

Inside An Election War Room

Winning Election through Campaign Management in Action

Step One: Research and Building Deep Understanding in Action

Every campaign is extraordinary. Therefore, it is very important to completely understand the circumstances and conditions under which your campaign is being conducted and the election will be fought. Research into the differences and peculiarities of the current situation is the first step towards planning a successful campaign. The initial phase of creating a captivating method must start with a sensible evaluation of the political scene in which one will be contesting.

It is prudent to use components such as the type of election, rules, characteristics of the district, voters, results of the last elections and the weaknesses and strengths of the party's candidate and contestants when planning for election campaigns. When all this data has been accumulated, one must make a concrete record that will sort the subtle elements into a concrete design that can then be utilized in writing the campaign plan. Today, there are many agencies that provide detailed analysis of voter insights that could help build the reputation for contesting parties.

Grass-roots level agendas that directly connect with people need to be addressed as a priority. During the election campaigns, the BJP concentrated on their plans for initiating Clean Ganga plan, setting up national optic-fibre network at village level and Wi-Fi zones in public areas, bringing back black money, abrogating Article 370 in J&K, formulating an e-governance plan, revamping Public Distribution System, transforming the Food Corporation of India (FCI), building 100 Smart Cities and instituting an all-women mobile bank. At the same time, the AAP promised Jan Lokpal Bill, right to water, full statehood for Delhi and the first corruption free state of the country.

Step Two: Setting a Clear Objective in Action

A definite objective is necessary in any political battle. Setting objectives is to figure out the tasks that must be carried out to triumph over the opposition. Over and over again, parties neglect to ascertain the number of votes that will be required to ensure triumph and to figure out the origin of these votes. As part of the preliminary research work, one ought to focus on the aggregate populace of a specific region, the aggregate number of voters, casting percentage, votes required to win and the number of households inhabited by voters. A portion of these questions requires some prediction for the future. One must use one's best judgement and compare the current election with past election results.

The BJP and their think tank sent an unambiguous message to supporters and voters that they wanted a clear mandate and not a fragmented one. After all, the party was fighting against the single-party dominance of Congress, which had been in power for sixty years. Setting clear objectives like Mission 272+ was not just a goal to be achieved; it was much larger than that. It emphasized the necessity of a clear majority by any means for a stable government, which can take decisions for the benefit of the citizens. AAP party leader Arvind Kejriwal realized his mistake in last assembly elections after quitting the CM's post. This time, he set a target for five years, 'Paanch Saal Kejriwal'—a message that confers his party power for a complete five years.

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Step Three: Segmenting and Targeting Voters in Action

Once a party or politician decides how many votes they need to win, and subsequently the number of voters that need to be encouraged to support their candidate, it is critical to figure out what makes these voters different from those who will not support their candidate. This methodology is called ‘targeting voters’ or simply ‘targeting’. Targeting should figure out which subgroups of the voting populace are destined to be receptive to the competitor and how one can centre one’s own crusade deliberations on these voters.

A lesson from the 2008 US presidential election is applicable here. Obama, with his ‘Change’ campaign, directly approached the younger population of Americans— especially those aged 18–27. They are active Internet users and have high aspirations. Secondly, with community-based campaigning, he brought locals out for discussion, one-to-one dialogue and idea sharing, making them realize their importance.

In the general elections, the BJP set the target for a clear majority. To achieve a clear mandate, it required proper analysis of its existing strongholds and potential areas of voter segments. In the last 2009 elections, the BJP was reduced to a tally of 116 seats and had not been able to win a majority. Segmenting in an election is largely based on region-wise analysis of voters and the targeting of specific strongholds. For example, the BJP strongholds are in central Indian states like Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat (home state of Narendra Modi) and Chhattisgarh, where the BJP was in power for the last three terms before 2014 and had a strong position when it came to voting sentiments. When Modi was appointed the head of the BJP’s poll campaign, it struck the right chord with these states, assuring the gathering of major support.

Step Four: Creating the Campaign Message in Action

A campaign message must be concrete in nature. Once a target group is identified, the message needs to be delivered to them with sincerity. It is not only a message, but a dialogue between the candidate and the voters that is filled with intensity and purpose. A party’s message determines its ability to contest and becomes the basis for potential voters to decide if they will vote for it.

A campaign message is not the candidate’s projection of what he or she will do if chosen, it is not a rundown on the issues the candidate will address, and it is not a straightforward appealing expression or trademark. These can all be a part of a campaign message, but they must not be mistaken for the message itself, which is a basic articulation that will be rehashed again and again throughout the duration of the elections in an effort to influence the targeted voters.

A message should be concise, straight, and valid. It should come from the qualities, practices, policies, and experiences of a candidate. It cannot conflict with the competitor’s experience. Likewise, the message ought to be conceivable. Competitors who make doubtful guarantees induce voter disregard. Voters must accept what you are saying about yourself and what your intentions are, so the message has to be genuine. It is therefore paramount to reinforce your announcements with confirmation of experience or learning from your past.

