

# The 11 Best Campaign Ideas NOT Used By Most Candidates

There are certain campaign tactics that are used in almost every campaign: yard signs, bumper stickers, a literature piece, broadcast advertising, etc. However, this article isn't about those. Instead it's about 11 of the best ideas I've run across over the years that don't happen to get used in most campaigns.

These ideas are generally affordable and they're effective at either getting a message out or helping to raise name identification. As you look for ways to help your campaign stand out, or run a more effective effort, consider integrating these tactics and strategies into your campaign plan.

## 1. Car Toppers

Car toppers are similar to yard signs except they're displayed on top of a car rather than in a yard. In most cases, the sign rests on a frame, and something soft is used to attach it to the roof or a luggage rack.

Their shape is usually triangular with the point facing the front so they ride aerodynamically. With this triangular shape, people behind the car and to the left and right have a full view of the sign.

Another style is the flat board sign. This has only two sides – instead of three – and rides with almost no wind resistance. While it can't be seen from the direct front or rear, it can be seen well from the sides.

Car toppers can be particularly effective when a candidate is knocking on doors in a neighborhood. Many legislative candidates are able to raise their profile in a neighborhood while they door knock by parking the car (and car topper) in a high-traffic entry point while they go door to door. The car sign sends an important message to neighbors that the candidate is 1) spending time in the area and 2) values the vote of the people who live there.

Car toppers are usually less than \$100 if you buy them pre-made and can also be made from scratch using a luggage rack, some screws, and 2' x 4' corrugated plastic signs.

## **2. Election weekend parade**

The most important time for a candidate to make a big splash is not at the beginning of a campaign during the announcement, but at the end of a campaign instead, right before the vote. One way to accomplish this is to parade through the neighborhoods with a candidate float decorated with signs, balloons, with people wearing the candidate's t-shirts.

Building a pre-election float is easy. The campaign decorates a pickup or flatbed with signs, helium balloons, and a sound system. The candidate's signs are, of course included, but it might also display signs from other candidates as well – especially if they are popular incumbents.

On the weekend or day preceding the election, crews of volunteers meet and work their way through the neighborhoods with flyers for the voters, candy for the kids, and a speaker system announcing the campaign's message.

This style of campaigning has a nostalgic feel to it for many voters, but is effective because it leaves a strong –hopefully favorable – impression in the mind of the voter shortly before Election Day. In a close election the added name identification and the literature, directly placed into their hands, might be just the trick for moving them into the candidate's corner.

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### 3. Brochure Notepads

In every campaign, there is a piece of literature explaining why the candidate should be elected. The campaign brochure is the most basic medium used in democracies around the world. Most of the time it's a standard tri-fold with a head and shoulders picture of the candidate, perhaps one of the family, and then a couple of action shots. Beyond that, it contains some bio information, issue positions and a statement from the candidate. All of which are at a pretty standard fare. Typically it's meant to be more informational than persuasive.

While this is an important campaign tool, it usually isn't very effective at establishing name identification or persuading the voter to support the candidate. Even worse, within a few minutes (probably seconds) after the voter receives the brochure, they've forgotten about it and thrown it away.

In the course of a campaign, candidates (and their volunteers) have the opportunity to communicate with voters in persona only once or twice. So, when you have a chance to put something directly into their hands, it should make a difference.

We encourage our candidates to use the "brochure notepad." As a name identification tool, notepads work very well because people keep them and use them. Forget the pencils, combs, and nail files. I used notepads extensively when I ran for office. Every house I visited would get a notepad and it wasn't long before I began seeing people standing in line at the grocery store holding their list on my notepad!

Today however, we take it a step further. We've integrated the tri-fold brochure into the notepad by printing issues, pictures and bio information about the candidate onto the first two pages of the notepad. The subsequent 23 pages are the standard scratch space for notes (as well as a logo identifier at the bottom).

Candidates who use the "flyer notepad" leave behind important campaign information about themselves as well as a name identification tool that will be around long after they are gone.

We've also made a modification to this notepad concept: on a longer notepad, we'll put the words at the top "Things to do...." Then the first thing on each page is "1. Vote for John Smith." The notepad is blank after that, but it stands as a regular reminder that they need to cast a vote for the right candidate.

