

How to run (and win!) a progressive local campaign in a pandemic

By [Nicole Mattson](#)

Things are weird right now!

Running a campaign is like starting a new company. You have a product (your platform) that you want to bring to market. You set up a bank account, come up with branding and marketing strategies, bring on people to help, figure out your target audience, and then you have to convince them to buy what you are selling.

In an actual company, you get real-time feedback on whether your campaign is working in the form of US dollars. If sales aren't where you need them to be, you can make adjustments. Maybe your message isn't quite right, or maybe you've identified the wrong audience. You adjust, try again, and keep repeating until you get it right.

In a local campaign, you only find out whether you did it all right on Election Day. Want to make it even harder? Let's run a campaign in a once in a century pandemic.

Lots of things make campaigning even more challenging now

Typical campaign activities may not be safe or may not be held at all. Conservative opponents may not follow safety guidelines, so they might be out doing all the things you can't do. We see photos of them holding events with no masks and no social distancing, and we know some of them are out knocking on doors without masks.

No one knows how viral spread might impact voter turnout. And now we have the president trying to destroy the postal service to hamper voting by mail.

To sum up, it's a mess out there and it's not likely to get better during this campaign season. If anything, it will almost certainly be worse. Sorry to be a downer, but that's my job: to help you assess where you are so you can make a plan to win.

Despite all that, it's especially important that we run to win.

We absolutely, positively have to win every seat we can, in every place, at every level. As Joe Biden says, we are in a fight for the soul of this nation. Your race matters. As we have seen since January of 2017, who helms the federal government is super important. But in terms of the impact on the lives of people who live in your community, your race is important, too. Who wins the seat you are running for could decide whether kids in your town get fed whether or not they are physically in school, whether your family breathes clean air, whether your BIPOC friends and neighbors are policed to death.

The good news is that you don't have to figure out how to do this on your own, because I just did it.

Who am I

Although I am currently the campaign manager for a Minnesota state legislature race, I am not a political professional. I'm a freelance marketing consultant, and I focus on e-commerce. As it turned out, my work skills translated perfectly to adjusting for our new campaigning reality.

[My candidate](#) faced a primary challenger for the Democratic nomination for her race. What that meant was that we had to figure out how to run and win a progressive local campaign in a pandemic. We did figure it out, and the end result wasn't close—we won the primary by a two-to-one margin.

Obviously, you don't get that kind of election result if you don't have a great candidate—and I did. But we also figured out how to run in this weird, mixed-up campaign environment, and I think it definitely made a difference in our margin of victory.

You can learn from our experience

I'm writing this ebook because I don't want you to have to take the time to learn how to do this by trial and error. I'm going to tell you exactly what we did to get the result we got, and I hope it helps you. We need every progressive candidate in every town, city, county, district in America to win every race we can. Our future depends on it.

Communications

There are four main factors in campaign communications: what you communicate, how, when, and with whom. All of these will be changed by the pandemic.

The voter's journey

Unless they already know you personally or are aware of your previous work in the community, most voters don't immediately jump to a yes-or-no decision on whether to support you, especially when you're running in a nonpartisan race. In marketing, we have a concept called "[the buyer's journey.](#)" It's a way of describing the stages a buyer goes through before they make their purchase. Typically those stages are awareness, evaluation, and decision.

I adapted the idea of the buyer's journey to fit how voters make a voting decision. The three steps I identified are awareness, persuasion, casting a ballot.

Awareness

In the awareness stage, voters may learn not only about you as a candidate but also the fact that the seat that you are running for is up for election. Don't take for granted that everyone knows that. Our whole lives have been scrambled by the pandemic and there is only so much information we can take in and retain. It's your job as a candidate to let them know who you are and what you're running for.

Persuasion

The next phase is persuasion, meaning you talk to the voters about why you are the best person for the seat you're running for. Ideally, this would be a separate conversation from the awareness message, but sometimes you're crunched for time and you have to do them both at once. Just make sure you always start with awareness and then move to persuasion.

Casting a ballot

This is the step that sometimes candidates don't focus on enough, and it's especially important under the circumstances we're in now. You have to ask people for their vote, and you have to offer to help them find out how to cast it. Again, do not take for granted that everyone you talk to is planning to vote and that they know when, where, and how to do it.

