

Downtown Promotion Reporter

The tools you need to bring more people and business downtown



Legal Issues

“Vote Yea” campaign a primer in building political will for downtown election issue

There are campaigns that we think get a message across and build or enhance a product’s image or brand in the public’s mind, and then there are campaigns that end with an election. The latter kind is the high-stakes and hard-fought way of politics, which is frequently pivotal to progress in downtown development. It took such a campaign, combining grassroots volunteer door-knocking and a slick website and other marketing collateral, to persuade voters to endorse a temporary sales tax for a new downtown arena in Wichita, KS (pop. 344,300).

The arena ballot initiative narrowly passed 52-48 last November, where previous efforts to gather support for a downtown arena had faltered. Even more impressively, a majority vote was achieved after public support for an arena sales tax was surveyed to be only 35 percent in late September. How did this campaign build political support and fend off naysayers?

Build a coalition of support by figuring out how everyone wins

Big ideas that affect public policy usually compete with other ideas and interests. In the often combative arena of public opinion, it helps the credibility of any initiative to have a broad coalition of supporters. But, to keep such a team united, it is critical to identify what will make teammates buy in — and stay in.

“Figure out what wins for everybody,” says Ed Wolverton, president of the Wichita Downtown Development Corporation (WDDC). Downtown arena proposals were advanced only to fail previously in Wichita. “This time was different, fortunately, and we were able to get it passed. But there were a lot of political turf issues we had to bridge first,” he says.

The big turf issue was between the city and county governments. The county already owned and operated an aging arena located about 15 miles outside of downtown that would have required renovations spending tens of millions in borrowed public money, to remain in use.

The city naturally supported the idea of a new arena in the downtown to replace the county’s facility. To obtain county cooperation, however, it had to let go of the hope that the new arena would be city-owned and managed. “We had to get them to work with us on that,” Wolverton says.

The WDDC and the city teamed to co-develop and present to the county a plan for a new downtown arena as an alternative to renovating the old arena. After some tweaking to the plan, the county put the decision-making about where to invest the public money to county voters through a referendum.

With the city and county onboard, the WDDC had to make sure the downtown stakeholders stayed aboard. “They certainly had a win that they

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understood,” says Wolverton, but the WDDC also had to address their concerns, such as gentrification issues.

“Once we had those three legs covered — the city government, county government, and our private sector — then we had to convince the public that it was a win for the entire community,” Wolverton says.

Gain voter buy-in with an independent economic impact study

Getting county voters to support a tax increase would clearly be the hard part of a downtown arena bid, requiring mass communication and education. One of the best tools to help make a pitch to the general public is information from an independent economic impact analysis.

To convince voters that their tax money would be well invested in a downtown arena, a “Vote Yea” advertising and public relations campaign and website fed off of the results of an independent economic study by Wichita State University, which has a contract with the city and county to study proposals requiring public incentives.

“Because it was by an independent third party, [the study] provided additional credibility as we spoke to the public,” Wolverton says. “It wasn’t just, ‘We said it.’ It was ‘Wichita State University said it.’”

Ad theme and copy should “push buttons” of target audience

As with other forms of marketing, it’s important to research, identify, and try to understand your target audience at the start of a political campaign.

The website and newspaper ads were developed to deal with complexities of the issues. Other campaign elements were designed to direct people to the website.

“Vote Yea” became the overarching theme and provided a fortunate coincidence of sports and political language, says Greg Hobson, creative director and vice president of Sullivan Higdon & Sink, the advertising firm that worked pro bono for the campaign. Here would be a facility in the heart of the city that Wichitans could feel proud of. Part of the campaign’s vocabulary was “Let’s give ourselves

something to cheer about,” a slogan tapping in to the city’s civic pride.

Research also indicated that people who were against the arena tended to have a mistrust of government and business. That inspired the campaign’s tagline: “The more you know, the more you like.” This positioned people who didn’t support the downtown arena plan as not very knowledgeable.

Ads, leafleting, volunteers get out campaign message

The simple message of a “Vote Yea” political ad campaign, supporting a temporary sales tax increase for a downtown arena in Wichita, KS, built upon the cheering theme and reinforced the idea that this was a positive development for the downtown.

“The campaign was so effective that the people against it came out at the very end with a ‘Vote Nea’ campaign!” the president of the Wichita Downtown Development Corporation (WDDC) recalls.

The ad agency Sullivan Higdon & Sink contributed their services pro bono, leaving the more than \$400,000 that the campaign raised to be spent mostly on media buys such as television, radio, and newspapers. “Vote Yea” ad space was also purchased on mall kiosks, buses, billboards, and even the back of a flat-bed truck that attended events at the Kansas Coliseum, which the new arena would replace.

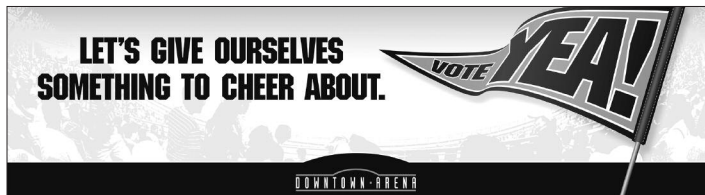
Several direct mail pieces were sent to registered voters. A volunteer coordinator was hired and was instrumental in finding and directing people to go out and walk precincts and leaflet door to door. Volunteers leafleted the county’s precincts every weekend from September to November. This was the most difficult to do, but it was a vital part of the campaign, the downtown director says. Leaflets would direct people to the campaign’s website.

A grassroots-style tailgate party was thrown to reward the 800 volunteers recruited and to draw further public attention a few days before the election. At the site where the downtown arena would be built, the WDDC served free hot dogs, hamburgers, chips, and soda, and gave away t-shirts. Those who had volunteered for the campaign received polo shirts. An election watch party for campaign volunteers was also thrown at a hotel in recognition of their service.

director believes was important to its success.

“Frankly, there are and were some local politicians adamantly opposed to any kind of taxes, and we worked to neutralize them by saying, ‘Let the voters decide. Take the posture that because it’s an election, the voters will decide, and you’ll abide by those results,’” Wolverton says.

Persistence is the key to building political will to support something good for downtown, he says. “You have just got to stick with it. Building political



Wichitans aren't a rah-rah bunch, but this ad taps their civic pride.

will is never easy. You have to try to get beyond the political turf, and the best way to do that is to pull as many prominent business leaders together as you can outside the

media spotlight to hammer through these issues.”

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