## 4. Cable Television

In my first campaign, I was a little known 25-year-old running for the legislature. I was running against an incumbent and was given little chance of winning (which can be good and bad). It's hard to be taken seriously as an underdog, and it's even harder to raise money. Sometimes you need to break something loose and make people sit up and pay attention to your campaign. I found it in cable television.

In eastern Iowa, the Iowa Hawkeye games are a big deal. They also happen to play on cable television now and then. In 1990, the team was having a surprisingly good year and was in contention to go to the Rose Bowl – but first they had to get through Michigan. No one expected them to win, but they were playing on ESPN right after the Notre Dame game (back when ESPN had the Notre Dame contract). Knowing this, I made an inexpensive, but polished, television commercial and decided to spend a few dollars.

Anyone who has purchased cable television advertisements knows how inexpensive it can be. It's not unusual to spend between \$5 and \$100 per spot on cable (as opposed to \$150 – \$10,000 per spot on local broadcast channels). Of course, there's a reason it's so inexpensive – you don't get a lot of penetration with cable television; however, there are many situations where it can play a strategic role, and I had found one of them.

With Hawkeye football games you can get penetration in our local market, so I decided to give it a try. I wrote a check for \$100. That bought me 20 ROS spots that day. ROS stands for “run of schedule” and essentially it means the spots will be randomly dropped into the day programming.

I got a little bit lucky that fall Saturday in 1990. Neither the Notre Dame game nor the Iowa-Michigan game was sold out for fixed spots. That means that I had a shot at landing in the games if the random computer drops came my way (talk about spinning the roulette wheel).

As it turned out, I showed up twice in the Notre Dame game – a good step forward in my catholic district. In the Iowa game, I got placement once in the first half. If it had stopped there, I would have been elated, but then in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, it got better.

Iowa had trailed the entire game. Late in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, a running back broke loose and scampered 40 yards for a touchdown, giving Iowa its first lead of the game. The fans went wild....the network went to a local break and I showed up on television

explaining my philosophy of taxation. Iowa went on to win the game and go to the Rose Bowl. As for me, I went on to win the election and head to the State House.

I understand that not everyone will get similarly fortunate placement with Cable television, but today there are better opportunities than those that existed for me. For one, cable news, especially CNN and Fox, are watched more than ever and have a substantial portion of the news viewership. It's also safe to say that people who watch the news are also the people who vote. With a sustained advertising campaign on just two cable networks, the talk amongst donors and party leaders can be turned from skeptical to openness. At the same time, you'll be reaching a lot of voters.

Cable television can't carry a campaign media effort by itself, but it can be an important part of an overall plan (it's a lot like cereal being part of "a balanced breakfast").

## 5. Burma Shave Signs

The Burma Shave Company used to raise a series of road signs that had a short rhyme. Parts of the rhyme were on each sign until you arrived at the last one, which proclaimed that Burma Shave was the product to use.

I once saw a candidate use this same concept very effectively in her campaign for the legislature. She created three messages that rhymed and all ended with the conclusion to vote for Mona Martin. The messages were spread out over one neighborhood block with four signs, and each was painted onto 4'x 4' wood.

She worked hard to find at least four homes that would take her signs on the three busiest streets in her district. Then as the time came to raise yard signs, candidates across the city began putting their standard signs up...and Mona did as well. No one put up more signs than Mona. In addition to these standard signs, she also raised these "Burma Shave" signs on those three busy roads.

As I drove down the road, I read the message and it intrigued me enough to keep reading them all the way down. I thought it was an effective and catchy way to get her message out and raise her name identification. It certainly made her stand out from the crowd of candidates raising their signs. But then a few days later as I drove down that same street I started to read her signs again and the message had changed. Her campaign was taking the time to rotate the three messages around to the three busy streets. A very creative idea. Mona Martin went on to win a race she was expected to lose with 50.2% of the vote on election night.

Being creative with signs is important when you need to stand out from the crowd. If you have a tough campaign, consider using Burma Shave signs to make people notice your campaign.

## **6. Major donor fundraising**

Most campaigns fail at raising enough money to get their message out. Fundraising is the second worst part of a campaign. Losing is the worst. That's why fundraising is so important. I once saw a study that showed 80% of victorious candidates had raised more money than their opponents. You can't buy an election, but it's hard to win when you don't have enough money to establish your name identification and penetrate the voter market with your message.