We have the highest voter turnout in the nation in Minnesota, and still many thousands of eligible, registered voters don't vote. As a candidate it's your job to help them take that last step. Ask them what their voting plan is—[studies show that if a voter makes a plan](#), even if they don't stick to the exact plan, they're more likely to vote than if they haven't told someone else what their voting plan is. Make sure you have a page on your website that gives people all the information they need to be able to vote, and tell people they can find voting resources there.

Strategies and tactics

These are the strategies and tactics we used to get our message out in our new campaign world.

Social proof

Most human beings don't want to stray too far from where it looks like the crowd is going. People assume that if the pack is going in a particular direction, it must be the right one. Marketers have called this phenomenon "[social proof](#)," and they use it on us all the time. Why do companies put product reviews on their website? Why do they show you customers' testimonials? Because you won't necessarily take what they say at face value, but you'll believe other people who say good things about them.

The same concept applies with political campaigns. Endorsements are the obvious form of social proof on a campaign, but they are far from the only one. Yard signs are big, especially in a local race. This actually happened in our race. My candidate had a phone conversation with an older man who said, "the nice teacher down the block has your sign in her yard, and my neighbor I don't like has the other guy's sign in his. So I already decided I'm voting for you."

Social media doesn't win elections, but this time it really matters

Campaign old-timers love to tell you that social media doesn't win elections, and in the Before Times they were right. But now it's absolutely critical that you have a strong social media message.

Marketing 101 says to go where your customers are to share your message rather than expecting them to find you. Right now we are mostly inside and on our devices, probably more than we have ever been. Our normal social lives could infect us with a deadly virus, so we are congregating online. How do you leverage that for your campaign?

Find influencers and amplifiers

You shouldn't be the only person in your community talking up your campaign. (If you are, it's not a great sign.) Recruit influencers and amplifiers to help spread the word about you—they can provide powerful social proof.

Influencers are people in your community who are respected and already have an audience or platform you can leverage. Think about other elected officials (current or past), people who run well-known organizations in your community, and people who have access to a network that you don't. Examples would be:

- Someone who has held the office you are running for

- The president of the PTA
- The leader of a school sports organization (such as the football or hockey parents' association)
- The head of a respected nonprofit organization in your area

Because those people already have a platform to speak to lots of people at once, their support is a great form of social proof and an effective way to reach a lot of potential voters. Have them post about you on their own personal page.

Amplifiers may not have as big of a network as your influencers, but they are still really important. They are people who will share your message with their friends via social media, text, email. You can find them among your most enthusiastic supporters. Ask them to share your social media posts, forward your emails, and text friends to ask if they have voted yet or if they want to volunteer.

Focus on Facebook

There are so many social media platforms. Should you be on Twitter? Instagram? Snapchat? TikTok?

You should have at least a minimal presence on Twitter and Instagram if you can manage it. But if you only have the bandwidth for one platform, I would recommend putting your time into Facebook. Facebook's users tend to be older, and older people are more likely to vote.

As of this writing, Facebook still allows political advertising. The process for getting certified to run political ads on Facebook is a real pain and can take weeks to finish, so if you think you might want to run Facebook ads, start that process ASAP.

If you do run Facebook ads, you can target them by your geographic location, age, gender, and users' interests. We targeted ours to people ages 18-65 who were likely to engage with moderate or liberal political content, and that worked well for us.

But even if you don't end up running ads, you can still get a lot of people to see your page and hear your message through your influencers and amplifiers. And the more Facebook users see your posts, even if they haven't liked your page, the more they will continue to see your Facebook posts. Personally, I never Facebook-liked our opponent's campaign page, but I did check on it periodically. Eventually his posts started showing up in my Facebook feed organically.

Be a resource for information

Your social media presence shouldn't be a constant sales pitch for you and your campaign. Be a resource for information about how the pandemic is affecting your community, how people can vote safely, what's going on in the body you are running to join. Be a trusted voice. Start behaving as if you are already a leader in your community, and people will follow.

Logistics

Website

Do you absolutely have to have a website when you're running a local campaign? I know a guy who won his local race with no web presence at all. He did it by knocking on every door in his district—before COVID. You can't do that. You need a website.

What goes on your website

The minimum pages you need are:

- Home
- About
- Issues
- Volunteer
- Donate
- Voting

Home

Your home page should feature a big picture of you, your top three to five campaign issues, a donate button, and your contact information. If you can make a short introductory video, that should also go on your home page.

