

The Psychology of Building a Candidate

When developing a campaign plan, one of the most important things a candidate can do is present a winning image to voters. What's a winning image? While that varies for every campaign and candidate, there are five key psychological elements that should be used as a framework, and then filled in with the particulars of your campaign. So whether you're walking, mailing brochures or giving a speech, think about building the voters' impression throughout the campaign in the order presented below:

1. FRIENDLY / BIOGRAPHICAL

One thing every candidate must remember: *Start Positive, End Positive*. A person will not listen to you, and certainly not vote for you, unless he or she likes you.

The positive biography is the most powerful part of the campaign image, and so it must come first. In 2008, did people really know where Barack Obama stood on the issues? "Hope" and "Change" were presented more as biographical extensions of the man than as his policy positions. The voters learned that the man grew up with his white grandparents, never met his Kenyan father, and then rose from this humble position to become an Illinois politician, U.S. Senator, and then President of the United States.

Building that positive image is why most candidates start with a totally positive brochure to mail and handout to voters when walking or at events.

2. ISSUES

Once the voters know who the candidate is, they need to know where the candidate stands on the important issues surrounding the campaign. It might be making sure the trash gets picked up on time or saving the library; or reducing the crime rate and fiscal responsibility. It is the reasons you decided to run for office and the reason that you expect people to vote for you.

3. CREDIBILITY

The voters now know the candidate and what they stand for, now they want to know *who else believes in them*. Who is the most popular person in the city or district, and are they willing to take a picture with the candidate? Find that person, take that picture, and get as many more endorsements as possible.

This can also include your memberships in organizations, clubs, neighborhood groups, party membership, special commissions, and church activities. This is all part of letting the voter know what you have done and who believes in you.

4. COMPARISON / ATTACK

In most local races, it rarely ever gets to the point where candidates directly compare each other, let alone attack. But, if the race is close and there is an important—albeit negative—piece of information that needs to be shared, this is the time to do it.

Voters need to get the first three (positive) elements before a candidate can compare or attack an opponent. Starting out negative can quickly create a backlash. People start to ask "who is this guy?" Why are they so negative all the time?

A safer way to express the difference between yourself and your opponent is a *comparison piece*. You've probably seen them--a mailer that's designed in two columns that compares

your accomplishments and credentials to your opponent lack of accomplishments and credentials.

4. FRIENDLY AGAIN

Now the campaign has come full circle. The very last impression a voter must feel about you when they walk into the polling booth is a friendly impression again. As stated earlier: *Start Positive, End Positive*. This is usually when campaigns send out their fanciest, largest brochure stressing the most important issues of the campaign.