



Eleven Tips for Winning Your Next Election

a white paper from Banach, Banach & Cassidy

Almost everyone believes that education is important. And, almost everybody believes that “children are the future” and that we must invest in them. Given these beliefs, how can voters possibly vote *no* in school elections?

People vote for or against school ballot issues for myriad reasons. That is what makes every election unique. Yet, those school districts that generally win at the polls exhibit some common characteristics. The characteristics and related tips are the subject of this article.

Build a support base

School leaders know that most voters in school elections decide how to vote long before election day. On election day they step into the voting booth, close the curtain, and pull one of two levers—*yes* or *no*.

School leaders also understand that campaigns don’t win elections. Campaigns simply harness support that is already there.

And where does support come from? It is the result of doing good work and making sure people know about it. In short, when school people compromise on communication with constituents, they build barriers to a successful election.

Tip One: Think long-term. Build a base of support for your schools by doing good work, engaging people in the educational process, and communicating effectively. Use campaigns to reinforce the support base that you build and tap it for *yes* votes on election day.

Know who will vote

If we called a one-hour school election for two o'clock this afternoon, three categories of people would show up—yes voters, no voters, and undecided voters. The same categories of people will show up at the school election that you have called for next year. The challenge is to discover how many of each category resides in your school district. Once that is done, the job that needs doing is fairly straightforward: Reinforce yes voters, generally ignore no voters, and try to move the undecideds into the yes voter column.

Tip Two: Know how many yes voters you need to win. Find them and get them to the polls on election day.

Know people's perceptions

Do you know what people think about when they think about your schools? Do you know what they like and don't like about the school district? Do you understand what school information they want and how they want it delivered? Unless you have completed a survey, odds are you are just guessing at the answers to the above questions.

Perceptions are important to understand. You can have great schools but if the perception is that you have mediocre schools, guess what? You have mediocre schools.

If public perception is that the new high school you plan to build is too expensive, guess what? Your election may be headed south.

Tip Three: Understand that subjective perceptions usually count for more than objective information. Get a statistically sound assessment of perceptions in your school district. Then keep it up to date.

Attend to process

You are not doing an effective job of marketing if all you do is put up a billboard. You are not doing a good job of communication if all you do is put out four newsletters each year. Marketing, communication, and school elections are all processes. Each of these processes begins when you decide to do something. None of these processes has an ending.

An election campaign is not a single thing or event. It is a complex process that must be goal-oriented and flexible enough to accommodate changes in the campaign environment.

Tip Four: Process requires people and a plan. Winners know what they want from their "three Ps"—their plan, their process, and their people. Don't get trapped into believing that your campaign ends on election day. (Actually, that's the day your next election begins and the election process recycles.)

Commitment is critical

Winning school districts have a vision and they are committed to it. They know where they are headed and they have the plans they need to get there. And, they are committed to attaining their vision.

The same dogged determination is required for election success. Have a clear understanding of your election goals, and do whatever needs doing to end election day with a victory celebration.

Tip Five: Know where your school district is headed and how the election relates to this vision. Send a strong signal that says this is the most important thing on the agenda.

Citizens lead campaigns

But “knowledgeables” map out the parade route. How much do most citizens know about conducting election campaigns, systematically assessing public perceptions, and producing communications that build understanding? Citizens can and should be out front in school elections, but they need guidance to keep them moving in the right direction. That’s why politicians rely on a bevy of expertise—from campaign consultants to media specialists to pollsters to people who stage events.

Tip Six: Citizens should be the out-front leaders of school campaigns, but they should receive all the guidance and support that they need.

Facts and logic don’t sell

Campaign messages must be relevant to the voter. School leaders generally believe that means voters should be barraged with facts and the campaign should appeal to the voter’s sense of logic. But facts and logic don’t sell! We know from basic psychology that most people make unconscious decisions (and then they try to justify their decisions consciously, sometimes using facts and logic). Winning campaigns target the hearts and stomachs—not the heads—of voters.

While election facts and financial logic may provide the foundation for the ballot issue, the message should become more emotional as election day approaches.

Tip Seven: Make sure your statistics, pie charts, and architectural drawings are wrapped in a message that is brief, easily understood, and relevant to voters. If you need help doing this, seek it.

Execute the plan

A great plan isn’t any good unless it is executed; that is, unless you do what you planned to do. Winners effectively execute their plans because they organize so the campaign can be executed in the high pressure environment that characterizes most campaigns.

If something cannot be done, it should not be in the plan. If it is in the plan, everyone connected with the campaign should assume that it will be done.

Tip Eight: Put your campaign in the hands of one person. Give that person authority and responsibility *and* all the support he/she needs.

Stay loose

A famous Polish general said that no battle plan survives the first contact with the enemy. The same can be said for a campaign plan. Odds are good that you will need to make a host of changes as your campaign unfolds. You need to organize to do this.

If your message is about science labs but voters are concerned about playgrounds, you will have to adjust your message. If you plan a heavy communication initiative using the Internet and find that half the people in town aren't connected, it is time to adjust strategy. Know how, when, and if you will respond if unknown "midnight riders" or tweets surprise you with a negative message two days before the election.

Tip Nine: Develop a rapid response team to work with the campaign coordinator. Charge them with anticipating events and doing whatever needs doing to keep the campaign on track.

Know your targets

A college is planning to build a new arts and science center. To whom should the campaign be targeted? Students? Parents of students? Alumni? Public school parents? All these targets seem logical, but in the case of one of our clients they proved to be wrong. The most support for the construction project existed among *preschool* parents! The campaign strategy was adjusted to accommodate this survey finding and "voters" approved bonds for the construction project.

Tip Ten: Know your targets. Know who supports your issue. And then make sure you have enough targets to win if you can turn out half of them on election day.

Face to face is best

People long for personal contact. Every technological connection—it seems—has been enhanced. We are connected like never before. Yet, we miss the human connections we used to enjoy.

Related this thought to election research which indicates that *most people vote for something because someone asks them to vote for it*. Don't skip on personal contact with members of your community and, especially, the people your campaign is targeting. Involve them in small group discussions. Ask them to volunteer. Phone them on election day with a reminder to vote. And thank them personally when you win.

Tip Eleven: Make sure key targets audiences are connected to you, one-on-one.

Will the eleven tips make you a winner? There are no guarantees. But one thing is certain: If you attend to the suggestions above, odds are better that you'll be standing in the winner's circle on election day.