

15 Campaign Mistakes First Time Candidates Make Running for Political Office

By: Alex Patton

PRE-CAMPAIGN LAUNCH MISTAKES

Not Doing Correct Research Before Declaring / Deciding to Run before Evaluating the Terrain.

This maybe the single biggest mistake a candidate can make. I rue the phone calls that begin with “I’ve filed my paperwork and I am running. I’d like to discuss it with you.” Too Late.

It is better to call with “I’m considering running for office, and I would like to discuss the decision-making process with you.”

In politics timing is everything, and sometimes this just isn’t the time to be successful.

Mistaking your Friends for Voters

Your friends lie – not in a mean-spirited way, but in a non-malevolent way that is crushing. Your friends like you and most likely think you would be a wonderful public servant. Your friends also most likely look like you, live near you, and share political opinions similar to yours.

But most importantly, your friends are NOT likely to say something to you that will test or risk your friendship.

Thinking Beating an Incumbent will be easy

Yes, you and your friends think the incumbent has done an awful job. (But we’ve already talked about your friends.)

Incumbents enjoy significant advantages over challengers and are extremely difficult to up-end. The base rate of success in the Congress? Less than 10%.

Not polling

Running for office without polling is like driving a car blindfolded. One wouldn’t be as stupid to drive blindfolded, why would one ever consider running without objective research?

Research is the way to test your friends’ and the campaign’s critical assumptions. Cost too much? Nope. Not in with advancement in technology.

Want to know what really costs too much? Running a losing campaign because the message was off or campaign strategy was based on erroneous assumptions.

Saying “They’ll Never Find It” when it comes to past events.

It will always be found!

In fact, sometimes your former spouse, former business partner, or just someone who doesn’t like you will gift-wrap and hand-deliver it.

Your supporters can forgive most things, but cannot and will not forgive being surprised.

CAMPAIGN MONEY MISTAKES

Underestimating the Time Needed for Fundraising. Underestimating the difficulty in raising money may be the second biggest mistake.

- Raising money for political campaigns is hard. It takes as twice as much effort and time as a candidate thinks it will – especially first-time candidates.
- Your good friend who said you would make a great public servant will suddenly stop returning your calls. Others will terribly disappoint you.
- Rule of thumb for first time candidates: I take whatever figure a first-time candidate tells me they can raise, and I cut it in half and then cut it half again. The result is the actual working budget until proven incorrectly.

Messing up the Money

Don't ever, ever mess up the money. Make sure the campaign keeps impeccable records and hits all filing deadlines.

Pro-tip – photocopy each and every check before depositing.

Second pro-tip – no cash even if the law allows it.

Candidate fills days with campaign work to avoid Fundraising

A candidate can find an infinite amount of things to work on, but normally a candidate starts doing these things because they are avoiding fundraising.

If you are a candidate, sadly your first priority is the role of head fundraiser in charge. You must provide the fuel for the campaign to run well.

If you find yourself digging holes for signs, writing television/radio commercials or attending government meetings you are most likely avoiding fundraising.

Yes, fundraising is hard and grunt-like, but all candidates volunteer for it.

DURING CAMPAIGN MISTAKES

Being Cheap About Photos

Good photos are essential to your campaign:

- Most people are visual. They learn visually, they are persuaded visually.
- Just because your cousin has a smartphone camera doesn't mean you get good photos.
- Don't be miserly, hire a great photographer.

Valuing Expert Opinion as Much as Your Cousin's

If you hire a political consultant, please don't weigh their opinion equally with your neophyte cousin. It is always desirable to seek advice and counsel from multiple people, but when push comes to shove weight the expert opinion more than cousin Eddy's novice opinion.

Getting Bored with the Message

Once your campaign researches and develops the message, repeat it until people scream – then repeat it more.

One of the biggest challenges for first-time candidates is they get bored with the message thinking everyone has heard it before. The reality? Most people don't tune into the campaign until the final week / days.

The trouble begins when the candidate decides to talk about something new. All consultants can recall picking up a newspaper story about the campaign (maybe the only time the hometown paper profiles a

candidacy) to read pontifications from a candidate never discussed or researched that does NOTHING to advance the campaign's message.

Don't do it. Repeat the message, repeat it until you get complaints, then repeat it more.

Mistaking Politics for Popularity

If a political candidate is attempting to be everything to every voter, the candidate is going to have a bad time.

In a political campaign, a winner needs just one more voter than 50%. As a political candidate, you will NEVER have all voters love you, so stop trying.

Acting like it all about the candidate – It's not.

Campaigns are about the voters, not you. Resumes rarely win campaigns. A candidate needs to suspend somewhat of what brought you to the dance – the ego. Candidates need to position smack dab in the middle of what the voters want.

Winning the Argument is NOT the same as winning the Election

Yes, you can be right, but please not to the detriment of the campaign. If you are trying to win every single argument, every single time, reconsider.

Failure to properly schedule use of candidate's and family's time

Common mistakes include, but are not limited to:

- Failing to schedule regular or periodic "down time," including family/spouse time as applicable;
- Failing to match your scheduling plan and strategy with your campaign goals (e.g., making sure the candidate's time is spent where the "target" voters are);
- Failing to develop a schedule for the spouse, depending on his/her interests, availability and skills.
- Failing to have a plan for the spouse — from how to engage/consult/manage, etc. — is critically important. More than one campaign and incumbent has crashed over a poorly "managed" spouse with unrealistic expectations, a feeling of neglect, or a lack of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

If you take away nothing else, please remember – do research before filing paperwork and don't underestimate the amount of time needed in the fundraising department.

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