If you can afford to hire a professional photographer to take your campaign photos, definitely do that. If that's beyond your budget right now, do your best. I have been taking good-enough campaign photos for local races with the portrait mode on my iPhone.

You should add closed captioning to your campaign video. I use a program called [Wondershare Filmora](#) to caption videos and add intros and outros. I am sure there are cheaper alternatives, but that's what I've been doing.

About

Your about page should introduce you as a person, but don't forget that this is still your campaign website. Your future constituents want to know who you are, but also why are you running? What about your background makes you uniquely qualified for this position?

Issues

Pick three to five issues that are your campaign platform and explain why. It's okay to adjust these as your campaign goes along and you talk to more voters. For example, maybe the number one issue you're running on for your school board campaign is class size, but as you talk to voters you learn that voters' primary concern is whether your town needs another high school building. You can and should add that issue to your list, even if you didn't have it there at first.

Volunteer

You need to make it as easy as possible for volunteers to sign up to help you. Every website platform has a form builder. Make sure you test your form out to make sure you're getting emails each time you get a new form submission. You don't want to leave any potential volunteers waiting for you to get back to them.

Donate

For progressive races, [ActBlue](#) is a great fundraising option. If you'd prefer to not to use a platform that is so clearly partisan, I would recommend setting up a [PayPal for Business](#) account. Either way, put donate buttons on your website that are easy for people to find.

Voting

Make sure you have a page on your website dedicated to explaining the voting process in your jurisdiction, along with links to a polling place finder, an absentee ballot request, and a ballot tracker if your state has that available.

What software to use

There are a lot of website builders out there. I have been recommending Wix to candidates. It's easy to set up even if you're not experienced at making websites, and it has all the functionality you need—events, forms, etc.

Whatever way you decide to go, the one thing I would recommend against is trying to host your own website. Sign up for a subscription service like Wix or Weebly and let them do the hard parts like managing security updates. You can focus on the content.

Google ads

Google Ads are an easy way to get traffic to your website. They can also help ensure that you show up first on the search page when people Google your name or your race.

You don't need to do anything fancy for your Google Ads. Just use your name and your race as keywords, and include your opponents' names as well, so that if anyone is searching for them, they find you first.

Google Ads don't have to be expensive, as long as you do this one really important thing. Make sure you target your ads geographically to just your locality or you will end up paying for clicks from people who aren't your potential voters. You can target geographically by metro area, county, zip code, even neighborhoods. View [Google's list of geographical targeting options](#) and choose the one that works best for your race.

Email

It's helpful to have an email list to contact your strongest supporters. Start with the email contacts you already have, and then add people who sign up for your email list via your website. MailChimp or Constant Contact are good, but don't get hung up on signing up for a service. You can just use BCC.

You can use email to let your supporters know about upcoming events, or ask them to share a particular social media post with their friends. Email is also great for

fundraising asks. Make sure, as always, that you make it as easy as possible for people to do whatever you are asking them to do. Remove all the roadblocks and speed bumps you can, and people will be more likely to follow through.

YouTube

Did you know that YouTube is the second most used search engine after Google? Lots and lots of people, some of whom are your potential voters, turn to YouTube as their primary source for information. As soon as possible, start a campaign YouTube account and put up even a short cell phone video saying who you are with a link to your website so people who use YouTube can find you easily. If you have time to add more videos later, great. If not, don't sweat it. One is better than none.

Events

Campaign events are extra hard right now. We're all Zoomed out, but don't give in to the temptation to do events in person unless they can't be avoided, like if a potential endorsing organization asks you to attend their town hall in person. You don't want to be in the news for being the reason why an infection in your community spreads.

Zoom town halls

On our campaign, we've been doing Zoom town halls every other week in the primary, and we'll do them every week in the general election. Pick topics that are important to your community, and ask experts in your district to join you to talk about them.

It's great if lots of people attend your Zoom town halls, but it's at least as important that people see that you're doing them so they know that you are engaged and informed on the issues that matter to them. So make sure to invite lots of people, and don't feel bad if many of them don't show up.

If you don't mind spending a little bit of extra money, you can use the webinar feature on Zoom to stream your town halls to your campaign Facebook page. That way more people will see the town hall, even if they don't attend the Zoom meeting.

