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Marketing Mix Assignment

In the early aftermath of the 2000 election, while Floridians were counting hanging chads, anecdotal evidence suggested that it may have been a “good” year for voter turnout.¹ After the dust had settled, the count showed that 54 percent of the voting age population had participated. While a modest increase over the previous election – 1996 saw 49 percent turnout, the lowest turnout for a presidential election since 1924 and the second lowest since 1824² – the returns did little to help the U.S.'s standing in the world, at least in regard to voter participation. A 1998 study of voter turnout by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance ranked the United States 114 out of 140 countries that have held two or more elections since 1945. This ranking was two slots below human-rights challenged country of Myanmar, but six slots ahead of Sierra Leone and Botswana.³

:: BEHAVIOR CHANGE

The numbers are staggering. In 2000, 75 million members of the voting age population did not vote, and 56 million were not even registered.⁴ Clearly, the United States can do better. The targeted behavior change of this campaign is to increase the number of people voting in U.S. elections. This campaign will focus on two areas to change the core behavior: registering eligible voters, and persuading them to cast a ballot on the next Election Day. The proposed behavior change is simple; a textbook definition of a low-involvement continuing behavior change.

:: TARGET AUDIENCE

According to data derived from U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, 76 percent of people who did not vote were unregistered or had problems with their registration. 16 percent of the non-voters had “problems” getting to the polls. These included being “too busy,” illness or family emergency, travel out of town, transportation issues or bad weather. Another 5 percent of those who did not vote did so because they were uninterested, unwilling or uninspired to vote.⁵

The demographic breakdown, while not precise, can provide some useful direction. The most under-registered ethnicities were Hispanics (43 percent) and Asian / Pacific Islanders (48 percent). Additionally, 49 percent of residents under the age of 24 are not registered to vote, which can be loosely tied to the largest segment of unregistered citizens by marital status: single, never married citizens (44 percent). Not surprisingly, the demographic breakdown of registered non-voters looks very similar. Again, the largest ethnic segments were Hispanics (55 percent) and Asian / Pacific Islanders (57 percent). The largest age segment was the under 35 crowd (55 percent), and the largest marital status block was again the single, never married segment (65 percent). Noteworthy additions to the population of non-voters were the unemployed (60 percent) and those without a high school education (62 percent).

Accordingly, the target audience of any voter mobilization effort should focus on minorities, the young, the unemployed, and the undereducated. This is not to say that these groups can be combined and treated as one large disenfranchised block of citizens. Each segment will demand unique messaging, even if the product and promotion structure remain largely the same.

:: COSTS AND BENEFITS

Voter turnout is perceived as a classic case of personal cost vs. public benefit. Until that is view is reframed, there is little hope that election participation will increase. The costs to the potential voter are not insignificant. The voter must register to vote, and reregister upon moving. The voter must prepare by educating himself about the candidates and any ballot measures. In most cases, the voter must take time off from work and travel to the

polling station. They also must have their identity verified through various means and stand in line until a polling machine becomes available.

Until 2000, the personal benefits of voting were difficult for many to appreciate. In spite of the recount turmoil, the Bush-Gore election demonstrated that a single person's vote can indeed make a difference. In five states -- Florida, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Iowa and Oregon -- the vote differential was less than a half percent (0.05). In New Mexico, the margin was just 336 votes.⁶ Unfortunately, this feeling of voter empowerment is limited to so-called "battleground states" where the state's electoral outcome is not easily predicted. In non-battleground states, it is common to hear people say that their vote is irrelevant. States such as New York (where Gore won by 1.7 million votes) and Washington D.C. (where Gore won by 77 percent) have little or no chance of being "in play" and are therefore largely ignored by the campaigns and Get out the Vote (GOTV) organizations.

Outside of this handful of battleground states, the primary personal benefits derived from voting are limited to the internal satisfaction of performing a civic duty and the nebulous idea that "if more people like me vote, elected officials will pay more attention to my demographic." The self-efficacy problem presented by voter turnout is not an "I don't think I can do it" problem, but is best summarized as "it doesn't matter if I do it or not."

