High Touch in a High Tech World

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Abstract:

In a world of high tech and low touch, it's easy for public relations programs to stray from tried and true, interpersonal strategies long associated with solid communication planning. New technologies allow communications professionals to quickly send e-mails and telephone calls to selected groups. Social media sites provide users immediate information including video and photos from an endless variety of sources. The list of technology options grows and grows.

However, even with so many technology tools available to communicators, formal plans that also included strategies utilizing important person-to-person research and targeted communications resulted in significant improvements for the Ritenour School District.
Last fall, when a majority of voters throughout the country celebrated the 2008 Presidential election of Barack Obama, voters in the Ritenour School District in suburban St. Louis, Missouri, overwhelmingly passed a $50 million bond issue that was previously defeated just a few months earlier in April 2007.

Ritenour's most recent bond issue victory was the latest in a succession of victories starting in 1990 when the district began an aggressive renovation program of all its facilities - six elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school and an administrative center. The November 2008 bond issue, the seventh bond election in 18 years, secured the funding for a new, state-of-the-art, 750-seat auditorium and music classrooms at the high school, a new 13-classroom school for early childhood education and several other smaller projects including a wireless network throughout the district and new instructional technology for classrooms.

But the bond issue victory brought success to another area - the district's communications plans. The plans focused on strategies based on important demographic research and targeted communications that utilized a variety of technology tools such as e-mail newsletters, rapid notification telephone calls and social media Websites. The centerpiece of the plans, however, was research-based, strategic personal communication opportunities. The mix of both quantitative and qualitative research, plus the use of electronic and person-to-person communications, resulted in not only a solid Election Day victory, but several district improvements prior to the election. Personal communication with students and families months before the November election resulted in their making several recommendations which were also incorporated into the new bond issue package.

Communicators are always looking for the highest level of success and the best use of time. Never before have school district communications professionals had so many technology
tools to enable high levels of strategic messaging to varied groups of education stakeholders. Communicators can easily get caught up in the "faster is better" use of technology and neglect crucial tactics important to relationship building, such as face-to-face meetings, potlucks, canvassing neighborhoods, bringing a small group around a table or having a cup of coffee with someone to talk about their school.

While Ritenour School District communicators have certainly benefited from and taken advantage of the technology improvements during the many bond issue and tax referendum campaigns, it's the personal relationships and personal contact that continue to make the significant, lasting differences in school, parent and community relationships.

The Ritenour School District prides itself on being data driven. Ritenour's Community Services office directs the district's communication program and annually uses a variety of methods to establish issue baselines, target key messages for multiple demographics and evaluate results. Today's new technologies make this work much less time consuming and less expensive than just a few years ago. While data is more accessible and abundant than ever before, determining what the data means remains the foundation and the starting point for important personal, strategic communication tactics. Using today's technology for much of the research and delivery of some messages allowed Ritenour communications plans to be more targeted, more personalized and less expensive than in previous years and previous election communications.

“The real power of technology isn’t that it makes other tactics, like interpersonal communication and relationship-building, obsolete,” says Nora Carr, APR, Chief of Staff for the Guilford School District in North Carolina. "Used wisely, technology can help us nurture and sustain the relationships we build via face-to-face communication.”
An important element of the district's research program is a telephone survey conducted every other year. Prior to the successful 1990 bond issue, the district hired St. Louis-based UNICOM, ARC to conduct the first professional survey in anyone's recent memory. Data from the first survey helped streamline district communication efforts related to the 1990 bond issue and was significant to the district's win that resulted in efforts to begin its nearly 20-year renovation program. Over the years, survey results have become much more than just a tool to gauge voter thinking for bond issue or tax levy elections. District research results are the cornerstone for many of the communication strategies, including helping to establish important trend data on key improvement efforts.

Before the November 2008 election, Ritenour conducted several public engagement sessions and focus groups to gather more data and "test" possible key messages. These sessions provided an opportunity for parents, students, staff, community leaders and residents to share ideas about district improvements and to discuss possible bond issue projects.

Parent focus groups were conducted at each of the district's schools. Recruiting parents to attend a focus group session at their own school proved a good strategy as this improved participation and afforded opportunities for informal, yet still specific conversations between parents, principals and other district leaders. Keeping the parent focus groups informal not only encouraged important conversation, but also kept project cost low. Principals recruited participants and provided donuts and coffee for the parents. Ritenour Community Services personnel served as moderators.

