



InsideInsight

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Seven things your patrons want you to know before your next bond or levy election

Whether your district is large or small; well-to-do, middle class, or struggling; its proposal visionary, basic or somewhere in between; research conducted over the last 16 years shows quite clearly that patrons have some very common expectations and belief systems that guide their decision-making process on your bond or levy proposal.

In this white paper, we present the top seven commonly held beliefs discovered through this research.

Even though you never hear from me, I have an opinion.

The 80/20 rule of business (80 percent of your business comes from 20 percent of your customers) applies to school district life as well, but with a twist.

In this case, school districts assume that the 20 percent of patrons they hear from also represent the opinions of the 80 percent who never speak up. Nothing could be further from the truth, and understanding this is critical to the health and well-being of a district and its leadership.

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Research reveals quite clearly that the 10 percent of patrons who are raving fans (what we call “the happy’s”) and the 10 percent who are the constant critics

(“the unhappy’s”) are usually no more than that – about 20 percent of the total population.

The issue, however, is that by focusing resources and energy specifically on engaging the fans and addressing the critics, districts miss that “mass in the middle,” as we call them, who usually only make their voices heard at the ballot box. Regular research with a randomly selected cross-section of your patron population will give you an accurate picture of where you stand and what challenges need to be addressed in your efforts to build a solid patron/district relationship.

Visionary plans without trust will go nowhere.

Districts are often perplexed when sensible plans, created through the work of citizen/district committees fall flat at the ballot box. Such districts often go back and tinker with the proposal, only to have another disappointment the next Election Day.

What gives? Research suggests that the message patrons may be sending is, “I like your ideas; I just don’t trust you to do what you say you will do.”

Perception of the district’s performance (of which “trust” is a component) is one of the three legs of the proverbial stool that are required for successful

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patron/district relationships, according to research. If patrons think the district is performing well, they like the ideas being suggested in the proposal, and they are interested in district news and activities, research suggests that success is highly likely.

If, however, one of those “legs” doesn’t reach the ground – either there’s a lack of satisfaction/trust, the ideas are perceived to be off-target (or beyond the patrons’ budget), citizens have only modest interest in district activities, or some combination – the climb is much more uphill.

It’s also important to know that “trust” and “satisfaction” are more than a simple thumbs up/thumbs down on overall district performance. You need to understand how patrons feel about the “classroom product” and those who deliver it, the quality and upkeep of the school facilities, and the layered nuances associated with how they view the work of the district administration. This includes whether they feel involved in decision-making, whether they think the district keeps its promises, and whether they believe they are getting a good value for their tax dollar investment.

If I want details, I’ll ask for them.

There will always be a segment of your patron population that wants to dive head first into the minutia and truly understand every detail. Studies show, however, that this segment is mighty small, and that if your communication to the masses is tailored to please these highly interested folks, everyone else will slowly tune out.

Nowhere is this more evident than when it comes time to ask patrons for their support on a ballot initiative. In an effort to reveal all, some districts produce volumes of printed material showing detailed drawings of every classroom addition, list every single project on the proposal down to an enhanced security lock on

the back door at the high school, and display financial flow charts that the average person would need to turn over to a C.P.A. for interpretation.

Such “full disclosure” usually results in one or more of the following. First, patrons view of the size (and the cost) of the plan becomes way more inflated than accurate. Second, critics have the opportunity to cherry-pick a project here or there, rather than seeing the vision behind the plan. And, third, those who are modestly interested become overwhelmed, increasing the risk that they will think, “Well, I don’t really understand it all, so I won’t vote.”

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Research shows quite clearly that most patrons want to hear the plan at a 5,000-foot level (“two new elementary schools to address crowding”) and to be assured that details are available, if they are interested. The same is true for day-to-day district life. Most patrons want information that informs and reassures them – not a deep dive that would qualify them as a subject matter expert.

“Increasing property value” may not be the benefit you think it is.

One of the familiar slogans that “Vote Yes” committees like to trot out as a justification for a bond issue is that “This will increase your property value.” Before you do so, patrons ask you to think carefully about the demographics of your district population.

“Growing property value” plays extremely well in young to middle-aged, upwardly mobile communities where the homes are populated mostly by families who have students in your district. While their present residence may end up being their home for a while, chances are they see themselves moving on at an undetermined point in the future. And, history will tell you that homes sell faster (and for more money) in communities where the schools are a thriving component.



