

April 2020

ONcall

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Tips for effective bond communications

Communication with district patrons needs to happen all year long, but it's never more important than when your district is asking voters to approve a money measure.

Seeking approval of a bond measure is a big ask because you are hoping to reach into your patrons' pocketbooks. Voters deserve to know why you want the money and how you will use it and, bottom line, how much it will cost them.

Districts are wise to be straight-forward and clear in their requests to voters and quick to provide all of the information they need to make their decision. Districts are bound by law to provide only factual, unbiased information about any bond measure. While it's tempting to talk about how much you need the bond and what a great value it is, districts must stick to the facts. Your citizen political action committee (PAC) can advocate and use persuasive words and arguments, but the district must remain neutral.

The tools you use to communicate depends on your district and how your voters like to receive their information. Some of your stakeholders read every word of the mailers you send out; others toss them out with the junk mail. Some spend considerable time pouring over your website while others never go there. Some shape their opinions on Facebook and social media; others never use it. The challenge is to identify a few effective communication tools that you can implement quickly, are easy to use and reach the widest audiences.

Then take your message, and repeat, repeat, repeat.

Recommended bond communication tactics

It's not good enough to just create a mailer with bond information and call it good. Communication is a continuous process, so you need to deliver your message over and over again throughout your campaign, offering patrons different ways to access your information.

Start early. A priority should be a straight-forward bond mailer that is sent to all voters in your district. This should go out within the first few weeks of your campaign, so people have all the facts upfront. It helps them to make a decision early and counters any misinformation that opponents might spread.

Print and mail information. While more tech savvy voters prefer electronic communications, there are still many voters who don't have access to computers or smartphones and who like receiving important information in a printed format. Depending on your resources, you may want to produce a mailer early in your campaign and a second mailer to send out closer to the election date.

Post reference material. Many districts create bond websites that include all the details of

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the proposed measure, including architectural renderings, financial calculators and PowerPoint presentations. Any printed materials they produce can refer to the website for more detailed information.

Produce a video. Videos are becoming a favorite tool for communicating about bond measures. Districts can visually show why a bond may be needed — crowded classrooms, deteriorating roofs and other issues. The videos can be shared in many places, from email to website to social media.

Be social. Facebook and other social media can also be effective ways to communicate about a bond, but districts need to closely monitor the comments to make sure they don't become a forum for negativity. Especially in districts where there's organized opposition to a bond, it can be better to leave social media to your citizen political action committee.

Focus on direct communication. **While there are many different communication tools available**, there's no substitute for good old-fashioned face-to-face conversations. These can take place in small coffee klatches — where a few neighbors gather to learn about the bond — or in larger settings, such as presentations to civic groups or parent clubs. People like hearing information first-hand and being able to ask questions and make comments, especially in smaller communities.

Go to the people. The key is to not just talk at people, but engage them in the conversation. Door-to-door canvassing is a wonderful tool for spreading information and also connecting with voters. The PAC needs to coordinate this if you want to use the opportunity to advocate for your bond, but the district can organize it if it's strictly an informative activity where volunteers hand out informational flyers about the proposal.

Invite them in. Open houses and tours of your schools are effective in getting voters inside your buildings so they can see areas of need that the bond would address first-hand. If overcrowding is an issue, invite one of your largest civic groups to hold its monthly lunch meeting at one of your schools so they can see what it looks like when students are there. If the drinking water is discolored because of old rusty pipes, take visitors on a tour that includes a stop at a drinking fountain so they see it for themselves.

Whatever tools you use, the key is to keep your bond communications simple, honest and clear, so voters have the facts they need to make well-informed decisions.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant