

## Action Steps to Take After a Sales Tax, Bond Issue or Operating Levy Defeat



Aside from campaigns, one of the foremost obligations of public officials is to understand the needs of the community and develop effective 2-way communication. Regardless of the outcome, making sense of the results, and being able to properly interpret them, can help equip you to better understand the needs of your community. Understandably, the temptation is to salve your “wounds” and hard feelings by stepping away from the election for a while and putting it out of your mind. However, now is a critical time to gather information that could help you understand what occurred during the election, as well as what the results suggest about your organization and how it is viewed by the public.

First, do a “content analysis” to determine what information voters might have heard and how frequently they heard it. This includes literature, news articles, editorials and letters to the editor, and fliers. Keep in mind that every election is about something, and regardless of what may have been touted, the volume and amount of information the community has received from the most persistent source is probably what shaped their impressions. This also is a good time to re-examine your external public communications to determine whether they were too narrowly focused or too esoteric for the general public.

Second, if there has been organized opposition, it is a good idea to have a comprehensive understanding of what kinds of strategies and tactics they used. Experience shows that they tend to follow the same tactics, once they believe they have a recipe for success. By knowing what to expect, you can often times thwart opposition with pre-emptive actions to mar the image of your institution.

Third, conduct an informal focus group among citizens and voters you don’t necessarily associate with, so you can ask frank questions about what they thought the election was about and why they think other people – not themselves, because that may be a prickly question for you to ask and for them to answer – voted against the issue.

Fourth, formulate a working hypothesis about why the issue was rejected by voters. It can serve as the cornerstone for the pivotal decision you will need to make: what will be done differently in the future! Many local governments are “repeat offenders,” that make the same mistakes in successive efforts and consequently reinforce the very notions that may be undermining their support and standing in the community.

Fifth, look at the behaviors of your core constituency. For example, if your agency is a public school system, check voting records to find out if parents turned out to vote – at a minimum – in proportion to their percentage of the electorate. If you do not have precise parent-voter data, use age statistics from the elections office to determine if voters in age groups of 25 to 45 years old participated in the election. Using that same parent or age data, compare precincts with higher numbers of parents or younger voters to the precincts with older voters to determine how your issue performed among your core constituency of parents. If the differences are not substantial ones, you can infer that your organization may lack robust support and confidence of its “customers”, which can be very telling.

**Finally, if it is essential to ask voters to re-consider the request in a subsequent election, formulate a carefully scripted response to answer why, after a defeat, the issue will be placed back on the ballot...especially if the subsequent issue is similar or identical to the previous one that was just rejected. Keep in mind that the first thing voters hear about an issue is what they will believe most intently and remember most vividly. Sometimes, thoughtless off-the-cuff comments to the media or on public access television can doom such efforts before the first ballot is ever printed!**

For more information about opinion research services, contact Paul Fallon at 614-341-7005 or [Paul@FallonResearch.com](mailto:Paul@FallonResearch.com).

[www.FallonResearch.com](http://www.FallonResearch.com)