That said, too many local candidates spend most of their fundraising time pursuing the \$20 contribution and almost none of their time pursuing large contributions. Most candidates spend dozens of hours on a \$10 per family picnic and no time scheduling meetings with major donors. This is clearly a poor strategy.

Major donor fundraising is how most campaign funds are raised these days by the larger campaigns. It can be successful for small campaigns as well.

To be successful at major donor fundraising, you must first establish your own credibility. You can do this in a number of ways: 1) endorsements from key political leaders or interest groups, 2) winning a contested primary, 3) having a well established name and reputation in the community, or 4) having had success in some other political race. There are certainly others, but those are the most common. Most candidates, with a little work, can hang their hat on one of those.

Once you are a credible candidate, then it is important to identify the individuals in the community that make large political contributions. If you feel comfortable with their politics, then they enter that pool of people who are potential donors to your campaign.

Donors can be identified by 1) researching campaign disclosure records at the FEC or through your local disclosure commission. Frequently, the newspaper will list donors to a political campaign as well. 2) Local elected officials and party leaders are able to help identify givers as well.

The toughest part of major donor fundraising is scheduling the meeting. A letter is insufficient to get the job done. Phone calls will work in some cases, but the best way to raise money is by simply going to the office or home of the donor and introducing yourself.

The key to scheduling is persistence. It's difficult to get in touch with donors and it's even more difficult to get a meeting scheduled. Here are some tips to help you schedule:

- Ensure the secretary or assistant that the meeting will be short.
- Use campaign supporters who have a personal relationship with the individual, if possible.
- When they return your call, be sure you're reachable.
- Be persistent. Try twice a day at least.

When you actually get the meeting, remember these tips:

- Dress the part. Your appearance, both in dress and personal style, will send important signals to the person you are visiting.
- Sell yourself first. Be likable and friendly. The donor will picture you in front of a group of voters and decide whether you will be successful.
- Explain a couple of your issues (be brief).
- Convince the donor your campaign can succeed (no one wants to bet on the horse expected to lose).
- Be a good listener. Learn what the donor does and find out their opinions on issues related to government.
- Look the donor right in the eye and ask for a large dollar amount. Then shut up.
- Allow silence for the donor to think and prepare to answer questions.
- If you don't leave with a check, leave them with a return envelope.
- Follow up the meeting with either a thank you note or a follow up note to get the contribution.
- Keep your donors up to date with progress in the campaign.
- Put them in your fax network and fax them favorable news articles as you progress.

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## 7. Door knocking

Even though most candidates know they should campaign door-to-door, very few actually do it. Every excuse is levied to avoid knocking on doors, but none are worth your time.

Remember this about winning elections: the most effective campaigning you can engage in is a personal greeting with an invitation to answer any questions they might have. The opportunity for the voter to see your smile, shake your hand, and look into your eyes is the single most important moment in any campaign. You may not lock down their vote at that moment, but as they proceed through the decision-making process, that moment will weigh heavily in their mind. Think of it like the vault in Olympic gymnastics competition. When the athlete “sticks his or her landing,” it doesn’t seal the score, but it weighs heavily in the mind of the judges. Voters are the same way, which is why you need to “stick” that first meeting.

Every day when you go to bed during a campaign, you should ask yourself this question: how many voters did I personally touch today? By scheduling regular door knocking hours into your schedule, you will be able to know that you have personally reached voters each and every day.

It’s hard to find a campaign that can’t build this exercise into their strategy. I’ve even seen presidential candidates door knocking. The point is this: from city council to Congress, taking a campaign door-to-door is a great way to lock down votes.

Here are some tips when knocking on doors:

- Leave a notepad or a refrigerator magnet behind when you knock on doors so that the voter will keep something around to remind them of you, long after the visit.
- Don’t spend too much time at any one door. Candidates need to meet a lot of voters and that requires moving quickly. An introduction and an invitation for questions are usually sufficient. If the voter wants to visit (a rare thing), that’s good, but don’t spend an entire evening at one house.
- Leave your home phone number hand scrawled on your notepad or literature for the voter to call if they have questions. You won’t get many calls, but they’ll appreciate the personal attention and the accessibility.
- Knock younger neighborhoods during the late afternoon and early evening time period. Campaign in the older neighborhoods during the day. This scheduling strategy will allow you to find more voters home.

