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Does Your Get Out the Vote (GOTV) Drive Register?

Everybody's doing it. Get out the vote (GOTV) programs, that is. It seems like every organization is sponsoring a voter registration drive. I've seen ads featuring "union voters," "energy voters," "franchise voters," "business voters" and "coal voters," all claiming that they will base their voting booth choices on how candidates stand on the issues important to their organizations. And of course, there are many large nonpartisan voter registration drives as well. These are all well-intentioned efforts.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I help clients with some of their internal GOTV campaigns. I believe it is really important to determine your GOTV goals and success metrics; otherwise, we are dilettantes in the voter registration game. (Because I have a healthy obsession with results, I've written about this topic before [here \(/web/20131027100931/http://www.kstreetcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/The-Hill-Employee-Voter-Registration.pdf\)](/web/20131027100931/http://www.kstreetcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/The-Hill-Employee-Voter-Registration.pdf) and [here \(/web/20131027100931/http://www.kstreetcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/ASAE-Science-Behind-Successful-GOTV-2004.pdf\)](/web/20131027100931/http://www.kstreetcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/ASAE-Science-Behind-Successful-GOTV-2004.pdf))

There are some proven ways to get people to the polls, namely those outlined in an [excellent book \(/web/20131027100931/http://www.amazon.com/Get-Out-Vote-Increase-Turnout/dp/0815732694\)](/web/20131027100931/http://www.amazon.com/Get-Out-Vote-Increase-Turnout/dp/0815732694) by Yale Professors Alan Gerber and Donald Green based on rigorous GOTV research.

As they wrote, everyone takes the credit for voter turnout because of their preferred GOTV tactics. Love social media? Then Twitter and Facebook drove them to the polls. Are you a direct mail vendor? Those postcards reminding people to vote did it. Like to generate a lot of web tools? Then the web gurus get the credit. Actually it's a lot simpler (and complex) than that, as we are biased toward the communications medium we prefer.

Now psychologists are being hired to study ways to get people to the polls, which I think is a good development, because it's all about changing behavior. Here is a synopsis of some recent findings.

Stop Scolding and Join the Crowd

One that we've seen work when it comes to getting people to contribute to a Political Action Committee or engage in a grassroots call to action is to remind them that the requested activity is an organizational norm, or to use skateboard English, it's the "cool" thing to do. It works in getting people to the polls, too.

How many times have you seen a get out the vote plea that involves a quote from one of the Founding Fathers (who I still believe were incredibly wise and prescient) or other historical figure about the importance of exercising your rights as an American citizen by voting, the responsibility we have to engage, etc.? How many

times have you seen get out the vote messages that remind the reader of the dire state of our participation in elections? They are using the fact that barely half of Americans cast a ballot in presidential elections ostensibly as a motivator to get people to the polls.

This tactic is so off-base, it's not even wrong. People should instead feel that they are part of the crowd, that participating in democracy is the "in" thing to do. Yale professor Alan Gerber and Harvard psychologist Todd Rogers conducted an experiment in the 2005 New Jersey gubernatorial election. They randomly assigned voters to get a phone call with one of two messages that relied on the same set of facts, but cast those facts in different terms. In one, the caller script said that, "In the most recent election for New Jersey governor, voter turnout was the lowest it had ever been in over 30 years." The other phone call message stated that, "In last year's election, the vast majority of eligible New Jersey voters actually voted. It was the highest election turnout in decades." Those who heard the second message about how the last election had high voter participation turned out to vote at a rate five points higher than those who were presented with the more negative view.

This applies to your PAC fundraising and grassroots calls to action as well. Dr. Kelton Rhodes and I saw this at play when a client asked us to conduct an influence audit on their grassroots communications. One of the first things Dr. Rhodes brought to my attention was a declaration in one of their materials which stated something like, "Very few of our associates engage in the political process, so we need you to help us make our voice heard."

He looked at me rather chagrined, and I could tell that statement didn't pass his "eye roll test." He reminded me, "Well that's the first thing that has to go. It's what we psychologists call a 'misuse of normative information.' It takes behavioral norms, things that everyone does, and unintentionally gives them credibility. It is a proven tactic to actually depress involvement." (Sadly, the client revealed that the materials were written by another consultant years before our involvement in this project.)

The Bottom Line – Evaluate your GOTV messages (and your PAC and grassroots messages). Are you excoriating your stakeholders or instead inviting them to have fun and join the crowd?

Assume the Best

Another tactic is to appeal to people's ego by reminding them you believe they are a good citizen. Therefore, you *know* they would want to register and vote because they are a "good citizen." It's a technique called altercasting, which means you are imbuing a certain behavior and identity on your prospect. You are assuming the best in them, and it's hard for people to disagree with your positive assessment of them, isn't it?

Michigan direct mail consultant Mark Grebner tried this technique, albeit on steroids. He sent citizens copies of their own publicly available voting histories along with those of their neighbors. He reminded them that "our records indicate that you voted in the 2008 election," inferring that they should vote again because of their "good citizenship." He received death threats but his tactic worked. The people who he targeted were *20% more likely to show up to the polls* than those who received a standard GOTV reminder.

The Bottom Line – Remind your stakeholders of their past good deeds and behaviors, citing that you expect them to replicate their good behavior!

Assess Behavioral Change

The final judgment as to whether your voter registration drive was successful is voter *behavior*. I wonder how many organizations evaluate whether their well-intended GOTV efforts produce the results they want – whether they move the needle. If your prospects:

- did not register to vote
- registered but did not vote; or
- registered but voted for the candidate(s) that actively oppose your organizations' interests. . . .

all of your well-intended get out the vote efforts, while nice, just don't matter.

It's about changed behavior and, for a partisan organization, it's about getting people to vote for candidates that favor your organization's positions. It is also, as I have witnessed with one of my best clients, about *spurring future involvement* in issues that affect employees' jobs. After a prominent and award-winning GOTV campaign, this client actually had employees calling her asking why the company was not asking them to contact their member of Congress on certain legislative issues! The staff felt this was directly attributable to the GOTV effort a couple months earlier.

This is a huge challenge for corporations that want their employees to identify with issues that impact their jobs. When they start voting based on issues that impact their jobs (which really is a function of them viewing their job as a part of their identity) then your voter registration effort drive is making progress. Associations have a bit of an advantage here because one of the reasons an individual joins your association is for the benefit of representation and advocacy.

The Bottom Line: Do you know if your employees and/or members are even considering your candidate's position on your issues when they enter the voting booth?

Have you seen an increase in proactive stakeholder involvement in your issues? Are they nagging you to do more? (that's a good thing!) It's hard to gauge their commitment if you don't have an integrated organizational culture of legislative and civic involvement. Change the culture, and you are on your way to changing voting behavior.

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