
The 7 Things your patrons want you to know
before your next bond or levy election



The patron/district “ballot dance”

- School districts try to figure out how to connect communications about their ballot proposals to what is meaningful to patrons.
 - Most patrons (except the zealots) keep their thoughts, expectations and concerns to themselves...until they vote, that is.
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The usual approach

- Districts tend to default to one of the following strategies:
 - ❑ Imply Armageddon if the proposal fails (“If patrons reject our proposal, the consequences will be dire...”)
 - ❑ Overwhelm patrons with details (“And in *this* wing of the elementary school...”)
 - ❑ Focus only on parents, hoping they’ll drag along enough non-parent patrons to pass the proposal (“If we just get our parents...”)
 - ❑ Go emotional (“Do it for the children...”)
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The usual result

- Patron zealots vote the way they were going to anyway.
 - How the rest of the patrons vote depends *less* on the proposal's components (and, yes, even on the economy) than it does on...
 - The current mood in the community
 - Whether or not patrons feel a connection with the district
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In other words

Am I a patron...or a partner?

The history of “The 7 Things”

- 18 years of research experience with school districts of all sizes, wealth and location (urban, suburban, rural)
 - Questions focused on satisfaction with the district, support/opposition to ballot proposals, and where patrons turn for district news have discovered the following common beliefs...
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1. Even though you never hear from me,
I have an opinion.

- Districts often (inadvertently) manage based on the opinions of the 20% of their patrons they hear from regularly – the 10% who are happy, and the 10% who are unhappy.
 - But, that 80% “mass in the middle” has an opinion, and they tend to express themselves on Election Day.
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1. Even though you never hear from me,
I have an opinion.

■ The solution:

- Conduct research with a cross-section of patrons, using every method at your disposal.
 - Communicate the results of that research, and also say what you plan to do with the information.
 - Report when you have done what you said you were going to do.
 - Repeat the cycle regularly (conduct, communicate, report).
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1. Even though you never hear from me,
I have an opinion.

■ The result:

- You'll have a better idea of the thoughts and ideas of the "silent majority."
 - You'll demonstrate your transparency.
 - You'll build and nurture your brand by showcasing your school district's ongoing interest in patrons' thoughts, ideas and concerns.
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2. Without trust, visionary plans will go nowhere.

- Having sensible plans for a fair budget is only one part of what it takes to succeed at the ballot box.
 - Patrons with meaningful trust concerns (how funds are spent, whether patrons are involved in decision-making, etc.) will often vote “no” *even if they like the proposal.*
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2. Without trust, visionary plans will go nowhere.

■ The solution:

- Track patrons' views on trust issues specifically – use of tax dollars, keeping promises, do they feel involved in decision-making, are concerns addressed appropriately, etc. – with all research methods at your disposal.
 - Focus your communications on steps you are taking in these areas (public forums, the work of Citizens Advisory Committees, budget presentations for patrons, etc.). Repeat, repeat, repeat.
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2. Without trust, visionary plans will go nowhere.

■ The result:

- You'll be able to more quickly – and specifically – address trust issues before they become chronic. (Election success is driven by a district's behavior 365 days a year.)
 - You'll affirm the confidence of patrons who already trust the school district.
 - You'll see those with limited interest default more to the positive, because they will trust that the district is offering a sensible proposal.
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3. If I want details, I'll ask for them.

- Breaking news: That “mass in the middle” is not nearly as interested in your proposal as you are.
 - If you try to overwhelm them with information to stimulate more interest in the nuances of your proposal, they will tune you out.
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3. If I want details, I'll ask for them.

- The solution:
 - Address the information needs of your zealots, via secondary methods (Web site).
 - Focus your primary communications on answering three questions:
 - What's in the plan? (Key facts)
 - What's it going to cost me? (\$ per year for the average homeowner)
 - Why should I vote yes? (Simple "sales" message)
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3. If I want details, I'll ask for them.

- The result:
 - You'll get and keep the attention of more typical patrons, because you are answering the questions they are asking about your proposal.
 - You'll still satisfy those patrons who love to look at architects' drawings.
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4. “Increasing property value” may not be the benefit you think it is.

