

MINUTES OF Citizens Advisory Forum: November 19, 2011

People present: State Senator Curt Thompson (*presiding*), COS Louise Johnson, others listed on sign in sheets.

OPENING REMARKS

This meeting is devoted to strategic messaging in campaigns. What makes Republicans so successful at this, and why do Democrats fail?

Democrats are not an ideology party. Party identity for Republicans is relatively simple and straightforward: *low taxes, small government, and family values*. This is their conservative catechism. Period.

Democrats, on the other hand, survive by attracting support from public interest groups (minorities, environmentalists, unions, gays, *etc.*) and don't invest a lot of time and energy into talking outside their circles. Strategic messaging doesn't stop with core supporters. George Bernard Shaw is quoted: "*The problem with communication...is the illusion that it has been accomplished.*"

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Last August, Drew Weston, Ph.D. from Emory held a workshop for the Georgia Working Families Caucus (for mostly Democratic state legislators in Georgia) entitled: "Messaging for Success in Turbulent Times". Dr. Weston promoted the fact that people's unfocused attention spans last only seven seconds; subsequently, all sound bites must last no longer than six seconds...and, hopefully, they will have an inherent strategic message that resonates for the listener.

MEETING TOPICS:

There are **three principles** of effective messaging:

- 1) **Tell a coherent, memorable story.**
- 2) **If you don't feel it, don't use it.**
- 3) **Know what networks you're activating.**

Principle 1. We are a story-telling species; yet, swing voters, especially, need a story that is literally not a shopping list of facts, policies and 12-point plans. They want a story that is memorable—one to which they can emotionally resonate. The moral of this story is the one that's based on values and principles. If it is told to them without a vision, the people will perish! And what happens when you don't tell them a coherent story? You will lose!

Principle 2. Human behavior is motivated by emotion. If it's emotionally inert, it's politically inert. [*Reflect back to a presidential debate when Dukakis answered Bernie Shaw's hypothetical question on Kitty.*] The point isn't to "dumb down" our messages; rather, it's to increase voters' emotional intelligence.

Here are some of the values we stand for:

- Middle class values
- People who've lost their jobs through no fault of their own
- Restoring the American dream.
- Small business as the engine of prosperity and jobs.
- Investment in our future (*our kids, our schools, our roads and bridges*).

- Guaranteeing dignity in old age.
- Opportunity for everyone willing to work hard and play by the rules.

Here are some of the values our opponents stand for:

- Tax breaks for the 1%.
- Big banks and big bonuses.
- Big Oil.
- Doing nothing and calling that “leadership”.
- Putting special interests over the interests of the 99%.
- If you’ve lost your job, your home, or your health care, that’s your problem.
- An America where the only jobs are stocking Chinese goods at Walmart.
- Intolerance.

Principle 3. Design messages and refine them in focus groups, if useful. Dial-test messages online using large samples, always testing against the language the opposition is actually using.

Use the language of the kitchen table. Instead of “The unemployed”, use “People who’ve lost their jobs”. Instead of “The uninsured”, use “People who used to have insurance”.

The structure of an effective message must:

- **Connect**, using an aspirational, value-laden statement, a metaphor voters understand, or an acknowledgement of their ambivalence.
- **Raise concerns**, describing the problem in a way that is concrete, visual and evocative.
- **End with a hopeful solution**, a return to the dominant metaphor, or a resolution to voters’ ambivalence.

Curt states that, if Democrats had used Strategic Messaging in 2010, then the U.S. Senate today would have two more Democratic senators. Because of low turnout, the electorate from the states of Pennsylvania and Illinois sent to Washington two Republicans, instead. Also, we just got plain lucky in Nevada and Delaware when the Tea Party movement elected two screwballs in the Republican primaries. In the case of Florida, however, Strategic Messaging may not have worked because the chosen Democratic candidate was too weak against Rubio.

NEXT MEETING:

Our next monthly CAF meeting will happen on January 21, 2012 at 10:30 a.m. in Café 45 South in Norcross.

Meeting Minutes Recorded
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