



Before You Start Trying To Persuade, Figure Out Who You're Talking To

By Robert Blaemire

Political campaigns are often characterized by a couple of pieces of conventional wisdom. One is that you pick cherries where the cherries are and another is that every campaign wastes 50 percent of its money but can never figure out which 50 percent.

Both of these sentiments are appropriate introductions to discussions of targeting.

Campaign assets are always severely restricted — there is only one candidate, the calendar always shrinks, and money is always hard to come by. These are reasons why a campaign needs to place a high priority on taking advantage of the multiplier effect of professional targeting in directing a message that appeals to those most likely to respond favorably.

The essence of winning elections is persuasion, and not every person is affected equally by a persuasion technique. As campaign resources begin to diminish, it becomes

increasingly important to make sure those resources are directed at voters who hold the greatest likelihood of being persuaded to vote for you.

While it is easy to understand why a campaign must target voters, the methods of doing so are esoteric. Campaigns spend their resources according to judgments that are influenced by how voters performed in the past. As a result, the more information we know about previous voter performance and attitudes, the better we can make assumptions about the future behavior of those voters or voter segments.

We want to be able to make educated judgments about every expenditure we make; expenditures not only of money, but of all campaign resources.

Campaign resources are limited, and the manner in which they are allocated should always be a function of intelligent decision-making. Targeting is one piece of the decision-making process.

Where should the TV time be purchased? How many gross rating points should you buy and in which markets? Where should field operations begin to prioritize their

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Household Targeting Hints

When the Alabama Democratic Party created a voter file in 1986, we quickly learned that some of the voter files were maintained on paper originally and had not been purged or updated.

For these counties, the information could not be compiled economically or with an acceptable level of quality.

To assure that those areas would not be omitted from statewide databases, we rented household files from R.L. Polk, Taylor, Mich., a private company that publishes city directories and mailing lists.

Even without precinct information or political demographics, having some names to contact and some information to use for targeting information was better than ignoring entire counties.

efforts within their geographical jurisdictions? Which types of voters need direct mail for persuasion? Which need GOTV mail? These and other resource allocation questions are common to campaigns.

You cannot run your TV ads on all channels in every market constantly. Your organizers cannot organize everyone. You cannot mail all households in the state or district repeatedly.

At its basic level, targeting is the vehicle for allocating resources and providing information aimed at per-

suading voters. Your targeting options include individual, household, group and geographic. Each of these options has different strengths and weaknesses for various campaign programs.

All are imperfect. If our objective is to predict behavior, what we know about the voter or about the voter's previous performance is essential. Then, picking the correct method of targeting is critical.

Individual Targeting

The most important targeting method is individual targeting. The more we know about individual voters, the better we can communicate with them. The better the communication, the better our chances at persuasion. And, the better the persuasion, the greater our likelihood of success.

If we can compile information on an individual that either provides a profile of the voter or of the voter's tendencies based on past actions, we

can design programs to get that voter to perform in a certain way.

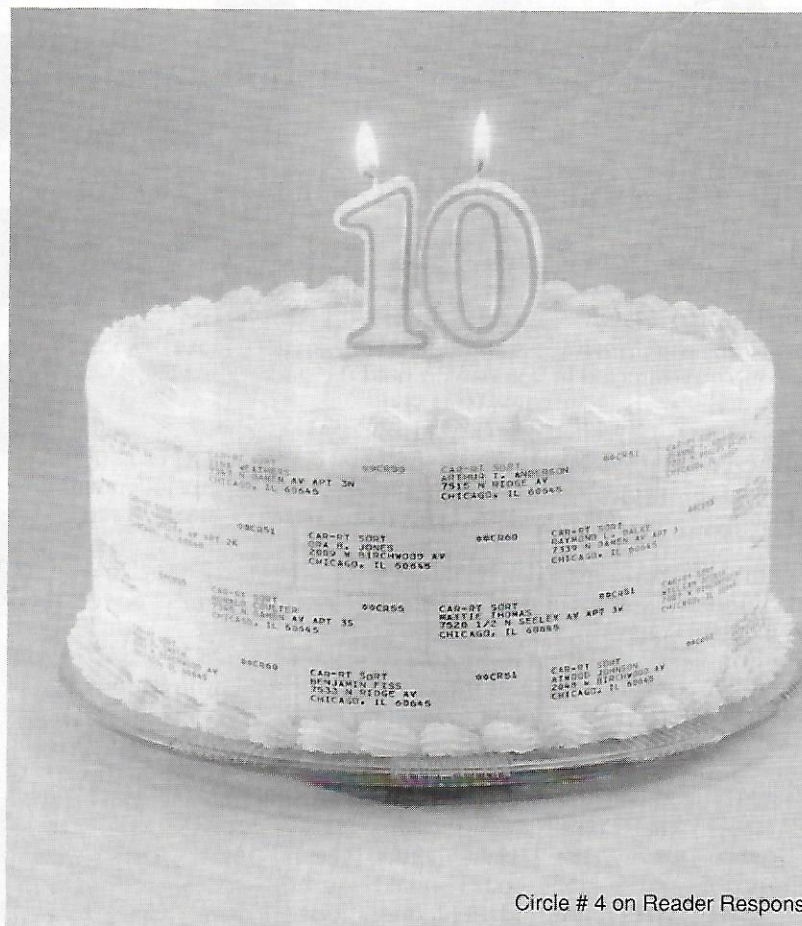
Lists of registered voters are the best possible resource for communicating to individuals whose profiles or previous performance make them targets. Unfortunately, many jurisdictions do not have this kind of information readily available and, far too often, the information available is not computerized.

