

Lessons from Merger Workshop

Convincing the Voters
Tuesday, November 8, 2005
4:00 – 5:00 p.m.

This forum discussed how the decision made to create a task force of elected officials (state representatives, local representatives, police, city). This was done because the elected officials had decided together that there should be an elected vote on merger.

Moderator: Bill Summers

- If you are going to take a vote, you don't want a detailed plan. Make legislation as slim as possible. Legislative and Executive would be merged, and the new government would decide what was to happen next.
- The business community was behind merger, but couldn't lead the charge. Local elected officials had to lead the charge.
- In past merger campaigns, there were no African Americans involved in the strategy until the last one. It is Good for African Americans to be involved in campaigns.
- Taxes couldn't be raised. Services had to stay the same: Suburban cities, volunteer fire departments, union contracts had to stay in place.
- Draw your districts where you already maintain neighborhoods as much as possible. This will insure that minority candidates will have a greater chance of being elected.
- To avoid merger getting caught up in county politics. Our national senator stood with us, as well as the small suburban city leaders.

Mr. Michael Shae, President, Connemara Creative, Developed Ad Campaign for merger

- It was important to create a hybrid campaign. Senator Mitch McConnell stated it was okay and necessary for democrats and republicans to put aside political differences and work together.
- Merger was rejected in both 1982 and 1983 because they were conducted as a political campaign.
- We did surveys and focus groups. In the focus groups, 70% stated that they were for merger, but in actual polling, there was no clear majority.
 - The Challenge: People were amenable to the concept of merger, but didn't like the way the city was selling merger.
 - The Realization: Needed to break down the statistics to areas of town.
 - In other words, in blue-collar areas of town, you couldn't talk about economic development; you had to talk about jobs. In white-collar areas, you had to talk about economic development. The survey tools determined which messages worked in different parts of the county.
- Held hundreds of public meetings: in homes and in large scale forums
- Biggest objection to merger? Turf. Elected officials were afraid of losing their Turf.

- During polling, when things plateau, the city moved to an air campaign. The developers discovered the problem was with females under 45: They were not being affected by the ad campaigns.
 - Solution: Empty Nest Campaign-60% of college graduates leave Louisville and never come back. The women didn't want their babies to move far from home. This campaign was successful.

Kathleen Parmer

- Strategic messaging was so important in making merger happen, because both democrats and republicans had to be unified.
- It is very difficult to ask your citizens for change. When you ask them to change the government, it is very scary.
 - What happens to: garbage, police, all the predictables in your life?
- It is essential that you get together with a communications specialist: What are you doing, what do you plan on doing, and where to go. Then you tell the citizens.
- Once the message is out in the community, all factions have to agree.
- Partner with the media and get good creative folks to distribute information: Neighborhood walks, hand outs, newspapers, debates
- Communicate everywhere, all the time.

Q&A/Comments

- You mention that you had editorial support. In the long term, was support from the newspaper always there, or did you have to work on it?

Bill: As it relates to merger, editorial support was always there. It wasn't the case from all reporters, but from editorial it was.

Mike: Oh, how incestuous the relationship from editorial board and democrats were. We put together a list of myths and truths, and the editorial board printed one every day. News side is different from editorial side. If opponents came out with something, they made sure that they were rebutted

- What were the reasons the past campaigns failed?

Mike: Past campaigns were painted with broad issue, but the semantics were wrong for city and county, and different parts of town. We had to have much more intimate conversation with the electorate.

- Several times you mentioned that changing the government is scary. Did the citizens here think that there was a structural government problem to begin with, and how did you persuade them that this was a good thing?

Mike: The only people who will vote for a measure have to be strongly for it. The "I don't know's and I don't carers" won't vote. Even if they think it's broken, they still may not want to

vote because their lives wouldn't be affected. There were lots of questions from elderly for example, about their garbage day would change. So many tiny pockets of questions that have to be addressed, and you have to address.

- There was 52% strongly for merger, the Friday before election. It was tracked on Election Day, and it was highest 54%. Do I understand this correctly? That the key to success was eliminating all the little questions rather than big arguments?

Mike: It's both of those: Issues within demographic groups, as well as city and county.

Jim: You have to reinforce knowledge: Tracking polls is so important. You have to talk about what people want to hear, instead of what you want to tell them

- How did you work with the democrat/ republican structure, and did you have a paid campaign manager?

Jim: Democrats and republicans paid. We ran a campaign that was so well run, that most candidates wanted to make sure that they did not say anything negative about merger. It wound up not being an issue because we went to great pains to insure that each party was seeing representation in how campaign was put together.

We had a paid campaign manager. We had one paid democrat and one paid republican. The team met every week. The team was Mike, Kathleen and her people. Jim was there. The Mayor was there. Rich Lewis was there. He ran the campaign office itself. If a lot was going on, would meet more than once a week. Were determined to stay on top, and not let anything get out ahead.

Mike: We had some internal dynamics. We had competing interest among democrats. Had city mayor wanting to be mayor of a metro city. The old mayor who was interested in running again, but kept it below the radar about his intent to run again. The difference between the 2 groups: one was motivated by political agenda and the other was motivated by pragmatism.

We put together a communications protocol. Interview the interviewer to find out what the story was about. We would decide what response would be and who would be responder.

Kathleen: In addition to proactive and responsive media relations, neighborhoods were important to us. About 1/2-3/4 of campaign time was spent doing forums and debates. Right after we started the campaign, we created fact sheets with key messages that were based on past experience and research. You have to be consistent, and can't change messages going out.

- Balloting?

Mike: Voters drop off at the end of the ticket. Phoning and mailing before election-every household was a possibility. We began with entire universe in terms of phoning about meetings, in order to get people to meetings. We called on likely voters. We discussed what was going on in the presidential race, rather than doing a specific ballot. The lower the turnout, the older the

electorate. The older the electorate, the harder it is to change their mind. Younger voters are more resistant to change.

- ❑ How did you raise campaigns funds? Did you get it from business community? It sounds like you got money from elected officials. How big a role did the business community play?

Mike: The business community was essential. The entire budget came from the business community. Businesses provided the assets to run an effective campaign. Delivery systems aren't cheap. It's expensive to go after likely voters and see where they are.

- ❑ Now that the campaign over, there is some rift. Are those efforts to communicate still going on?

Jim: First of all, in terms of government size, the size of government is smaller than when we had 2 governments. The cost of government has risen some due to inflation. In terms of the African American community, there would never be more than 2 African American's on the council, but now there are 6.

- ❑ Are you marketing the successes of merger?

Jim: Yes. The mayor is constantly marketing the success of merger. We wouldn't be able to market MetroSafe, had it not been for merged Government. We are always trying to find ways to do a better job marketing it.

- ❑ Just a question about arguments you used to promote the approval. Were there quantitative issues that came into play?

Mike: Yes, but you have to understand the quantitative arguments. Purchasing is emotion based. You have to understand the logical underpinning to the emotional response. You can't spout numbers or you are toast. Emotions are the decisions. Babies leaving made the difference. Polling tells you what emotional cords to pull.