

2009 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award Entry

Project Summary

Research

As funding for public education has tightened, Adams 12 Five Star Schools began taking a long-term view of its budget and the forecast for smaller revenue streams. In a proactive move, the district began cutting its budget in anticipation of dramatic fiscal cut-backs. Over the course of three years, the district cut \$16 million from its budget – enough to operate six elementary schools for a full year. As the district looked at its budget for 2009-2010, it was clear that without a change in funding, the district would have to cut another \$8- to \$15-million resulting in lost elective classes, increased class sizes, and the loss of at least 165 jobs. At the same time, the district was continuing to grow. Mobile classrooms were added to schools to accommodate expanding student enrollment.

A Spring community poll was conducted showing the community respected the district and trusted how it conducted its operations. However, when pollsters tested a ballot issue for a mill levy override (additional operating funds), that issue fared badly. Only 42 percent of those polled indicated support for such a measure. This was especially bad news given a long polling history that shows school ballot issues show their high water mark of voter approval in a Spring survey. The results almost always drop from that point. In fact, they normally decline at a rate of about 1 percentage point for every month between when the poll is taken to when the election is held.

Despite the dismal election forecast, there were clear and compelling needs. The district decided to take on the ominous task of asking voters to pass a mill levy override. So, **the district's goal was to pass a ballot referendum** to infuse money into district operations to avoid the loss of jobs and student services. The ultimate **measure of success would be the passage of the mill levy election**. Benchmarks to meeting the ultimate goal were to be measured using ongoing feedback from small group community meetings and a tracking poll to be taken in October.

Planning

Campaign staff identified target audiences and key message concepts which research showed most resonated with each group. Based on poll results, we knew our most supportive voters were 18 to 34 years old, Democrats, women, Hispanic, staff members and/or parents. Audience targets and message concepts were:

- **School staff by level, classified, certified, central office staff & parents by level** – Responsible, proactive budget planning with substantial cuts already made; potential cuts anticipated by level (elementary, middle, high school) if ballot measure was unsuccessful.
- **Business** – Economic impact to the community and the effect on businesses.
- **Senior Citizens** – Economic impact to them and the community, maintaining community amenities and quality of life provisions, and a property tax exemption provided for qualifying senior citizens.
- **Women** – Maintaining quality neighborhoods, economic messages, keeping small class sizes in schools and maintaining a nurturing community environment.
- **Early voters & “late deciders”** – Economic impact.

Our communications plan involved a multi-tier approach including face-to-face, personal interaction; direct mail; yard signs; relationship-building; interactive Web site and email blasts; and mass media.

To help plan, monitor and adjust strategies, a campaign organizational structure included campaign chair, strategic advisor, treasurer, volunteer coordinator, campaign advisors, logistics/data coordinator, alumni coordinator and community relations coordinator.

Principals and parents were active participants. A major tactic used was a “hub” concept. Schools were divided in geographic sections with teams of principals and two parent volunteers for each of our 50 schools. Each school team organized 20 small group gatherings such as home coffees, block gatherings, toddler play groups, investment groups, alumni socials, poker and bunko groups, bowling leagues, wine tasting parties, book clubs, parent association meetings, gatherings at school activities and other social gatherings. A presenter was identified to bring up issues surrounding the election and generate discussion. We supplied presenters with talking points, handouts, fact sheets and flyers with our most effective messages. Presenters filled out a feedback form after their gathering indicating the number of people at the gathering, demographics of attendees, perceptions of the district, previous exposure to the ballot issue, favorable key messages, unfavorable messages, lingering questions of participants, suggestions for other contacts, and the general sentiment of the group. This organizational concept made distributing messages efficient and allowed us to collect data to adjust messages and tactics quickly. This was essential given the rapidly deteriorating voter mood due to massive economic declines.

Implementation and Communication

Using feedback data from small groups made the campaign nimble in refining messages to target audiences which was then fed back to the hubs to use in ongoing meetings and media communication. In past election campaigns, messages identified in a Spring poll were successful in connecting with the general public. However, in this case, the bottom completely dropped out of the economy in October and that changed the entire value system of our community and its priorities regarding schools. Weekly feedback data indicated our economic messages resonated most with all target audiences. As the county’s largest employer, cutting nearly 200 jobs was a poignant message internally and externally. Results from an October tracking poll indicated we were actually gaining in voter approval at a time when all indicators showed we should have been losing ground. In addition to relationship-building tactics, we used these tactics and customized them based on just-in-time research:

- Mass emails and e-newsletters were sent to internal and external targeted audiences.
- A campaign web site included a blog, calendar of events, photo gallery, key messages, email options, video, newsletter sign up, comparison to other districts, volunteer sign up, voter registration information, donation options, list of supporters, consequences if issue didn’t pass, and ballot language.
- Robo calls went to targeted audiences with people from their demographic group making the recorded call.
- Volunteers knocked on thousands of home doors and talked with voters personally and leaving campaign literature.
- Face-to-face meetings were held between parents and teachers.
- Volunteers waived signs at heavy traffic street corners several weekends prior to the election.
- Five direct mailings went to targeted voters with messages tailored to that audience based on research.
- Newspaper ads, stories, and letters to the editor were published.
- Pizza box flyers were placed on all delivery boxes from area pizzerias.
- Flyers with candy attached were put in children’s trick or treat bags at large community kids events.
- Sporting events were venues for personal interaction and handing out literature.
- Church meetings included flyers on chairs and pews.
- Spanish-speaking communities were targeted with door-to-door visits from volunteers.
- Restaurants put flyers in food bags.
- Grocery stores catering to Spanish speakers put Spanish flyers in customers’ grocery sacks.
- Volunteers painted car windows with messages of Vote YES!
- District and campaign Web sites included informational videos; videos were also put on YouTube.
- Bank statement stuffers were sent to all credit union members

Evaluation

The ultimate evaluation of the success of this communications plan was the passage of our mill levy override. Despite the fact that our spring poll indicated only a 42 percent approval rating for our ballot measure, we were able to use strong interpersonal and just-in-time messaging to gain passing voter approval of 51.12 percent. Political experts called the election outcome “incredible.” Even after the ballot measure passed, we conducted a focus group study to determine which tactics and messages were most powerful so we can use these findings in future elections.