Don't answer the question, answer the question you wish had been asked.

In other words, always stay on message.

When the message changes with our audience, we will be seen as deceptive or hypocritical. We live in the age of Google and YouTube. Assume we're never just talking to the people in the room or listening to that particular radio show. That means, among other things, that we need to maintain the the same message for the entire cycle, Primary and General, and that it needs to be the source of contrast with all opponents.

**Framing**

Every policy position must be phrased as a special case of our message. For instance, if our message is:

“The influence of unaccountable money in our political system has distorted policy and prevented meaningful and productive debate on important issues.”

then a question about gun control should yield this kind of answer:

“Gun industry money has distorted the public debate about the role of guns in American life, preventing meaningful discussion and reform.”

Framing will connect issue communication to our broader message and permit the public to better relate to the campaign and its purpose.

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**Developing The Message**

Once we have decided to run for office, we must sit down together as a team and develop our campaign's message. We start with the candidate's motivations for running, such as the issues or concerns that she feels are not adequately addressed by incumbent policy-makers. We then put these concerns in a form accessible to the ordinary voters that will comprise the margin of victory. That requires concision and awareness of the voters' feelings.

**The Message Grid**
The message grid is a tool we use to systematize our communication with the public. It places our narrative in context with that of the opposition, allowing us to foresee how they will attack us and how best to respond. The grid is laid out as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How we see ourselves</th>
<th>How the opponent sees themselves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How we see the opponent</th>
<th>How the opponent sees us</th>
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Let's say that our boss, Representative Smith, is considering a run for the Senate seat held by Senator Jones. Representative Smith has a record of standing up for children, the poor, the elderly, and the environment. Senator Jones has made his name defending the interests of business and the wealthy. Our message grid might look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We are defenders of ordinary families.</th>
<th>Senator Jones is a defender of the American way.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senator Jones is a defender of wealth and power.</th>
<th>Representative Smith pushes an alien ideology.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</table>

We can then plan our message and anticipate our opponent's response.

Our message should neutralize the strength of the opposition and address the concerns
of the voters.

**The 3-9-27 and the use of talking points**

When communicating with voters in the field and through the media, it is important to be concise. To help accomplish that, we have a tool called the “3-9-27. “ This involves condensing our message so that it comprises 3 distinct points, takes 9 seconds to say, and occupies 27 words (or less).

**Example:**

“Rep. Smith believes that education is the key to competitiveness, that workers' rights must be protected, and that global warming is a serious threat.”

Concise messages are more likely to be heard in a media environment where viewers and website visitors are bombarded with information and broadcast producers have to trim content to cover the news within time constraints and the limits of the audience's attention.

**Using The Message**

Having the world's best message does us little good if we wield it clumsily or fail to maintain message discipline, oscillating constantly between conflicting themes that confuse voters and offer opportunities for our opponents to label us as inconsistent or deceptive. Using a message effectively requires skill, planning and discipline. Using an effective message consistently and well can overcome any number of shortcomings, such as having less money or name recognition than our opponent.

**Universality**

Once we have developed our campaign's message, we have to ensure that the campaign consistently uses that message on all of its products. Bumper stickers, flyers, TV ads, and radio spots should all use the campaign's message and visual brand where the medium allows. All the campaign's products should be immediately recognizable and the message should be consistent. Nothing is more embarrassing than to be caught delivering different messages to different audiences.

**Message Discipline**

Key to maintaining that consistency is mastering the art of staying on message. When our candidate speaks to the media or the public, compliance with the campaign's theme is mandatory. We will frame issues in terms of the overall theme of the campaign, and
we will avoid laundry lists and rambling autobiographical exposition.

**Answering Questions on Message**

Many questioners and all competent media figures will try to push our candidate off message and get them to make controversial statements that hit pet topics and generate circulation and ratings.

When this happens, we respond by framing the question in terms of our campaign's message. For example, if Representative Smith as described above received a question about the No Child Left Behind Act, she could respond “education is the key to keeping America competitive, and teaching to the test will not do that. I propose to let teachers teach.” The answer is framed in terms of our core message.

**Using the Media**

No matter how many doors we knock on or how many phones we ring, our chances of winning elections will hinge on how we use the media. We will not be able to contact most voters directly and many voters rely on media to distinguish between serious and frivolous campaigns, candidates and issues. Getting our message out to mass audiences requires mastery of mass media. We must understand the media's mission and the tools it offers us in order to reach the electorate and win our race.

**The Reporter's Job**

Reporters are not our friends. They have their own agenda. They may be trying to inform the electorate, they may be trying to increase ratings or circulation, or they may be motivated by an interest in particular issues or regions. Whatever their motivation, they will probably not be interested in promoting our campaign or point of view.

We can, however, build relationships with print, broadcast and online reporters. If we follow the game rules and treat reporters with respect, honesty and awareness of the reporter's objectives, they can be valuable allies. Media figures are often experienced observers of the local political scene. They may give us a heads-up on new rumors by way of securing a quote and their questions may tell us what parts of our message are not working.