Zoom drop-in sessions

This is something we haven't done yet on our campaign, but other candidates are having success with. You can call it something like "Coffee with the Candidate" and have a standing, open Zoom session every week. Another option would be to have

drop-in sessions on Facebook Live. Try to get a volunteer to manage the incoming questions if possible, so you don't miss anything. Also try to have someone keep track of who attended so you can follow up and thank them, ask them for their vote, and maybe cover them into volunteers later.

If you have to do an event in person

As of right now, it seems like holding events outside with masks and social distancing is safe. However, you can only ask people to comply with good practices. You can't enforce it and you can't assume everyone will behave the way you wish they would. So think very carefully about whether you absolutely have to have an event in person, and check the infection rates in your area before you do it—covidactnow.com is a good source for data.

Fundraising

Fundraising! Everyone's absolute favorite part of campaigning, right? Like everything else, COVID has made fundraising a challenge, too.

What's different about fundraising

For one thing, we can't have house parties. Local campaigns used to get a chunk of their donations from people hosting their friends and neighbors to have a small gathering where they learn about you and hopefully give you some money. House parties are pretty much off the table for now.

But we have a bigger fundraising problem than that: we are in a deep economic hole that is getting deeper by the day, so people may not be able to give as much as they had before, or maybe not at all.

How to fundraise in a pandemic

First, talk to everyone you know who might be willing to donate anything at all, and ask them. Unless you know for sure that they are in financial difficulty, don't make assumptions about other people's money and how they want to spend it. It may be that they really want you to be in the seat you're running for and they are happy to make a donation.

Next, check state campaign finance reports to see who other candidates in races like yours have received donations from, and then contact those people and ask if they'd be willing to donate to you. One of my favorite things to do is to check [FEC.gov](https://www.fec.gov)

for federal election donors in your area. Contact people who look like they are in political alignment with you and ask if they are willing to make a donation to your campaign.

Ask people to set up recurring donations if they can, even if they are small amounts. Make sure the donation platform you're using has this feature set up before you ask.

And finally, build your email list. Every email you send doesn't have to have a donation ask in it, but you should periodically send one out, even if it's in with other news or information. Lots of times people intend to make a donation but they get busy or distracted. A little nudge might be all they need to get their credit cards out.

Volunteers

Normally we would send volunteers out to knock doors, but that's not a good idea this year. So we're going to have to focus mainly on phone banking. Some campaigns are having difficulty recruiting phone bankers, but phone banking is the best way to have direct, personal contact with voters right now.

Although phone banking isn't my favorite method of contacting voters, it works. So plan to spend a lot of your time on the phone from now until Election Day. We're holding open Zoom sessions for volunteers to drop in and phone bank with us twice a week. But you can also give people a list and ask them to commit to making, say, 20 calls twice a week.

If you have voters that you have addresses but not phone numbers for, have volunteers write personal postcards to them. It's a highly effective way to get people to read your mail—when was the last time you got a handwritten postcard?—and it's an easy way to get volunteers into your pipeline. When they are comfortable with writing postcards you can ask them to do texts or calls.

Field

Field organizing is the backbone of any campaign. You need to talk to voters, ask for their vote, and then get them to show up to the polls. We used to do that primarily by door knocking. Now...

Think very, very carefully about door knocking before you do it

Let's set aside the safety concerns for a moment and focus on the politics. Will you turn off potential voters if you show up at their doorstep? What if you test positive? Do you want to have to call voters and tell them you may have exposed them to COVID? Do you want that to be the lead story on your local news?

If you feel like you have to knock on doors because your opponents are, check <https://covidactnow.org/> for case counts in your area every day. Do not go out when cases are rising. It is poor leadership and terrible politics to potentially bring COVID to people at their doors. Don't do it!

If you're not doorknocking that, talk about it. Tell voters you wish you could see them but it's not safe. Let them see the contrast between you and any opponents who are campaigning without your safety in mind.

Can't door knock, now what?

In the campaign we just won, *we did not knock on a single door*. We still got more votes than the win number we had calculated. How did we do it? Here are some of the tactics we used to talk to voters.

Direct mail

I will admit that we sent our mail before DeJoy tried to wreck the USPS. Still, mail is worth sending. We sent an introduction piece out at the beginning of the campaign, and a get-out-the-vote mailer right before Election Day.

Think very, very carefully about what information you're giving voters on your mail piece. What is going to be of greatest interest to them? What is going to make them want to learn more? Is it easy for them to figure out how to find out more about your campaign?