The more available this information is, the easier it is to formulate and transmit messages, apportion volunteer efforts, purchase radio and TV time, send direct mail, make phone calls and direct other campaign resources.

To use individual targeting, you need an enhanced voter file. While, as with any list, it may be old when it arrives at your headquarters, it is a tool that can be updated and coded to make it useful to the development of voter contact programs.

Household Targeting

Spending campaign resources wisely means getting the most bang for your buck. Ranking individual targets by household helps make sure you maximize your impact. Sending



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Group Targeting Hints

There are many instances where a given organization will communicate with its members about a candidate it supports.

Sometimes those communications have to be done independently of the campaign in order to avoid campaign finance violations.

Other times, the organization will disseminate the candidate's literature or direct appeals to membership on behalf of the campaign.

Be sensitive to which application works.

There are examples where formal alliances between an organization and the candidate might create general political liabilities.

Groups formed around hot, emotional issues can become liabilities to the campaigns they seek to help.

In that case, some groups seek individuals among their membership who may offer their time, not as group activists but as volunteers.

Many uses of formal organizations or appeals to other voter segments may come into play during the campaign, but their activities must be meshed with other campaign tasks.

mail, for instance, to multiple-person households where more than one person fits your targeting scheme means that you have a better chance of receiving more votes than if you send the letter to a single individual. Having appropriate household profiles and accurate household capabilities means that phone, walk and mail programs can be implemented with a greater sense of efficiency and economy.

The best database for household targeting is a voter file that is householded. In the absence of a quality voter file, there are a variety of large list brokers who manage wide-coverage household files with valuable demographic data.

Each has strengths and weaknesses that may not be immediately apparent. Those mostly compiled from the phone file, for instance, are not always good for direct mail.

Group Targeting

Membership organizations are a form of group targeting that can often be helpful as a tool for disseminating your message.

Appeals made to groups are usually based on issues that have wide agreement among the membership, whereby appeals to individuals and households may be made more on the basis of that person's or household's perceived self-interest.

A campaign can appeal to either the members of the group or its leadership for support.

Lists that make up interest groups arrive from a variety of sources, including the membership lists of some of the organizations themselves.

When a campaign has a variety of types of lists available, they should be merged into overall targets for each campaign program.

However, it is sometimes preferable to let the leadership speak on behalf of your candidate in direct communication with its members. It certainly sounds less egotistical when the group's leader makes claims about a candidate than when the candidate makes them about himself.

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Geographic Targeting Hints

One sophisticated example is the targeting combination used in the Dukakis campaign for president in 1988 in Illinois, where Reagan Democrats were the focus of a hard-hitting direct mail campaign.

In order to do that, we ranked households by their likelihood of fitting the Reagan Democrat profile, using ethnicity, income, party and precinct returns. To reach voters most likely to vote and maximize the return on campaign dollars spent per household, we selected households with a strict voting history and with more than one voter per household fitting that description. After six hard-hitting pieces of mail reached the highest ranked 300,000 households, the Reagan Democrats in Illinois ended up voting for Dukakis to a greater degree than in any other industrialized state.

TARGETING WINS ELECTIONS

Political direct mail and voter contact products must be on target in order to be effective. When they miss the mark—dollars are wasted, elections are lost. Strategists need to use every available item of information about their voters to do their targeting. What they don't know could be catastrophic!

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Geographic Targeting

The oldest professional form of targeting is by precinct. In other words, by using previous precinct-level performance you can predict future performance. Beware: precinct boundaries are occasionally redrawn, upsetting the basis of these calculations, and you must be aware of where precincts are affected by a remapping.

