



## Some New and Old Rules for 2016 Presidential Campaigns

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## Some New and Old Rules for 2016 Presidential Campaigns

RICK RIDDER

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*In this memo to 2016 U.S. presidential campaigns, political consultant and former U.S. presidential campaign manager, Rick Ridder, through a set of rules and recommendations, examines the impact of resources, metrics, and mass customization on a campaign's messaging and strategy. In the context of a voter and data-centric political environment, Ridder highlights the application of old campaign adages to new age realities. Ridder is a principle at RBI Strategies and Research, a Denver-based political consulting firm, and he teaches as an adjunct professor at the University of Denver's Josef Korbel School of International Studies.*

**KEYWORDS** *campaigns, candidate, messaging, politics, 2016*

*Phases and stages, circles and cycles, scenes that we've all seen before. Let me tell you some more.<sup>1</sup>*

**To: 2016 Presidential Candidates**

**Fr: Rick Ridder**

**Re: Your Campaign**

In the next few months you will be inundated with brilliant political advice from campaign staff, consultants, bloggers, journalists, and family. Let me further contribute to your woes by adding my voice to the cacophony. These words are based on my involvement in eight presidential campaigns in a senior position but also with an acknowledgement that the late campaign wizard Joseph Napolitan was right: All campaigns are the same. All campaigns are different.

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## “MONEYBALL” HAS COME TO YOUR CAMPAIGN

Today campaigns require the employment of metrics and the continual evaluation of campaign tactics. It is the reliance on a kind of research encompassing more than just polling, focus groups, and candidate and opposition research.

Central to modern campaigns is now the analytics team. They slice and dice the electorate—and your supporters—into demographic morsels based on purchasing patterns and lifestyles, all in an effort to make your campaign’s communications more efficient and effective. The analytics team will test the impact of your e-mail, text messages, and direct mail. Maybe they will even determine the optimal distance the reception desk in your campaign headquarters should be positioned from the front door (20 feet, according to one campaign study).

No longer should campaigns rely on the adage, “it worked last time, so let’s do it again.” Now you need to allow the analytics and research experts to help the campaign make more informed strategic decisions, from the subject line of your latest fundraising e-mail to the number of get-out-the vote calls a volunteer can be relied upon to make.

Republican candidates, be aware: One of your opponents in the primaries, former Texas Governor Rick Perry, is particularly attuned to testing tactics in campaigns. In one of his gubernatorial campaigns, he tested the voter recall of his TV spots and found voters had little memory of his spots 4 days after the spots went off the air. So, they learned the lessons that a message delivered early in a campaign must be consistently repeated (voters don’t remember) and that once on TV, stay on TV.

## REMEMBER, ALL POLITICS IS PERSONAL, CUSTOMIZED, AND INTERACTIVE

As campaigns become more individual voter-centric and data allow for more in-depth insight, communications increasingly have become highly personalized and customized. Tip O’Neill’s adage that “all politics is local” no longer applies.

How has politics gotten personal? As a candidate, you must communicate not only that you understand an individual voter’s concerns but also that you’re in touch with that particular voter’s specific values. This means that to demonstrate that you are in tune with the concerns of the voters in a particular state, you may have to forgo a Sunday morning national news program for a bird hunting expedition in a rural area of a key state. That way, as a candidate you show you are in touch with the target audience and understand their concerns and even what they do as recreation.

How has politics become customized? Going beyond the merely personal, a campaign will use all the data it has collected on individuals to communicate a very customized message to that single voter. By acquiring an individual’s

computer IP address and purchasing behavior indicators from major commercial data vendors, then matching the data to voter files, your campaign can now target gun-owning hunters who have recently bought ammunition in a specific rural area to inform them of the your position on the Second Amendment—and tell that voter that you are bird hunting in that same neighborhood.

Why is politics now newly interactive? It is not sufficient for you to simply communicate to voters. Campaigns must engage the voters and interact with them. It is no longer a one-way conversation. Through e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and text messaging, your campaign must fully connect with the individual voter, in a two-way conversation—not only to garner that vote but to request contributions, volunteers, and even attendance at rallies.

This engagement must be real. As consumers, voters are accustomed to having an online chat with a customer service representative providing them with a customized, interactive experience in real time. Your campaign should keep in mind that these business interactions shape the expectations of voters.

So, perhaps, after your hunting expedition, you should hold a tele-town hall to speak with and listen to the concerns of targeted voters about hunting and Second Amendment rights.

#### AS YOU TARGET, DON'T FORGET THE MESSAGE

There is a tendency in this era of customization to have a message for every voter. This leads to message disharmony, because your overarching theme is lost in your attempts to specifically meet the needs and wants of an individual. Without some consistency in messaging to the broad target audience, your messaging loses its potency and effectiveness.

Democrats have a particular proclivity to put forth a message for every voter. Their party comprises many interest groups with multiple agendas that often prevent the development of an overarching message.

#### KEEP YOUR MESSAGING FOCUSED ON AN ACTUAL MESSAGE

A good message is not about: (a) endorsements, (b) how much money you raised, (c) your consultants, (d) your team's tactical expertise, (e) the expansive nature of your "on-the-ground" organization, or even (f) a specific issue on which you are basing your campaign.

A good message communicates who and what you are fighting for and includes the key components of your vision, direction (change or stay the same), and the values you hold dear.