But, research suggests that this message has the exact opposite effect in communities in which many of the residents have long since attended their last high school graduation within their immediate families. In fact, it's not at all uncommon for survey respondents in such districts to say, "Why do I care about increasing my property value? I'm not moving, and my kids will just sell the house anyway once I'm gone. I won't care what price they get."

What makes this even more challenging is that there don't seem to be any hard and fast rules that would suggest that if your percentage of "non-student households" exceeds, for example, 50% that you shouldn't tout "increasing property value" as a benefit. As such, just realize that many people see "increasing property value" as school district-speak for "tax increase," so you would be best served not to throw around that phrase without first considering the demographics of your patron population very carefully.

My primary source of district information isn't the newsletter you mail to me.

Don't tell your communications person, but patrons usually rank district-sponsored communication tools – such as the trusty newsletter – no higher than fourth or fifth on their list of most frequently consulted news sources.

What's number one? Almost always, research shows that people rely on gossip provided by friends and neighbors to find out what's really going on in the district.

While it's impossible to make certain that such conversations consist of accurate information, you can enhance that possibility by presenting simple, benefit-driven information via your printed communication tools, backpack fliers, announcements delivered by teachers and principals, and releases you send to the local media. Doing so will provide more accurate fodder for those conversations that take place over the back fence.

For each piece of news that you share, be certain that your intended recipients can quickly grasp the pertinent details and can easily understand why they should care about what you are telling them.

Remember, it's only news if it matters to patrons.

Tell me (frequently) that you've heard me.

The benefit of pre-election patron research is two-fold. First, the district has the data it can use to help guide decision-making. Second, it is able to use this data collection effort as a way to demonstrate the role patrons played in creating the final ballot proposal. In other words, "We didn't conjure this up on our own. We asked our patrons what they wanted."

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Districts that effectively execute this communications strategy do so to the point where, at least internally, they tend to think, "Haven't we said this enough already?"

In a word, no.

There's a maxim in the advertising industry that says "As soon as the client is getting sick of the ad, the target audience is finally starting to see it."

The same is true for school districts that are trying to effectively connect with their patrons. Assuming that said patrons are as interested on a daily basis about school district news as district leadership is can cause the plug to be pulled on the "we heard you" message long before it has actually been received.

If it's important to demonstrate patron involvement before a bond or levy election, it's doubly so during the regrouping process that follows a defeat. Patrons



need to hear over and over again how their voices have been heard, and how their input is guiding the next steps.

What part of “no” don’t you understand?

If you think patrons are sending a message when they vote “no” on a proposed ballot issue, imagine the message they are delivering when a district presents the same ballot issue (or one with only cosmetic tweaks) a few months later hoping to get a different result.

Assuming that the defeat was due to such things as “We didn’t get our message out enough,” or “We just need to work harder,” or (even worse) “Patrons just didn’t understand” is a recipe for disaster that,

research shows, adds years to the patron/district relationship rebuilding process.

Certainly, a thorough evaluation of the communications strategies and tactics, along with reviewing the organization of the informational and promotional campaigns is warranted after a defeat. But, equally important is an unemotional study of the specifics of the proposal and its costs to determine what substantive changes would give the measure a better hope of passing next time.

Whatever you do, research says quite clearly that patrons want to hear district leadership talk unemotionally about how they will “step back and evaluate our next steps in light of the election result” and “keep patrons informed and involved as we move forward.”

Final Insight

Great school district/patron relationships are built during periods of normalcy and tested during bond and levy election times.

To build that strong relationship, it’s important to communicate simple, yet powerful, messages that help patrons have a working knowledge of the district’s news, views and vision.

For about 80 percent of your patrons, that’s all they really want to know: How’s it going and what’s it mean to me?

For the other 20 percent, you have to be ready with the details that they crave, because they’ll come calling seeking that data. Those are the “happys” and “unhappys” mentioned above, and chances are you know most of them by name.

Where most districts run into trouble is that they communicate to the entire patron population as if they were all as passionately interested in the nuances as those in the 20 percent group are. They aren’t, and providing details that aren’t wanted will cause the bulk of your patrons to tune you out.

It’s sort of like advertising rack and pinion steering on a station wagon. The car may have it, but that’s not what draws buyers to this type of vehicle. If it’s not a benefit to the buyer, all it does is cause confusion.

And, it’s communication confusion that sinks many a good bond or levy proposal, because a district tries to say more than what patrons want to hear. Stick with simple messages that mean something to both parents and non-parent patrons, and deliver those messages consistently, and your chances of having a happy Election Day grow significantly.



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