As a substitute for individualized targeting, precinct-based targeting has to be seen as aggregate and therefore not as precise. Sometimes, however, individual data is not available and precinct targeting becomes critical.

The main problem with precinct targeting is that using it often means that messages are sent to weak voters or opponents in good precincts while missing good voters or supporters who live in bad precincts. Since a vote is a vote is a vote, where a person lives is just not that important.

There are many ways to use the information provided in a precinct targeting plan. Determining the appropriate use is a function of the particular campaign task. For instance, if your constituency swings back and forth from Democratic to Republican, using the degree a precinct swings from one election to another is a way to prioritize precincts. If GOTV is your greatest priority, turnout percentages are particularly relevant.

If precinct targeting is your sole means of targeting, you might select all voter households by precinct for direct mail. If, on the other hand, precinct targeting is used for some tasks in the campaign but not as your sole means of targeting, you might use it as a means of prioritizing literature drops, bumper-sticker days, house parties or other geographically-based programs.

Precinct targeting should be used with the proper perspective, understanding the value of the information while understanding its limitations.

Certain assumptions are built into precinct targeting that involve selecting data from a specific previous campaign. Which race was used for the "Baseline Democratic Vote," for instance, is an important ingredient in drawing conclusions. Campaigns should make sure they understand what assumptions are built into the calculations and the factors that went into these assumptions.

Precinct targeting is best used for

ranking areas for walk programs, for volunteer efforts and in combination with individual targeting.

Combining precinct with individualized targeting can be powerful, for example, in the South, where Democratic registration is disproportionately high but Republicans are elected in certain types of elections. Selecting a voter who is a Democrat yet lives in a precinct that votes Republican may mean that the same voter falls into the Bad Dems category. Bad Dems would be described as Democrats who perform as Republicans and are usually the type of voter that Democrats must persuade in order to win.

Simply stated, a precinct that votes 100 percent Republican and has 100 percent Democratic registration is a 100 percent Bad Dems precinct. All Democrats can be placed on a spectrum of good to bad in this respect, and targeting takes over. But targeting is really the easy part of the campaign — a means to an end. Persuasion is the real goal.

Precinct targeting lists are compiled with publicly available election returns at the precinct level. Some simple calculations may be made on a spreadsheet to provide targeting characteristics. More complicated assessments may require specialized software. These calculations appended to precincts on a voter file allow for every kind of targeting. The precinct data used in combination with voter data allows the campaign to rank people by "Democratic-ness," for instance.

When discussing geography, it is important to define the terms. The concept of targeting demands that we aim toward the greatest degree of specificity when allocating our campaign resources. In other words, individual targeting is said to be the best form of targeting because that level is as specific as you can get.

The other, less specific, end of the spectrum would be the entire state or district — 100 percent of the geographic universe. Looking at the district as a targeted universe is not, however, targeting. Segregating the state or district into counties narrows our focus some.

Slicing those counties into precincts is more specific — and targeted — still. Narrowing our focus to census block groups, which will be smaller still after the 1990 census data is released, is even more specific and targeted.

In other words, we know that we cannot hit our targets with a shotgun,

but need a rifle instead.

The rifle can hit a specific, small target without causing extraneous damage. The shotgun approach incurs risks the campaign may not be able to afford.

Another type of geographic targeting to consider is census-based targeting. Using census information may miss various political, geographic and individual characteristics, but it offers the ability to predict household behavior on a basis of lifestyle.

Cluster Targeting

A final type of geographic targeting is called geodemographic targeting. It uses compiled census information to come up with a profile of individuals. Some political campaigns have used it effectively since the late 1970s by incorporating census data with voter information to cluster people by lifestyle and geography. The lifestyles have been discerned by several items of census information, such as buying patterns, television viewership and other consumer habits and trends.

A valuable use of cluster data is for buying radio and TV time, specifically when a campaign poll is cluster identified and can be married to Arbitron data, allowing time to be purchased on programs listened to or watched by various cluster groups.

Another valuable combination of data is to cluster encode a voter file, allowing you to slice and dice the cluster group based on political information and performance. All of this is consistent with the theory that the more you know about your voters, the better you can communicate with them.

No campaign has unlimited resources — it is necessary to find ways to spend them wisely. Understanding the data resources available about an election jurisdiction will illuminate how you can target, and how you cannot. The more information available, the more precise your targeting.

To phrase it as an analogy, consider the problem of hitting a target with an arrow. First you have to know if the arrow can reach the target at the distance of the target from the weapon. In addition, knowing which forest the target is in is not enough; you have to know the tree to which it is attached.

The thing to remember is that near misses do not count in target practice or in politics.



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