

LOBBYING

Microtargeting: Moving Beyond Get out the Vote and on to Grassroots Mobilization

In the aftermath of the contentious presidential election in 2000, top Republican strategists for then President George W. Bush set out to reconfigure traditional campaign methods for winning the support of voters, motivating them, and ensuring that those voters turned out on Election Day. These strategists came to understand that the most reliable voters were often motivated by singular or small groups of issues and could be swayed to vote—one way or another—based on these issues alone. After studying the results of one of the closest elections in the nation's history, and two off-year elections in Virginia and South Carolina, they also came to understand that to win an election, a campaign did not need “undecided” or “independent” voters as much as was once thought. What a successful campaign did need, however, was to identify and understand those voters most likely to be supportive, deliver specific messages targeted at what those voters cared about most, and to make sure they showed up to vote on Election Day.

The revolutionary tactic developed for this new grassroots campaign strategy was based on the idea of microtargeting individual voters by keying into the issues that motivate each person. Using publicly available data files on voters, consumer information purchased from commercial companies, and extensive polling and surveys to determine behavioral patterns and issue intensity, campaigns could create a matrix that identified the issues particular groups of voters cared about most. They could then use that data matrix to deliver targeted, issue-based messages to voters through mail, phone calls, and door-to-door grassroots activities.

Microtargeting first seeks to answer critical questions about voters: Do you vote and vote regularly? Which party's primary do you normally vote in? What issues are most important in determining who you will vote for? Once this knowledge is obtained, campaigns can apply their resources (financial, grassroots, and time) to delivering their issue-specific message to each group of voters, capturing their likelihood of supporting the campaign and ultimately making sure those voters show up at the polls on Election Day. Today, both Republican and Democratic parties employ their own form of microtargeting and get out the vote (GOTV) models with great success.

Political strategists are not the only people to understand and harness the power of microtargeting to motivate individuals and groups based on specific issues. Over the last few years, public relations firms have begun incorporating this strategy into effective,

issue-based campaigns for corporate clients seeking to shape the political debate either in Washington or at the state level. This model is no longer simply for GOTV during elections—it is now an effective strategy for mobilizing like-minded groups and individuals to influence legislators on hot-button legislation.

The intersection of government and business in this country is growing, and business interests are finding themselves in need of more than the traditional lobbying efforts to shape legislation in their favor. Instead, smart businesses are turning to public affairs firms that specialize in mobilizing grassroots resources based on direct messaging with sympathetic individuals. This is effectively done through identification of like-minded groups or coalitions, the building of quality lists of activists who share the same concern about an issue, and the sharing of information with existing associations or sympathetic entities with existing networks. By motivating groups and individuals with shared concern about an issue, business interests can effectively sway elected officials at the grassroots level.

Beyond traditional lobbying, this grassroots microtargeting can have profound impact on the decision making of elected officials by motivating their constituents to become educated advocates on issues. Two notable examples would be the recent debates in Washington over climate change and health care reform. In each case, Congress attempted to move legislation with profound impact on the business community. In response, impacted businesses began identifying, reaching out to, and working with interested citizens on shared concerns. This activity resulted in mounting pressure on elected officials to take their constituents' concern into account; in some cases, those elected officials were challenged for reelection.

Over recent years, the average voter has become increasingly engaged in the political process beyond voting. They are paying more attention to debates, tracking votes on legislation, attending town halls, and contacting their legislators. They are actively seeking out information on issues that are important to them. It is a clear signal that those who can effectively microtarget and educate these individuals on the issues that drive them will have an upper hand in shaping the debate in Washington and at state capitols around the country.

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