Each parent focus group was asked to discuss and then rank 12 indicators of a quality school. In each of the 10 sessions, parents were then asked to think of their child's school and
rank the indicators as they related to their school. Participants were also encouraged to offer other ideas or suggestions to improve their school.

These sessions were particularly valuable since, as Carr notes, “Research shows that about 80 percent of communication is non-verbal. Tone of voice, inflection, facial expressions and body language all communicate more than the actual words we say or read. That’s why interpersonal communication is so important. You can tell if your message is getting across. If someone has that ‘deer in the headlights’ look, it’s time to regroup. It’s hard to do that with e-mail. You can really alienate or confuse someone and not even know it.”

The results from the focus groups’ personal conversations versus an online or e-mail survey were significant pieces not only for communication planning, but also for district improvements and bond issue project plans.

It didn’t take many parent and community sessions to establish common trends. Parents told district leaders their ideas for improvements and shared their willingness to support future elections that included items such as new playgrounds for elementary schools and new instructional technology in classrooms. Parents wanted new programs and services put in place to help them stay better connected with their child's school and teachers. And, residents wanted the best in safety and security and complete compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines because they believed those features would continue to improve the overall quality of the district and ultimately the community.

District officials listened to parents and residents and made changes, in some cases unrelated to the bond issue. Within weeks, for example, a new parent-school online system was implemented to enable parents 24/7 access to their child's information and school. A rapid telephone notification system, already in the works, was given a higher priority and put into
place a few months earlier than originally planned. Several components of the bond issue proposal, however, were changed substantially in response to participants’ suggestions. These changes resulted from the quantitative data from the telephone survey, as well as the qualitative research results from the various focus groups and parent discussion sessions.

The bond issue previously defeated in 2007 had a price tag of $32 million and generated only 51 percent voter approval. (In Missouri, a 4/7 or 57.14 percent majority is needed for passage.) The 2008 bond issue package, modified to include the latest parent, staff, student and community input grew from the original $32 million package to a $50 million proposal primarily as a result of key recommendations of the various groups.

With such significant changes, the district chose to conduct additional research to determine voter receptivity to the additional projects and the accompanying $18 million increase in costs. Eight months prior to the 2008 election, the district conducted a follow up public opinion telephone survey to collect information about the district changes already put in place and changes made to the upcoming November bond issue proposal. Results obtained from retesting voter support of bond issue projects that included the parent and resident recommendations and the increased cost of the new package provided the assurance district leadership needed to advance the bond issue vision from planning to reality.

Like earlier district surveys, analysis of the telephone survey revealed key messages for specific demographic groups such as parent, non-parent, age and area of school attendance. The survey confirmed the likes, dislikes and level of support for specific bond issue projects and key communication messages. The information was the foundation for the district's communication planning. The increase in respondent support for the new bond issue verified the significance of
the person-to-person research used in development of the 2008 bond issue package and "theme and message" content for communication plans.

**Using Technology to Keep Communication Personal**

"We can use more technology to help slice more finely," says Carr. "The new technologies give communicators a more sophisticated and cost-effective approach to keep us one-on-one and personalized with our messages. Technology can help maintain relationships by creating more sophisticated data bases used to contact people."

Carr believes new communication tools like electronic newsletters, Facebook or Twitter are good devices and help communicators fine tune their efforts, but new technology "doesn't replace the solid PR practices needed in our work."

Stacey Smith, APR, Fellow PRSA, at Jackson, Jackson & Wagner, agrees social media will assume an increasingly larger role for school districts and that it can deliver many benefits. She believes, however, it is important for communicators to understand their stakeholders’ behaviors surrounding their use of social media and what kind of non-cyber behaviors communicators can expect as a result.

“It’s going to become more and more important to talk to your stakeholders about social media uses and not just Internet access,” says Smith. “Research can tell you who has access, but not how they are using their online connections behaviorally – outside of the web. Social media is going to be an important tool in helping maintain relationships and gain mutually supportive behaviors. However, social media will not and can not be the entire relationship in and of itself.”

