

Preparing Yourself to be a Candidate

By

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Now that you've learned how to organize a campaign, raise money, develop an earned and paid media plan and improve your speeches, it's time to consider yourself as a candidate for elected office.

The better foundation you build -- intellectually, financially, emotionally and physically -- the more prepared you'll be when you take the plunge and announce for office.

Too often, candidates announce for office and haven't thought about the short-term and long-term consequences of their decision. Where's the money coming from? How will I pay the October mortgage? Is my family emotionally prepared? Do I have the energy to spend 18 hours a day on the campaign trail?

To help you better prepare, follow these suggestions:

1. Intellectually

- A. Continue to improve your public speaking skills. Sign up for a speech class at your local college or adult education center. Participate in your local Toastmasters group. Practice in front of a mirror.
- B. Beef up your community service activities to gain recognition and experience. Telling a group of voters that you're a member of the Kiwanis Club tells them nothing about you. Telling a group that as a member of the Kiwanis Club, you headed up the Pancake Breakfast that raised \$5,000 to send needy kids to camp, lets voters know you tackle problems and present solutions.

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This is a good time to start getting your name out into the community -- send a picture of you and the kids you've helped send to camp to your local newspaper. Send a letter-to-the-editor thanking everyone who attended the Pancake Breakfast on behalf of your organization.

- C. Write your "life and times" (autobiography) to gain insight about your accomplishments, goals and values. This is the first "homework" assignment I give candidates. Sit down with your resume and flesh out the details -- a narrative description of your beliefs and accomplishments.

Again, voters want to know more than just resume items. Voters want to know what you have accomplished in life -- and what you can do for them.

This is the first step to developing an announcement speech. Your "life and times" also provides information for campaign brochures and focuses your attention on what groups to target in your campaign efforts.

For example, a candidate wrote that he had taught catechism to a handicapped teenager while the candidate was a college student. You can be sure we mentioned his devotion and volunteerism in our targeted mail piece to Catholic voters.

- D. Increase your network of contacts by identifying and meeting with decision-makers, community leaders, political party members and potential contributors.

Keep a journal of who you've talked to so you can refer back to who promised to do what on your campaign. Remember to follow up -- too often, people volunteer to help on a campaign and never hear from the candidate or staff. Don't let that

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happen to you. Collect as many business cards and append them with personal notes; set up email directories.

- E. Develop an issues file. Clip and collect articles about the meetings of the office you're considering seeking, potential opponents and issues of importance to your community. Remember, voters expect you to know more because you're a candidate.

- F. Collect lists now. Pull together all the membership lists you think you may need to build a coalition or raise money in your campaign: church membership, service groups, college alumni, and other organizations, such as the Bar Association, Farm Bureau, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Chamber of Commerce, etc.

It's much easier to spend the time collecting the local American Legion membership list now than trying to find the list to use for a mailing to veterans just two weeks before the election. Plan ahead.

- G. Find a mentor to help you learn issues and procedures. Brush up on parliamentary procedure; know what issues are being presented at this month's City Council meeting. Determine who you can call to help you learn the ropes.

Most importantly, attend meetings of the office you are considering seeking before you formally announce. Once you are a candidate, reporters and voters will expect you to know everything about the office.

2. Financially

- A. Start squirreling away extra money now. You may believe you can continue to work full-time and campaign for office, but it seldom works out this way. So prepare now.

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You are still going to invest your own money in the campaign whether you plan to or not. There are always tickets to buy for charity events, parking and gasoline bills, and meal expenses that are not in the campaign budget -- and these come out of your own pocket.

Make sure you have got enough money tucked away to cover your family's expenses. Planning ahead gives your family piece-of-mind that you can meet your October mortgage payment:

- B. Delegate bill paying to someone else. Whenever I ask a group of potential candidates who pays the bills in their family, nearly every person raises his hand. Delegate that monthly responsibility as soon as you can -- there is nothing more embarrassing to a candidate than to have your electricity turned off in October because you have not had time to pay your bill in six months.

3. Emotionally

- A. Be patient! You do not have to order 7,000 neon green and black yard signs today just because the salesman is at your office. Take time to budget and coordinate. Remember your campaign plan...and use it.
- B. Remember what is most important -- your family. Schedule time with your spouse and family. An unhappy home life makes an unhappy candidate. And forgetting your daughter's dance recital or your spouse's birthday is unexcusable. Make sure all important family dates are marked on the master calendar.

If you think you will have the opportunity to spend time with your family after you are elected, you won't. You have taken

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on another job --being an elected official -- and scheduling personal time is critical.

4. Physically

- A. Build up your physical endurance by starting an exercise program. Can you spend an entire Saturday walking door-to-door in a precinct? Can you walk an entire parade route without hyperventilating?

If you can't, start building up your endurance now by walking everyday (of course check with your family physician before starting any exercise program). I once had a candidate who escaped to the mall every afternoon instead of walking door-to-door because she was too tired. She lost the election. Don't let that happen to you.

- B. Update your image gradually so your change won't be so abrupt. As we discussed earlier, how you look and what you say are important. If you decide you need to make a change in your image, make it gradually. Update your clothing, buy new glasses, change your hairstyle. The trick is to polish your image without people noticing.

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