



## **The key to a successful election campaign**

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With local government elections just around the corner, many elected members and aspiring participants will turn their thoughts to the upcoming campaign.

For many, this will pose not only a significant challenge, but also provide an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their abilities to represent the best interests of their local communities.

### **Where to start**

When considering an election campaign it's often difficult to know where to start and candidates may turn to a communications consultant for assistance. As a rule, however, there are strong ethical reasons why consultants are reluctant to assist with specific political campaigns, as it can place significant conflicts of interest on any current or future dealings.

However, for those seeking office there are a number of things that candidates can do to maximise their opportunities.

### **Get out and meet your voters**

Probably the most important factor for campaigning in local government elections, especially in Tasmania, is to get out and knock on doors.

Put simply, using a bit of shoe leather is the best tried and true path to any elected office, as it gives the community an opportunity to meet the candidate, air their views and, just as importantly, it gives potential representatives a feel for what the community is thinking.

Over the years, I've seen many aspiring and successful representatives spend many thousands of dollars on lavish campaigns with expensive posters, flyers, direct mail and even television advertisements. The reality is much of this money could have been saved by a bit of hard work on the doors of the municipality.

That is not to say that a good poster and other communications tools such as flyers and direct mail are not effective and for those also holding down a full-time job in the lead up to a campaign it may not be practical to spend the time that door knocking requires.

## **Credibility is everything**

The second most important factor in campaigning is to ensure you've taken the time to build up credibility among your electorate.

At a conference in Canberra a number of years ago, I heard a speech by a battle weary ALP staffer who had just finished work on Mark Latham's unsuccessful tilt at the top job and he probably provided the best indication yet as to why the campaign failed so dismally.

He stated that six to eight week election campaigns weren't about what was said and done during that time, but more about reminding the electorate of what had occurred over the last number of years in the lead-up to the election.

The subtext being that elections are not about the campaign itself, but are rather about forcing people to actually engage in the political process and make a decision on the actions of the various political aspirants over many years in the lead-up to the poll.

For Latham, who only had a short run as leader prior to the election campaign, this meant he was unknown to the electorate and so was watched very closely during the campaign. Meanwhile, John Howard had been Prime Minister for many years and so the community knew exactly what they were getting, and while perhaps they were tiring of him, they didn't know enough about Mark Latham to make the switch.

## **Build a good track record**

The bottom line is if candidates simply bob up six to eight weeks before a poll, they are unlikely to get anywhere. The real secret to success is to build a profile and a track record in the lead-up to a campaign.

For elected members this is fairly straightforward as they can use their position to get out and about as well as make comments on particular matters. For unelected members it's a bit more difficult, but the principal is the same – build up a track record over time so the community has an idea of who you are and what you stand for, and you'll be surprised how much support you have when the campaign starts in earnest.

Getting your name in the media is important, as is getting posters and flyers out there. But at the heart of any successful election campaign are a proven track record and an ability to engage with the community. Follow these two simple rules and you'll be surprised at how successful you'll be.