- Make sure you dress the part to fit the neighborhood. Just because you are a candidate doesn't mean you need a coat and tie when you are campaigning. Look comfortable, but not slovenly. Look polished, but not overdressed.
- Leave a car with a car topper in the neighborhood as you campaign. People will know you are in the area and you'll get extra credit for the personal time you spend there as well as an increase in name identification.

## **8. Rolodex letters and potlucks**

Most campaigns have supporters and volunteers who want to help. Near the end of the campaign there are many ways to help: yard signs, leaf-letting, making phone calls, etc. There are ways to help early in the campaign, and one of the best is what I call Rolodex letters.

The purposes of this activity are to raise money, gain supporters and find yard sign locations. The actual letter is signed by the person sending the letter and needs to educate the reader about the campaign. This includes giving 1) a couple good reasons to support the candidate, 2) an explanation of the campaign needs, 3) how much money is needed to pay for those things, and 4) a date when a reply is needed.

The concept is simple: every person that is willing to participate takes 50 envelopes and addresses them to their “personal friends” list (of course, they can take more than 50, but that’s a good goal to start with). This list may include name in their Rolodex, Christmas card list, neighbors, etc. In addition to the address, they need to put their personal address as the return address. Once they have addressed the 50 envelopes, they bring them back to the campaign and the volunteers take it from there.

The envelopes are then stuffed with a letter, a reply card, a reply envelope, and are stamped first class.

Here are some tips to keep in mind with this project:

- It’s important to not send the entire project with the participant signer – only the envelopes (to ensure that it actually gets done). There’s more accountability involved when they have to bring the envelopes back in to be stamped and stuffed. It’s also a good way to keep track of how many are actually going out.
- The letter should be written by someone on the campaign and then modified by the sender to make it more personal. It should then be printed by the campaign.
- If need be, encourage the sender to flip through their church directory, service club directory, or send them to co-workers - anything to spark their memory of people they know.
- Make sure the letter is written in a way that is not threatening to the eye. It should use short paragraphs and not be too long. Don’t be afraid of going to a second page and don’t try to squeeze too much on any one page.
- Your reply piece should include your campaign disclaimer, the committee name, to whom the checks should be made out to, and whether or not corporate contributions are allowed. It should also include lines for the contributor’s name,

address, phone number, email and amount of contribution. For federal campaigns, you may need to collect employer and relationship to candidate.

A corollary to the Rolodex letter is the campaign potluck. The dynamics are generally the same as the Rolodex letter- find a local school or church in which to have a potluck. You then begin calling supporters and volunteers and ask them to “host” a table. The responsibilities of the host are simple: bring a meat dish, a salad and a dessert for the main potluck table (enough for their table), and they bring enough people to fill the table (usually about 5 – 8 people).

On potluck night, people arrive and enjoy a good meal, some entertainment, remarks from the candidate, and then everyone is encouraged to help the candidate by filling out the card in the middle of the table and leaving it in the basket or jar provided. Your campaign chair (or whoever is doing the contribution request) should encourage them to either write a check, check the box to take a yard sign, or volunteer.

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## 9. The handwritten letter

When it comes to persuasion mail, two mistakes frequently made by campaigns are: 1) all the mail is glossy and slick; and 2) letters that are sent are always typeset and never hand written.

Our company does more than its share of slick, glossy campaign mail because it's a useful tool. Having said that, too much of the same glossy, slick mail begins to wear thin with voters.

People have different tastes and in campaigns, people respond to different mediums. In the mix of campaign mail, there should be a couple persuasive letters mixed in. One way to make the letter more personal and meaningful for the voter is to have the candidate – or the candidate's spouse – hand write the letter and have it reproduced that way.

Its not often you get hand written letters anymore – even if they are reproduced. But when someone sits down and writes about personal things and writes it in a meaningful way, it's more likely to be read by the voter. Of course, the handwriting needs to be legible and big, but it can have a significant impact.

One of the most effective tools in a campaign is a letter from a wife to female voters. It's clear from voting patterns and survey research that men and women generally view the world differently. Issues from gun rights to drunk driving laws are viewed from different points of view by men and women. I also think women are more interested in the personal qualities of the candidate. A good way to discuss these personal qualities and the issues important to women is from the candidate's wife. *Of course this assumes the candidate is a man.* For female candidates, daughters and sisters can write the same letter and communicate the same message.