:: THE OVERALL APPROACH

To fully understand the terrain on which a GOTV drive must operate, it is important to take a look at Jerome McCarthy's four P's: price, product, promotion and place.⁷

As mentioned earlier, the price – the cost that the audience is willing to accept – of voting is significant. 41 percent of those citizens eligible to vote did not participate. A majority of these potential voters were not properly registered (76 percent). While there is no publicly available data on the reasons why people are not registered, in the age of Motor Voter registration it is safe to assume that ease of registration is not the primary problem. Logic dictates that many people are not registered because they are simply uninterested in voting. Of those who are registered, problems getting to the poll (56 percent) and a lack of interest (28 percent) were the primary reasons for not voting. Any product offered is going to have to address these pricing problems.

Packaging voter participation in a manner which the audience will find desirable requires changing the offer and reeducating the public. Some aspects of changing the offer (a Constitutional amendment repealing the Electoral College) are so difficult as to be impossible. Other means of changing the offer, such as allowing votes to be submitted by mail, have a much better chance of success. In Oregon, all ballots were cast by mail for the first time in the 2000 Presidential election, and 67 percent of eligible voters participated. This was a full 13 percent above the national average. Another way to change the offer is to allow Election Day voter registration. In many states where this was legal – including Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming – voting rates were significantly higher than the national average.⁸

Changing the product offering in these ways, while important in targeting "busy" and unregistered voters, will do little to make disillusioned and disenfranchised voters believe voting is relevant to their lives. It will also do little to provide pertinent information to people confused by the details of the voting process. The final piece of the product puzzle will need to include educating the electorate on individual voting benefits, and providing informational support to those whose participation requires additional assistance.

The methods of promotion will vary depending on the product. For example, same day registration and voting-by-mail are both legislative changes that will rely heavily on personal selling. This will take the form of a grassroots effort to lobby the federal and state legislatures for legislative action. On the other hand, the voter education campaign will rely heavily on an initial blast of mass communication, followed up by door-to-door, telephone and peer contact for the target audiences. Recent studies have shown that following impersonal communication with personal selling can increase voter turnout significantly. Door-to-door appeals have been shown to increase campaign effectiveness by 7 to 12 percent with non-commercial telephone calls an additional 3 percent.⁹

Finally, adequate distribution and response channels will be needed to ensure that people who want more information about voting are able to connect with relevant resources. The most cost effective ways to manage these contacts are via the internet and a toll free phone number. However, acknowledging that 40 percent of Americans do not have access to the internet¹⁰ and five percent lack access to a telephone,¹¹ some areas of the campaign will have to rely on other means. Door-to-door and peer contact can provide a supplementary channel to distribute needed information, especially the more complex details about the voting process.

:: THE MARKETING MIX

The campaign will need to begin immediately, with the bulk of the mass communication efforts staged over the nine month period of time prior to the election. Due to the cyclical nature of elections, there is every reason to believe that, upon the completion of the first cycle, the plan can be reevaluated, updated, and reused in subsequent election cycles.

In the first phase of the campaign, the communication objective will be to inform the target audience about the very existence of voting. This phase will focus on the portion of the target audience in the pre-contemplation stage of behavior. Segments of this audience include middle school civics classes (those too young to vote) as well as citizenship classes (those who are actively attaining citizenship) and could take the form of educational materials prepared for their teachers. Messages will be primarily “moral” based, targeting the idealism attached to both the young and the newly immigrated. The message itself will be based on the audience's new found “right” and may even play off the fact that until now this right has been denied to them. The symbology will be largely patriotic, perhaps focusing on the Statue of Liberty, and hence largely resistant to distortion.

In another aspect of phase one, campaign officials will need to form a public relations campaign aimed at legalizing voting-by-mail and Election Day registration. Segments of audience targeted will include legislators and other opinion leaders; existing voter rights organizations and activists, as well as the general public. This contact could take the form of one-page briefs on the issue, persuasion pieces for inclusion in publications, and a web site which will serve as “home base” for the campaign. The web site will provide ready information to opinion and organizational leaders, and give activists and the general public a place to volunteer, opt-in to campaign mailings, and sign petitions targeting decision-makers. The messages will be “rational” and “moral,” outlining both the benefits to the audience targeted, but also to society as a whole. Either way, the message will be both highly personal and highly advocating.