A message should be convincing and it should seem important to voters. You must discuss subjects that are essential to your intended interest group. These subjects should be issues that voters face daily in their lives, not issues that legislators think are essential to public policy. Voters are more prone to help candidates who discuss their occupations, their children’s education or their benefits than the candidates who discuss the budget, despite the fact that the budget will influence these things, i.e. if you are trying to persuade voters that you are the only suitable contender to speak for them in an effort to gain their votes then communication needs to be properly designed.

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A campaign message should be equipped with clarity and speak to the heart. The message should be delivered in a dialect that enables voters to accept and understand it effectively. To impress voters, government officials perpetually use specialized words that the voters either do not comprehend or do not find significant. It is much better to craft a visual picture in their minds. Discussions of individuals, things and real-life circumstances to depict conceptual thoughts, for example, financial strategy, should take place. Governments promote their policies through advertisements. These advertisements largely talk about the change a policy has made in the lives of people. But, these promotions are limited to the populist programmes. In case of budgets and financial plans, a large proportion of population is not aware of plans, policies and provisions. It is very important for a government to disseminate financial plans to every citizen to make it beneficial and inclusive. Politics, by and large, is a game of emotions and legislators who engage the minds and hearts of voters generally defeat individuals who appeal to their heads.

One must figure out how to address voters' core values and signal that one is deeply concerned with the issues that they confront every day. Campaign messages need to be dynamic, meaning they should be easy to alter according to the situation, location, and overall environment. When it's clear what message will influence a candidate's target voters, they must repeat that same message at each open door. Though there is no way to guarantee voter attention, giving an effective campaigning message, repeatedly in distinctive ways, will usually interest voters.

Step Five: Media Management in Action

Politics and elections are important occasions that attract more media attention than most other events. Parties can use daily papers, TV, Internet and radio to get their campaign messages out. However, this requires a good relationship with news people, a convincing motivation in sharing their story and an effectively comprehended point to their message. Nowadays, various parties appoint a dedicated staff of press secretaries who manage the majority of press and media-related work.

There are two reasons why it is important for each party to maintain a good rapport with the print and broadcast community. First, whenever a writer prints or telecasts a tale about election battle, the message goes directly to the intended audience free of cost. This is particularly valid regarding free political weeklies and the majority of the web news sites. Further, the substitutes (like official party newsletter, publication, speeches delivered at public functions and rallies) of media are regularly viewed as invalid. Electorates are substantially more inclined to accept positive data about a politician if it originates from an 'autonomous' source, like a mass telecast rather than from a 'one-sided' source, like the party's campaign.

Press conferences must be well planned and should be important enough for press reporters to attend so they can gather meaningful information. The party should furnish the press with a photograph of the candidate, profiles, written material, applicable position papers, press clippings and statements that the party wants to release. It is very important that every time a party organizes a press conference, they also try to strengthen their overall communication and relationship with the media community.

One cannot only depend on columnists for the publicity required for the campaign. The party may also need to buy extra attention from daily papers and radio or TV commercials. Yet media management can go wrong and have a negative impact. During an interview with NDTV's Ravish Kumar on 27 January 2015, the BJP's Delhi chief-ministerial candidate Kiran Bedi not only tried to avoid questions but actually tried to run

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away. Though it was a pre-election interview and should have been handled carefully, Bedi came off as hurried and did not seem keen to answer all of the journalist's questions. She began avoiding questions and literally ran away from a media person. This created a negative buzz around her in the media almost immediately. After this debacle, some of the leaders from rival parties suggested that she appoint a media manager, exposing her weakness

Step Six: Volunteer Management in Action

In creating your voter contact plan, you must understand that you cannot finish everything with only the few individuals who began helping on the campaign. To run a successful election campaign, you will need people whom you may not be able to pay. This is the place where volunteers become necessary. As your campaign starts convincing voters that you are the best competitor, it will likely draw in individuals who will offer considerably more help than their vote. These individuals will need to volunteer in the campaign and support you till you win.

Individuals volunteer for many reasons. The primary volunteers are frequently party followers who want to be included for a sense of commitment. Some individuals volunteer because they feel firmly about a specific issue—they either admire your stance or strongly disagree with your competitors'. Some individuals are simply social and want to be included in the political fight to spend time with friends or other people who share their interests. Some individuals volunteer because they see it as a chance to get a job. Finally, some individuals volunteer because they are looking for acknowledgement.

Volunteers stay with campaigns if they feel that they are making a commitment, if they feel acknowledged, if they feel that the work is intriguing, if they are meeting interesting individuals or if the work is fun. Volunteers can be highly dedicated, but if they are putting in an excessive amount of work, it increases the chances that they will leave the battle because they are exhausted or feel that the work they have been given will not make any difference.

Volunteers can come from numerous distinctive zones. The principal volunteers will presumably be companions of the candidate and activists who have helped with past campaigns. These volunteers will likely not be enough to perform all of the campaign's work, and more individuals will need to be discovered. You ought to search for individuals who have volunteered in different areas of their lives.

They may volunteer for community associations, neighbourhood aggregates, religious associations, unions, schools and so forth. Your campaign message should address a specific issue or gathering, and you must be ready to convince associations working towards particular issues to help you and encourage more volunteer participation. As your campaign moves forward to voters, you ought to take each chance to ask individuals to help in the campaign.