**“Off the record” and “On background”**

A good general rule for campaigns is that we should never say anything in the presence of a reporter (or anyone we don't know) that we don't want to see on the cover of the
New York Times. Once we have built a relationship with a reporter (and after making sure the reporter accepts the rule), however, we may find it useful to put information into a reporter's hand that we don't want to see in print over our name.

There are two rules that we can use to accomplish this: Giving a quote “off the record” or imparting some information “on background.” An “off the record” quote may be printed, but our name will not be used. We may be quoted as “a prominent Democrat” or “a senior member of Rep. Smith's staff,” according to the reporter's purposes or an agreed-upon arrangement. Information provided “on background” will not be printed. The reporter and her editors will use the information in their inquiries, and it may help them build a story, but it will not be used directly in their story.

It should be noted that there is considerable confusion and disagreement within journalism about the meanings of these rules. We must clarify the ground rules with the reporters we deal with before information is given.

**Dealing With Negative Media Exposure**

No matter how careful the staff or saintly the candidate, we are going to get negative press. Much of the media relies on contention and partiality to generate entertainment value, and they will look for things to ridicule or decry in our campaign or, if we're lucky, in those of our opponents. People will also make mistakes. Candidates will answer questions without thinking about our message, questions will not be understood, campaign volunteers will get in fights with voters, headquarters staff will serve tainted food to volunteers or give out opponents' literature by mistake; whatever the specifics, something is going to go wrong.

When it does, we have to remember that voters and the media do not not see the race in the same way. Media is obsessed with the “horse race” aspects of a campaign, endlessly interested in the competitive process of elections and thus is fascinated by our errors. The voters, however, want to know how their lives will be affected by our policies. Most of them will not have been tainted by the “been there, done that” cynicism of the professional media. So it is essential that we move quickly to put the story back on our message. We have to act within the news cycle to make sure that the story is the issues we are fighting for rather than the mistakes we made in the course of that advocacy.

**Debates**

Elections are inherently competitive endeavors, and nowhere does this become more obvious than during formal debates. Their outcome is the most common reason for swing voters coming off the fence or committed voters becoming undecided. They usually take place late in a campaign are thus the focus of intense attention by the media and public. Securing and winning a debate with a “safe” incumbent may be the best chance that an insurgent challenger has to unseat her.
Prepping For Debates

Prep is critical to victory in our debate and therefore in our race. We will prep our candidate for debate by staging a serious of mock debates using staff or trusted outsiders that can impersonate our opponents and put our candidates off balance and off message. Our shadow opponents must be tougher on our candidate than the real opponents will be. After each prep session, we will give the candidate detailed and specific feedback about her demeanor, tone and method of answering questions and countering attacks.

Then, talking points are rewritten, candidates practice new methods of delivery, shadow opponents refine their technique and we do it all over again. If the process is not ruthless, upsetting and exhausting for all involved, we're not doing it right. We prep until the candidate can't get any sharper and then we give her a break and prep once more the night before a debate.

Staying On Message

Just as with the media, we have to make sure that we maintain message discipline during the debate. The candidate needs to reframe questions and rephrase rebuttals in terms of our core message. Remember that our opponents will be doing the same. Do not permit them to get away with it. If necessary, jump in out of turn to rebut an opponent's framing or refute her assumptions. Do not be afraid of minor or fleeting violations of debate rules, as long they are not repeated or sufficient to leave the average audience member the impression that our candidate is dishonest or a bully.

Dealing With Attacks

If our candidate is accused of political or personal misbehavior, we deny it in as few words as possible and then, in the same breath, we return to our theme. We imply or state outright that the attack was made because the opponent has no good answer to our message and issues and use our talking points to reinforce them.

Spinning The Results

Like beauty, the outcome of a debate is often in the eye of the beholder. Unless one candidate is clearly unprepared and inarticulate, voters will bring a lot of preconceptions to their evaluation of the debate. We can reinforce our supporters' conclusions of victory and pull swing votes into our camp by spinning the results. Our staff and volunteers should consistently communicate to media and voters how our candidate's performance validates their candidacy and our message. We will reframe questions about debate performance in terms of that message. We will emphasize how our candidate's performance and message demonstrated that they are in touch with the concerns of the voters and accuse our opponents of being out of touch.
**Putting It To Use**

No amount of classroom training can substitute for real-world experience. Acquiring that experience means making mistakes, so don't be dogmatic and don't be too hard on yourself. Most mistakes will not be fatal to a campaign. Like military training, the purpose of this course is to give you the confidence to make it to the “battlefield” where the real lessons are learned.

Mistakes are the cost of doing difficult things, and there aren't many human activities more challenging than running for elected office. The hours are grueling, the pay small or non-existent, and if campaign staff do their job well, few people will ever know their names. The important thing is to remember why you are putting yourself through this and to keep in mind that your whole campaign team is going through the process together. Avoid ego battles and turf wars within your campaign and concentrate on maintaining coherence and message discipline and you will stand a very good chance of winning your race.