Direct mail is most likely going to be the biggest expense you have. Expect to spend about \$1 per piece, depending on what size you choose and including postage. Find a union print shop to print it and mail it for you, if at all possible.

One last note on the mail: campaign mail is going to be crazy in October, so get your best piece out as soon as you can or it will get lost in the pile. You may not have the time or the budget to send two pieces.

Phone bank

Anecdotally, people are answering the phone at a higher rate than usual. Have your volunteers keep track of who you should follow up with. If people are especially

enthusiastic about you, have an ask and a way they can fulfill it. Can you drop off a lawn sign? Can you email them the donation link? Would they sign up to make calls or write postcards?

Text bank

Text banking is going to be big this fall. People who don't answer their phones mostly at least look at their texts. So many campaigns are going to be doing it that it's probably going to be a nuisance for voters. But you need to reach people however you can, and text banking might be one way to do it.

There are several text banking programs you can evaluate, like [Hustle](#) and [ThruText](#). Expect to spend about eight to ten cents per outgoing text.

Relational organizing

"Relational organizing" is a fancy way to say "asking people to talk to other people they already know." This is where your amplifiers will come into play. There are several ways you can organize your relational organizers, but the easiest and least expensive would be a Facebook Group and an email list. Facebook Groups facilitate conversation better, but it can be easy to miss parts of conversations there. An email list gives you more control but makes it harder for your volunteers to talk among themselves.

Whether you use a Facebook Group, an email list, or an organizing tool like [Outreach Circle](#), you should give your volunteers a task, like checking on voter registration for five friends, and then follow up to make sure they have done it. If you want to make it more fun and engaging, you can create a points system and have a small prize at the end of the campaign for the person who makes the most contacts with their friends and family.

Signs

If you are in a nonpartisan race, an easy and effective way to signal your partisan leaning (if you want to do that) is to make sure your signs show up on the same lawns as known Democrats. Signs can get expensive quickly, so make sure you're budgeting carefully for them.

Two field techniques we haven't used this year

Lit drops

Lit drops, meaning dropping off campaign materials at voters' doors without talking to them, might seem like a tempting option right now. After all, you don't have to pay for postage with a lit drop. But your time and your volunteers' time would be better spent talking to voters. And not only that, if we want to save the USPS, we need to pay for the service that they provide.

And of course, during the COVID era, there is one concern you can't avoid: what happens if one of your lit droppers tests positive? How will you tell people they have been exposed?

Radio

We haven't done radio ads yet for one simple reason: [people aren't listening to the radio as much right now](#) because they aren't in their cars.

Where to get voter data

The best place to get your voter data is your local Democratic Party organizing unit. Even in a nonpartisan race, they may be able to give you a letter of support or endorsement, which will then give you access to buy into the party's Voterfile, also known as VAN. This data is valuable because they have identified the likely partisanship of many voters, which will allow you to target your outreach efforts to the voters most likely to vote for you.

If you can't get the VAN or you decide you don't want it, the next best place to get voter data is your Secretary of State's registered voters list. It's less expensive than the VAN, and it contains all of the registered voters in your area. The downside to getting the SoS list is that you can see who has voted, but not how they voted. So you will spend some of your time and money on contacting voters who will not be likely to support you.

Make a schedule

Remember that the three stages of the voter's journey are awareness, persuasion, casting a ballot. The last stage might come sooner than ever if voters are casting mail-in ballots as soon as they can get them, so make sure you keep a schedule, while also

keeping in mind that any individual voter you talk to could be on any step of the voter's journey once early voting has opened.

Final tips

Be a resource

Campaigns can get caught up in pitching their candidate to voters, and while that is of course necessary, people don't want to be sold to all the time. One way you can engage voters while also providing a public service is to be a trusted resource in your community for information on voting and on the pandemic.

Give people the information they need to vote safely in this environment, like:

- Registration information and deadlines
- Absentee ballot information and deadlines
- Voting procedures that may have changed since the last election
- Polling locations
- Ways to turn in their ballot without going through the USPS (drop boxes, in person at a voting location)

And of course the pandemic isn't going away soon, so it's also a good idea to be a person your community can trust on infection rates, safe practices, and programs to help people with housing, school, food security, and business.

Lead the way

Above all else, set a good example. Wear your mask. Maintain physical distance. Don't hold events or talk to voters in person if cases are going up in your community.

And remember, your race matters. Your voice is important. Your community needs you. You can do this!