Jeb Bush will have great difficulty avoiding these messaging traps. To some, he has to prove that he has the old Bush network supporting him, but to others he must show that he is new and different from his brother and father. Further, he has to demonstrate that he is a viable candidate

because he has been out of public office for 8 years. This need to cross the viability threshold will drive his desire to talk about the amount of money he has raised, his consultants, and the number of supporters he has, to try to gain credibility beyond his last name.

### TOO MUCH MONEY CAN LEAD TO AN UNFOCUSED MESSAGE

Campaigns awash in cash are similar to start-up companies with too much capital; they have a difficult time focusing on their unique selling point. In campaigns, the influx of large amounts of cash often leads to a diffused message as campaign operatives make use of the available funds to communicate very broadly and with little coordination in the messaging and targets. In a sense, they have the resources to be all things to all people; therefore they try and fail.

### RUN FOR PUBLIC OFFICE, NOT TO BE THE STANDARD BEARER OF A MOVEMENT

Movements don't win campaigns. Candidates win campaigns. Your campaign may start as a movement based on a single issue, but ultimately you must make a transition to a candidacy that provides voters with an understanding of your vision, accomplishments, and broader goals. In conjunction with the communication of your electoral agenda, you must make it clear you are running for a job with multiple responsibilities.

Democratic presidential campaigns are littered with "movement candidates." Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, Fred Harris, Jerry Brown in '92, and Howard Dean are among the notable recent aspirants whose campaigns began as movements and who then had difficulty transitioning to a plausible candidacy.

### YOU MAY NOT BE ABLE TO CONTROL YOUR OWN MESSAGE

Despite all your efforts, outside forces, such as independent expenditures, will come to support your campaign and probably communicate something that in no way mirrors your message—or worse, misrepresents your position on an issue. And, yes, there is very little you can do about it without potentially violating some campaign finance law. This external noise amplifies the importance of your own message discipline and repetition, lest your own message be lost in the ruckus.

Recent U.S. Senate races have been the proving grounds for the intense weaponry of independent expenditures. In 2014 in Colorado, over \$105 million was spent on the U.S. Senate race, of which less than one-third was

spent by the candidate committees. Senate candidates had no control over these independent expenditures or the messages that were communicated.

### THINK SMALL FOR VOTES AND FOR MONEY

In the bifurcated electorate of national elections, small groups of voters in a minimal number of states can be the difference between winning and losing. Think through how to put together small blocs to compose large blocs.

Getting money from deep-pocketed individuals is attractive, but a large donor base of small contributors gives your campaign greater latitude in positioning on issues and strategy. When members of a small group finance a campaign, that group will often try to dictate strategy and messaging. They use their access to the candidate and campaign leadership to press their case and imply that your failure to follow their brilliance will result in a curtailing of financial support. These individuals will be far more difficult to accommodate than 100,000 seemingly anonymous small donors.

The key to Obama's success in the primaries and the general election of 2008 was his small donor support and his team's ability to micro-target in the swing states. In the primary season, the small donors gave him the foundation to expand his campaign infrastructure beyond Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina. In the general election, he wasted little money in areas or on demographic groups where he either was winning or losing significantly. He narrowed his efforts to the important persuadable voting blocs.

### IN A MULTI-CANDIDATE FIELD, USING NEGATIVE ADVERTISING CAN HAVE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

U.S. campaigns are generally fought between candidates of the two major parties. But primaries—as well as foreign campaigns—frequently have multi-candidate or multi-party contests. In such situations, negative advertising put forth by your campaign may not accrue to your benefit. You may hurt your intended target, but you may indeed hurt your own campaign, as your target's supporters flock to another adversary, not to you. This is often referred to as a “murder-suicide” strategic outcome.

In the Iowa 2004 primary, the Dean and Gephardt campaigns commenced a volley of negative ads directed at each other's campaigns. The beneficiaries: John Kerry and John Edwards.

### DON'T UNDERESTIMATE BEING SECOND IN THE EARLY CAUCUSES AND PRIMARIES

Mitt Romney won neither Iowa nor New Hampshire. Second place kept him in the game through Super Tuesday, as he collected delegates. Some

presidential campaigns aim only to win an early state and either do not have, or are unwilling to commit, the resources for later states. Keep your eye on the ball: delegates.

### DEFINE YOUR VENUE AND REMEMBER THE CONTEXT INCLUDING THE INTERNET

Are you playing to the crowd in the room or to the living rooms of those watching on TV? Or both? Either way, don't forget that anything you say, no matter the venue, can and will be on the Internet in video form. If you have any question about that, speak to M. Romney regarding a comment about 47% of American voters.

### THE GREAT CHALLENGE IS DEFINING HOW YOU WILL WIN

As every baseball manager knows, you can't play in the World Series if you don't win the playoffs. On the other hand you can't build a team for the World Series that can't win the playoffs.

The political translation of this is: Don't build a candidacy that will win the primaries but lose the general election. However, don't position your candidacy to win the general election but to lose the primaries.

This is the struggle Hillary Clinton will face every day from now until November 2016, as she looks in the rearview mirror of 2008 where she played for the general and ignored the primaries until it was too late. And, perhaps, Jeb Bush faces the same challenge.

So, good luck. I hope this is helpful.

Oh, one more thing. *Don't forget to sleep.* Many good candidates falter because they did or said something stupid when they were really, really tired.

### AUTHOR NOTE

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### NOTE

1. "Phases and Stages (Theme)" Willie Nelson, 1974.