

Cost-Effective Voter Contact

Ten Questions to Ask When Shopping for A Voter File

by Robert Blaemire

Shopping for political products and services should be no different than shopping in the mall. To get your money's worth, you must be an educated consumer.

Most campaigns now recognize that they must have the ability to generate personalized voter contact, whether in person, by phone or through direct mail. The primary tool enabling that voter contact is a voter file. However, achieving a successful and cost-effective voter contact campaign requires a sophisticated voter file of high quality, managed by a knowledgeable computer vendor.

With apologies to David Letterman, a fellow Hoosier, here's a "Top Ten List" of questions any candidate, manager or consultant should ask when looking for a voter file for an upcoming campaign.

1 How old is the data?

It's obvious that dead people don't vote – at least in most parts of the country. Trying to contact them only wastes precious resources; the same is true for people who have moved away. At the same time, you are unable to contact voters who have registered since the list was compiled. So, the older the list, the greater the likelihood that you are attempting to contact voters who are out of your reach.

2 What are the purge practices that have governed the maintenance of this database?

If the state has a purge law, you need to know what it is and whether or not it is enforced. If it is, do the voter files reflect that enforcement? We have one file from a state with no purge law and, as a result, have done our own purging by eliminating those names who have failed to vote in four successive elections after the date of registration.

3 Is voter history on the voter file or can it be appended?

The ability to select for contact those voters who vote frequently is critical to any campaign. Knowing whether and when voters cast their ballots is so critical that all campaigns should do what they can to get voter history data onto their files.

4 Has the file been improved with NCOA?

The National Change of Address computer program improves lists enormously and the costs are well worth it. All address changes over the previous 36 months are available to match to your voter file and most vendors can also identify addresses known to be undeliverable. The potential savings far outweigh the costs, which is easy to demonstrate to any campaign.

5 What data is available on the file or can be appended by the vendor?

In addition to accurate names and addresses, campaigns need to have as much personal information as possible to target voters effectively and efficiently. The most important data are age, race, gender, party and voter history. If any of these items are not available on the acquired databases, your vendor should discuss the ability to obtain that information. Also useful are census items, such as income and educational levels, which can be appended to any database.

6 What legal or contractual restrictions exist when using the file?

Knowing this in advance of using a database can avoid costly and troublesome problems down the road. If you assume you are going to be able to use a file continuously, find out up front. If there are ways you may not use a database, such as fundraising, for instance, you should know that in advance.

7 What are the political and technical experiences of the vendor?

The nuances and demands of each race are unique; campaigns are better served by having a vendor who can adapt to the specific campaign environment. Beware of inexperienced vendors!

8 How flexible is the vendor in the products and services it offers?

It's important to know that the vendor is available when you need him or her. It's also important to have a vendor who can produce products as you need them. Many vendors have a "take it or leave it" attitude as far as their products are concerned. While there are limits to a vendor's ability to customize products, the vendor must be able to produce materials as they are needed. Decide what you want and make sure the vendor can provide it. Many vendors, for instance, will provide mailing labels but will not offer full service printing and mailing.

9 Are the vendor's products priced competitively and fairly?

Comparing prices is always important but also make sure you fully understand the pricing. Does the price list explain all of the potential charges? Are there volume discounts? Are you charged differently for complicated orders? Do the selections you make each have an additional cost, like pizza toppings?

10 What is the management and ethical reputation of the vendor?

If you think the reputation of the vendor isn't important, there's some Florida swampland I'd like to sell you.

Robert Blaemire is president of Blaemire Communications, a direct mail firm based in Reston, Va.