- Growing communities with patron turnover view this as a benefit.
 - Older, “I’m going to live in this house until I die,” communities, and/or those with a lower percentage of current student households do not.
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4. “Increasing property value” may not be the benefit you think it is.

■ The solution:

- Understand your district’s age, income and student household penetration demographics.
 - Apply the phrase (or similar expressions) strategically in growing communities.
 - Refocus your messaging in established communities on how the proposal maintains and enhances the value of existing *district* real estate. (“Taking care of what you’ve already invested in.”)
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4. “Increasing property value” may not be the benefit you think it is.

■ The result:

- You’ll connect more effectively with patrons on the dicey cost/value issue associated with your proposal, because you’ll be speaking in language that respects the dynamics of your patron population.
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5. My primary source of news isn't your newsletter (or other official district sources).
- Research reveals that patrons get their “news” about your district primarily from friends and neighbors, your local newspaper (or newspapers), and from your teachers.
 - Your newsletter and other *official* district sources (Web site, BOE pronouncements, Twitter feed, Facebook page, etc.) are further down the list.
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5. My primary source of news isn't your newsletter (or other official district sources).

■ The solution:

- ❑ Maintain strong, two-way communications with parents through your staff by keeping your teachers and all patron-contact staff members informed (and by asking them to keep you informed regarding questions and concerns they hear).
 - ❑ Disseminate a steady stream of benefit-driven news through all your available tools.
 - ❑ Inform your news media about public education – even when you have no story you'd like them to cover.
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5. My primary source of news isn't your newsletter (or other official district sources).

■ The result:

- ❑ You'll increase your chances that the messages that are important to you reach your patrons.
 - ❑ You'll build a stronger two-way communications channel with your staff and with the news media, allowing to you anticipate and address issues more promptly.
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6. Tell me (frequently)
that you've heard me.

- The value of research is two-fold: You have data, and you have permission to say, “We asked you what you thought, and we acted on your advice.”
 - Many school districts understand the value of data, but neglect to let patrons know that they have been heard.
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6. Tell me (frequently) that you've heard me.

■ The solution:

- Connect any district news that you (reasonably) can with insight gained from patron contact – whether or not that insight is from formal research.
 - Repeat “We asked our patrons, and they told us...” even after you get fatigued and wonder, “Haven’t we said this enough?” The answer to that question is always “no.”
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6. Tell me (frequently) that you've heard me.

- The result:
 - You'll help your patrons feel more connected to decision-making at the district.
 - You'll demonstrate to your staff how much patron input is valued and encouraged (making them more likely to seek it out on their own).
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7. What part of “no” don’t you understand?

- Assuming it was a failure of message, effort, or timing, school districts routinely trot out the same (or, essentially the same) proposal right after a loss.
 - Patrons typically reject these “reruns” with more vigor, while wondering what the school district missed in the message sent by the first defeat.
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7. What part of “no” don’t you understand?

- The solution:
 - Regroup after a loss – and promote the fact that you are doing so, to “understand how our patrons want us to proceed.” Time suggests study, and is a powerful message.
 - Identify via research (and then promote) the benefits that were clearly missed by patrons the first time around – whether you choose to run the same proposal or not.
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7. What part of “no” don’t you understand?

- The result:
 - You’ll demonstrate respect for the “will of the voters.”
 - You’ll show those who think that the district is out of touch that you are, in fact, paying attention.
 - You’ll increase your chance of success at the ballot box.
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The “7 Things” in review

1. Even though you never hear from me, I have an opinion.
 2. Without trust, visionary plans will go nowhere.
 3. If I want details, I'll ask for them.
 4. “Increasing property value” may not be the benefit you think it is.
 5. My primary source of news isn't your newsletter (or other official district sources).
 6. Tell me (frequently) that you've heard me.
 7. What part of “no” don't you understand?
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A final thought

Elections are won by school districts that build and nurture strong, mutually beneficial relationships with patrons 365 days a year.

Thank you!

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