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Fire district sways voters with focus on town relations

Craig McGuire - 15 Aug 2005 00:00

When the town of Huntington, NY, rejected a bond referendum to finance much-needed safety improvements to the district's 63-year-old main firehouse - for the fourth consecutive time - a rogue volunteer posted a sign outside the firehouse that read "F.U.P."

Though quickly removed, the sign, and its not-so-subtle acronym (Firefighters United Promoting Unity, Brotherhood, and Loyalty In Centerport), enraged some in the community.

"It was the action of a single person and not indicative at all of our commitment to the community," says Jack Geffken, chairman of the town's Board of Fire Commissioners. "There was a lot of frustration, but not with the community - rather, with a small, PR-savvy group, infamous for its last-minute disinformation tactics, that, for whatever reason, fought us every step of the way."

Strategy

How bad was the situation? Bad enough, or at least sensational enough, that it propelled what was purely a local news brief in a sleepy community of only 6,500 onto the pages of most of the major regional newspapers and TV/radio outlets.

In fact, says Don Miller, VP, HLD/Blankman, one resident, speaking to the press under the condition of anonymity for fear that if his "house goes on fire, they'll pass me by," was quoted as saying, "It's childlike, it's deplorable, and it's sickening."

Obviously, journalists love such conflict. And with a new bond vote looming, the Fire Department knew it had to capitalize on the buzz to promote its worth to the community.

"The short-term goal was to reach out to the community and restore the positive image of the volunteer department," Miller says. "In addition, there was a need to educate the public about the importance of expanding the firehouse, illustrating the impact on the safety of the firefighters and ultimately the residents."

Therefore, the plan included working with community leaders, identifying proponents of the bond, and formulating an awareness campaign, coupled with an aggressive initiative to get residents out to vote.

Tactics

For starters, HLD/Blankman designed a monthly newsletter touting the accomplishments of Centerport's volunteers and began issuing press releases reporting its members' good deeds.

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Next, the firm created opportunities for one-on-one interaction with key leaders, as well as public forums to present the case for passing the bond. Then the team enlisted volunteer firefighters, and others, in a grassroots, get-out-the-vote push.

Several events were created to showcase the department's advanced emergency medical services and offer testament to its life-saving capabilities.

Supporters of the bond were identified, and phone banks were set up to make sure they got to the polls. The day before the election, volunteers distributed literature door to door.

Results

Where previously opponents of the referendum would distribute 11th-hour information to influence the community, this time, a positive story ran just days before the vote: a three-quarters-page feature on the front cover of the Long Island section of *The New York Times*.

As a result, the September 2004 bond issue was approved by a vote of 761 to 590, for a total of \$2 million in funding (scaled back from the original \$4 million). In the end, the annual added cost to each local tax-payer amounts to \$24, Geffken says.

Future

Geffken says that the department's relationship with the town has become much stronger since the campaign. He thanks PR for helping overcome community barriers.

PR team: Centerport Fire District, NY, and HLD/Blankman Public Relations (Rockville Centre, NY)

Campaign: Centerport Bond Referendum

Time frame: March to September 2004

Budget: \$15,000 (retainer fees); \$3,875 (creative charges)

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