The second phase of the campaign will begin nine months outside of the election. The communication objective will be to demonstrate the positive consequences of voting, and will be supplemented by the positive approval of popular role models. This phase will primarily target the portion of the audience in the contemplation stage of behavior. The audience segments directly addressed will be the same target audiences identified earlier: minorities, the young, the unemployed, and the undereducated. This contact could take the form of posters, public service announcements and leaflets, all using prominent figures or prominent issues, which will appeal to the audience segments targeted by each ad. The messages will need to be screened carefully for symbols, in an attempt to remove as much political baggage as possible. Also, in an attempt to make the campaign seem broadly backed and limit any potential “spokesperson” or “issue” liabilities, every attempt will be made to have a broad range of issues and spokespeople. The focus will be on showing a wide array of reasons to vote, not just one or two.

An example of a prominent-figure advertisement includes a poster with women's basketball star (and prominent Latino) Rebecca Lobo, with the caption “I vote because I love my heritage.” A supplemental paragraph provides information about how Latinos are under-represented and how proper representation will benefit the target audience. For other figure-based messages, the topic of the sentence – “I love my heritage” – can be replaced with messages more appropriate to the targeted community segment. An example of a prominent-issue advertisement includes a photograph of an empty emergency room, with the caption “Vote. Your health care could depend on it.” A supplemental paragraph provides non-partisan information about how hospitals are affected by legislation, and how that affects the target audience. Additional issue-based messages can replace the topic of this message in order to form an advertisement more appropriate to the targeted community segment.

Regardless of the type of feature, the last sentence of each promotion will be a call to action: to get involved and to vote. The messages themselves will be both highly personal and highly emotional, and will funnel people to the preexisting web site and toll free number, where they can become more involved with the campaign. More importantly, the web site and phone number will provide metrics to measure the success of the campaign. People who see the advertisements that comprise phase two, but are not incited to contact the campaign, will still have an additional exposure to a “pro-vote” message, which will add to the repetitions necessary for a member of the target audience to change their behavior.

In the third phase of the campaign, which will take place in the three months directly prior to the election, the communication objective is to provide motivation for taking the concrete step of voting. Another primary objective will be to teach the skills needed for a voter to successfully participate in the process. This phase will primarily target the portion of the audience in the preparation and the action stages of behavior. The contact is designed to reinforce, or supplement, the exposures created by the phase two advertising blitz, through the use of non-commercial phone banking and door-to-door canvassing. The segments of the audience to be directly addressed by phase three will be determined by research designed to highlight where the contact is most needed and would yield the highest returns. Canvassers and volunteers making these contacts will have at their disposal voter registration forms, simple literature on the voting process, and information on where the target’s polling place is located. Everyone associated with the campaign will be trained on how to best communicate with the target audience, helping them to self-evaluate the costs and benefits of voting. The message will be highly personal, and highly adaptive. A strong focus would be placed on addressing any self-efficacy issues that may arise.

The final phase of the campaign, will take place in the month directly following the election. The communication objective is to offer rewards for those who took action and voted. This phase will target the audience that has been exposed to the campaign at an earlier point and time; therefore, most of the target audience will be in the maintenance stage of behavior. The contact will be a simple thank you email or letter, designed to provide praise to those who took the time to vote, and encouragement to those who were unwilling or unable.

:: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the best way to effect change in voter participation is to adjust the offer as much as possible, address messages explaining the benefits and efficacy of voting to each highly segmented audience, and follow up with personal visits and phone calls. While mass communications to highly segmented audiences increase the efficacy of the message, in this case nothing beats the “segment of one” that personal selling provides.

¹ CNN, "Glimpses of voter turnout across the U.S." 7 Nov 2000, <<http://www.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/11/07/election.turnout/>>.

² BBC News, "The United States of Apathy," 11 Jan 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/americas/2000/us_elections/vote_usa_2000/597444.stm>.

³ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report* (Stockholm: IDEA, 1998) 157-170.

⁴ Current Population Reports, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, February 2002).

⁵ Census Briefs, *Too Busy to Vote* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 1998).

⁶ Federal Election Commission, *2000 Official Presidential General Election Results*, 1 Dec 2001, <<http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/2000presgeresults.htm>>.

⁷ E. Jerome McCarthy, *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach*, Third Edition (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, 1968) 31-33.

⁸ Current Population Reports, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, February 2002).

⁹ Donald Green and Alan Gerber, *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004)

¹⁰ Pew Internet & American Life Project, "Rural Areas and the Internet" (Washington DC: Pew Internet, February 2004).

¹¹ Federal Communications Commission Press Release, "FCC Releases New Telephone Subscribership Report" (Washington DC: FCC, 7 Feb 2002)