Step Seven: Managing Public Relations in Action

The field of public relations involves dealing with and disseminating precise and relevant data to the general society. This function is particularly critical to election officials as they need to verify the voters and have the actual data. They are required to participate effectively in the decision-making process and have an important role in exercising and incorporating teachings, illuminating all the clients and counting candidates, elected officials, media, voters, staff and the overall population.

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To educate the general society, it is fundamental for decision-making authorities and the media to cooperate to communicate the exact data about voting procedures. It is important when working with columnists to get data to the public through election offices spread across the country. Election officials must strive to create cost-effective activities to guarantee that the general population comprehends the organization of elections and is above all educated about how to take part in the electoral race.

Public relations have a very significant impact on voters. The efforts invested in improving public relations will affect a voter's capacity to comprehend and take part in the decision process. It is a good idea to use mailings to inform voters on how to stamp their vote and to post this information at surveying areas. Give simple instructions under big headings on the best way to utilize voting gear and how to check a poll. Post this data in extensive (very large in quantity, on a large scale) print inside places where voters are surveyed and where they stand in line at voting stations.

Create a website for your election office. If you need assets to achieve this, consider banding together with other neighbourhood election offices within your state or with your state decision office to create a statewide website. The web page must be open for business twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, so you need the technical capability to have many guests. Use this media to teach and advise everybody, including voters, candidates, chosen officials, media, survey workers, students and so on.

Step Eight: Booth Management in Action

All of the efforts that you have put into campaigning and contesting elections should ideally culminate in people coming out to polling booths to vote. If you want to win an election, you must focus on winning each booth in your constituency. This requires a lot of strategizing and delicate execution. A well-received campaign can result in disappointment if your booths are not managed appropriately.

A detailed map showing all the booths of your constituency is necessary. You must be aware of each booth's total population, its demographic composition and your target population segments. Based on this data, you need to assign an adequate number of volunteers to manage each booth. The BJP's victory in the 2014 general elections can be attributed to their 'one booth ten youth' (or twenty youth in UP) strategy. This plan was executed with full precision and resulted in a resounding victory.

It is important that volunteers reach out to the voting population on the day of polling or on the night before, reminding them to come out and vote for you. The volunteers also need to ensure that the voters who stay away from their constituencies travel back to their constituency a day before to cast their vote. Appropriate arrangements should be made to ensure that the elderly and first-time voters are properly assisted and brought to the polling booths.

Volunteers assigned to the polling booths should be alert enough to prevent fraudulent voting and report any unfair practices. They should be able to identify the voters and give them their election slips (voter identification card that carries their name and identity number). They need to guide the voters to the appropriate polling booths. First-time voters need to be educated on the polling process and how to use the electronic voting machines.

In a nutshell, booth management is done by a self-guided army of volunteers, who ensure your electoral victory. It is essential that this team is composed of experienced and capable members. This group has to be motivated and equipped with the tools and techniques to handle the election process.

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To ensure a high voter turnout, the BJP instituted a strategy that aggressively involved its volunteers, who went to the doorsteps of voters when there was just around one hour till the end of polling. The panna pramukh (in charge of a page of around 1100 electoral rolls) had been tasked with reaching out to at least thirty voters. Over one lakh volunteers, several of them affiliated with the RSS, visited around 12,000 polling stations across Delhi. The panna pramukh strategy was part of BJP President Amit Shah's micromanagement strategy at the booths in an effort to ensure that no stone was left unturned at a grass-roots level.

This strategy was adopted from the RSS. The BJP created an army of panna prabhaaris (page heads, also called panna pramukhs)¹⁸ in UP to focus on approximately sixty voters per panna prabhaari. Each prabhaari was given responsibility for a panna—which literally means a page, but in this case referred to a page in the electoral rolls. Each page in the voters' list has the names of eight to twelve families. Each panna prabhaari was required to focus on these families. The impact of the strategy was immediate and immense. It worked excellently to mobilize voters. Another interesting feature of this plan is the fact that it engaged as many people as possible in the greater cause. As per the BJP team, not all the panna prabhaaris were RSS workers. Many of them joined the movement because they had genuine expectations from the new regime.

The Road Ahead

A major chunk of political aspirants across the globe are desirous of imperium. In recent times, the road to contest and win state and national assembly elections is laden with micromanaging each and every aspect of citizen's lives. Rising corporate participation in election process has advanced the trend towards competitive primaries. Though we know suffrage is unique power wielded by citizens, their united decision to seek out candidates who support their issues is influenced by exposure to conscious as well as unconscious exposure to multifaceted PR campaigns of political parties. The fine balance between power and responsibility of both the party and public is the will to create a union built on the fundamental that a nation is strongest when it's united through its citizens; when all work together to accomplish a better standard of living for all.

Resources:

1. Swinging The Mandate: Developing and Managing a Winning Campaign by Dheeraj Sharma(with Narayan Singh Rao)
2. The Game of Votes by Farhat Basir Khan
3. When India Votes by Jaishri Jethwaney and Samir Kapur