Here are some tips to make this letter a success:

- Use a fine point pen when making the master copy
- Reproduce it in blue ink
- Use an off white paper and an off white envelope
- Use a paper “bulk” stamp on the envelope and have it hand addressed if possible. If hand addressing the envelope is not possible, consider use of a handwritten font for machining the address on it.
- Also, have the return address hand written and reproduced that way.

Of course, in many cases, the candidate can produce his or her own handwritten letter for general persuasive purposes. The same principles would apply in this case.

## 10. Email networks

Email is inexpensive and can be an effective networking tool in a campaign – especially if you are writing something that voters care about. The best attribute of email is its “viral” effect. Voters can very easily forward an email around if there’s something that is funny, maddening or interesting. Granted, most political email notes have none of these qualities...but they could.

Email is also an important tool in the effort to keep campaign supporters and volunteers up to date with the progress of the campaign, as well as volunteer opportunities.

The most important part of the process is collecting email names and addresses. Here are some tips for gathering addresses:

- Start with your personal email address book. Make sure your email client is set to automatically capture email addresses that are sent to you. You’ll have to do some editing to the list, but it’s a good place to start.
- On all correspondence with voters or contributors, always ask for an email address.
- If you have a campaign Web site, make sure there is a place on the front page where voters can sign up for your email newsletter (this, of course, opens it up to your opposition, so think carefully about what you write after that).
- Ask local party officials if they have any email name lists that could be incorporated into your campaign.

Here are some tips to use an email network effectively:

- The subject header on your email should be something provocative. Your subject header should not be: “Candidate newsletter #21” or anything similar to it.
- Don’t put email addresses in one of the address lines and expose them to everyone receiving the email. Most people appreciate you keeping their information confidential. Instead, use the BCC (blind copy) function and send the first one to yourself, or use an email client provided by a company that engages in broadcast email.
- Don’t write too much in any one email. Most people are looking for short notes and won’t read long messages.
- If you have a Web site, use the email to direct people back to your volunteer or contribution pages.
- If you have information that’s too long for an email, put it on a Web page and put a link to it in your email. An article in a local newspaper that’s favorable to your campaign or unfavorable to your opponent’s campaign is usually best promoted by linking to it.

- Provide people an opportunity to be removed from your email newsletter. If they do ask to be removed, make sure your campaign follows through and actually removes the name from the list.



## 11. Automated Phone calls

Automated phone calls are recorded messages that are delivered via computer to people and answering machines. With auto call technology, more than 10,000 calls can be delivered per hour to reach voters.

Automated phone calls can help your campaign in ways you might not have thought of:

### 1. Persuading Voters

A 30 second message is enough time to penetrate with one message or issue that will move people to vote for you.

### 2. Turning out favorable voters

If you have a precinct or a demographic group that is particularly favorable and want to turn them out in higher than average numbers, you may want to see they all get a personal call reminding them to vote.

### 3. Prospecting for yard sign locations...

Our phone technology allows us to provide a message to voters from the candidate and then give the voter the option of pressing "1" on their phone if they would like a sign for their yard. We then email you the names and addresses of those who have requested one. This usually has a 2 – 5% success rate of those voters reached, and it requires a voter file that has both phone numbers and mailing addresses.

### 4. Increasing turnout for an event or fundraiser

Event turnout is always difficult and frequently nerve wracking. Automated phone calls can leave messages for voters to remind them of an upcoming event and will significantly increase turnout in most cases.

### 5. Finding favorable voters who need a vote by mail ballot

In one race, we called favorable voters and gave them the opportunity to be sent a vote by mail request form simply pressing "1" on the phone pad. Almost 4% did, which can impact any close election.

### 6. Finding voters who have a particular view

Sometimes you need to find voters with a particular view. Our response technology allows them to press the number that corresponds to their views.

### 7. Responding immediately to negative attacks

When you get attacked by your opponent, especially late in a campaign, you need to be able to respond quickly. With automated calls, the candidate or a surrogate for a candidate can distribute thousands of calls in an hour. It's fast, cheap, and effective.

**For more information on the use of automated calls in campaigns and business, please visit [www.victorystore.com/phone/index.html](http://www.victorystore.com/phone/index.html)**