Finding the right mix of media tactics to effectively communicate the research tested messages was the next step for the Ritenour communications staff. District communicators utilized more traditional tactics including printed media and news releases, but also used social
media and other technology-based devices to help strategically communicate key messages and to maintain contact with district stakeholders in a more time and cost effective manner.

Demographic data from the telephone survey indicated strongest support for the bond issue proposal from the district's parents, especially the younger 18-34 year old voters, compared to any age group. According to Kitty Porterfield of Porterfield & Carnes Communication, understanding the special communication needs of these Generation X'ers - speed and convenience, individualism, lack of trust of the institution and tailoring information delivery - is important to any strategic communication plan for this group.

Porterfield stresses the three “R’s” in communicating with Generation X – relationships, relationships, relationships. “There is no such thing as one size fits all when it comes to communicating with Generation X’ers,” Porterfield noted. “They tend to trust themselves and peers first. Unconditional trust is non-existent. Trust is built incrementally over time and is based on character and competence. With Generation X, there is a true lack of trust of the ‘institution.’ They need a face and a voice – someone to hold their hand and answer their questions.”

Ritenour's communication strategies for this target audience utilized tools to help personalize the messages. Younger voters, including younger alumni away at college, received e-mail notices linking them to absentee ballot information. Social media Website groups shared the district's key messages, but also included personal endorsements added by recent graduates and current young parents. These communication tactics provided fast and inexpensive communication in a personalized manner. As the electronic messages were forwarded and shared, the messages became less "institutionalized" and more trusted because the messages were from friends and colleagues.
“The impact of our new, younger parents is interesting. They’ve grown up with Facebook, Twitter and other technologies. How we continue to use technology to communicate and how we mix those face-to-face strategies is changing.” says Carr.

Today's technology makes e-mail messaging results instant and measurable - another advantage of incorporating electronic media in communication plans. Ritenour's e-mail communication is continuously evaluated by monitoring the open rates of the various key messages by the target groups. Analysis of e-mail newsletters provides Ritenour's communication staff with key demographic results including who is reading them, which specific articles are read and by which groups. Using this technology allows Ritenour communicators to continuously sharpen the message to selected audiences. By keeping key messages in the most viewed articles and photos and modifying messages to groups with low open rates, the communication becomes more personalized and relevant.

Ritenour's bond issue citizens committee used technology to help keep communications personalized in other ways, too. A newly created data base was manipulated to provide computer-generated canvassing lists and walking maps which enabled volunteers to go door-to-door in an efficient, organized manner. The database also generated the name of the homeowner and names of other voters at the residence allowing for more personal contact between volunteers and homeowners. Many volunteers went to the same houses on consecutive Saturdays furthering the relationship building efforts.

It's difficult to measure accurately the impact of the committee's efforts to canvass in a more personalized manner than in previous campaigns. Election results, however, virtually confirm going door-to-door and personally speaking to voters was an integral and productive component of the winning effort. While every polling place in the district increased in the
number of yes votes in the 2008 election, the areas where citizens committee volunteers had the highest levels of personal voter contacts showed the largest increase in favorable votes. In one Ritenour elementary school polling area, yes votes increased by 25.2 percent from the 2007 election to the successful 2008 election. This area is also where some of the largest numbers of volunteers visited with the most voters on each of the canvassing dates. Clearly the use of technology and the added value of personal contact worked in this situation.

Ritenour’s communication plans were based on research results. Technology was used to improve data analysis, delivery methods and costs of the communication pieces and to improve the personalization of communications for targeted demographic groups. At the heart of the plans were the tried and true public relations practices such as public engagement, focus groups and principal-parent coffees.

Carr believes people today are starved for community and starved for time. “Modern society can be very depersonalizing. Even though we’re all incredibly busy, we still need face time and it’s still a relationship-driven business. We can easily get caught up in the tyranny of urgent rather than be proactive and strategic in our communications,” says Carr. “Technology can either add more fuel to the fire or help us operate more efficiently and open new avenues for creating a sense of community. The power to choose is in our hands.”

Understanding the value of high-touch tactics to help build that sense of belonging and community is critical in successful communication planning. High-tech tactics can help keep time-pressed people in the loop, but it’s the personal relationship building strategies that prove to be very effective in a way the online world simply can’t match. The trick is to know what to use and when, and how and when to marry the high tech with the high touch.
References


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Bio for Cindy L. Gibson

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