

A Political Marketing Plan

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As a member of the Strategic Planning Team, I was invited to be an observer of the recent State Chairs Conference. I was expected to sit quietly and listen to the state chairs and other presenters talk for a day and a half in order to determine the general acceptance level of the Strategic Plan. Ouch! Keep my mouth shut and listen for a day and a half!? How is an opinionated motor mouth supposed to do that?

Anyway, I survived, and did hear some interesting presentations. The high point for me (and many of the state chairs) was Mark Schreiber's presentation on marketing strategy. It was a very good presentation, with quality logic and a conclusion that was almost dynamite. Almost.

The basic premise behind his idea on marketing strategy is that we need to target *a* demographic group; that is, we do not have the resources to target multiple demographic groups at once, so we should start with one, and then add others over time. He then had some good criteria for choosing the first group:

1. The Libertarian program is of special benefit to this group.
2. The Demopublicans are overlooking or under appreciating this group.
3. This group is small enough to be reachable given our limited resources.
4. The group has resources (money and talent) to offer the party.
5. Association with this group builds the quality of the Libertarian Party brand image, making it easier to recruit other groups, subsequently.

Factor number 2 tends to rule out groups such as gun owners, who already have significant support from the Republican Party. Factor 4 rules out young people since they have poor voter turnout and have no money to donate; further, they don't stay young for long. Factor 5 rules out drug users. So based on these criteria, Schreiber suggested we target small business owners, and got overwhelming support from the state chairs. The income tax hurts small business more than anyone else due to its complexity. He claimed that small business gets overlooked by the major parties (though I personally question this). This group does have excellent talent and resources, and being in favor of small business is very much like being in favor of Motherhood and Apple Pie, thus fulfilling Factor 5.

But, I think that if we adopt such a marketing strategy as stated, the results will be very disappointing. For while Mr. Schreiber's logic was compelling, the initial premise of his marketing plan is dead wrong. We cannot target a small demographic group and then add other groups. Politics is a game of pluralities. 5% market share is worth absolutely *nothing!* The only niche marketing available to political parties is geographic targeting, not focused demographic targeting.

If the group being targeted was one heavy with idealists willing to work for a cause with no success on the immediate horizon, then targeting that group could be

useful since we could gain the starry-eyed idealists needed to do the work long before the days of real success.

But I don't think small business owners are such a group. Small business owners experience enough risk during their day job. Few of them can afford to be too idealistic. And small business owners appreciate a realistic business plan, something the Libertarian Party sadly lacks. So while the LP shares a spirit with small business owners, and wants to offer them much, the fact that the LP cannot deliver in the near term means such recruitment efforts will yield weak results.

In marketing terms, politics is not like selling wine, or consumer electronics—products where a small dedicated market segment can sustain a business. Politics is like selling carbonated soft drinks or computer operating systems. Either you appeal to a huge demographic or you cannot justify the infrastructure.

Think of the Cola Wars: they are between “those who think young” and “those who like “The Real Thing””. These are very fuzzy and broad demographics, intentionally designed to minimize overlap.

While I think the strategy *as stated* is doomed to disappoint, I also said that it is *almost* right. A small tweak could turn it into a real winner.

Instead of “Let's target small business owners,” we could “Be the party of Small Business.” That is instead of being a party that has small business owners in our special interest support base, we could be the party that promotes a Small Business Vision for America.

This is a vision that appeals to WTO protesting hippies, the type that says “Capitalism kills.” It appeals to Greens. It appeals to bleeding-heart liberals, liberal college professors, and ACLU civil libertarians. It appeals to conspiracy theorists. It appeals to all who are distrustful of “Big Business.” And yes, it also appeals to small business owners and people who want to become small business owners. *This* is a big enough demographic to win elections. It is a vision that truly distinguishes us from the Republican Party. It is a vision that targets starry-eyed idealists who are willing to do the work before immediate success is on the horizon.

And yes, it is a libertarian vision. In a libertarian society, capital would be plentiful, making it easier to launch new businesses. Overhead would be greatly reduced, reducing economies of scale. Private schools would arise to teach more entrepreneurs and fewer bureaucrats.

We can put the “liberal” back into “classical liberal.” For more information, see www.holisticpolitics.org and hit the button entitled “Shrinking the Big Corporations.”