

CASE STUDY: POLITICAL CAMPAIGN

Can Good Research Help Elect a Relatively Unknown Candidate?

San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer

BACKGROUND

Kevin Faulconer's campaign to replace Bob Filner as Mayor of San Diego needed to explore public opinion and issues that could come up in the race. They chose Competitive Edge Research & Communication to conduct comprehensive research to help them win.

CHALLENGE

We knew from previous survey research that Faulconer, a Republican City Councilman who represented only one-ninth of the city, was not well-known by San Diegans. Another important fact: only 26% of San Diego's voters were Republicans. Therefore, Faulconer needed to quickly convince a lot of non-Republicans (who didn't know him) to side with him over a better known Democrat.

The campaign knew it had to find ways to bring Faulconer's true essence to the attention of a skeptical electorate. Specifically, the campaign believed there were segments of open-minded Democrats and independents who would vote for a Republican if they heard a positive message that didn't sound like it came from the keyboard of a D.C. operative.

Campaigns Are Like Snowflakes

Each has a different shape, formed by different conditions. Campaign pros who embrace this – and take the view that campaigns are organic rather than mechanical – will be more successful.

Sounds a little Zen, right? Maybe so, but a pollster who helps the candidate win must have the mindset that ***this race is different***. Different than all others before.

Experience helps, but you can't fight the last war. Cookie cutter won't do. Every aspect of the research must be intentional.

MISSION

To study San Diego's 660,000+ voters and uncover the motivations and reasons behind their opinions, because only then could the Faulconer campaign hope to change those opinions.

SOLUTION SET

Competitive Edge Research & Communication has developed a wide range of specialized research methodologies across public opinion & marketing research verticals. For this particular political campaign, the following approaches and tools complemented each other to provide our client a 360° view.

FOCUS GROUPS



Via focus group discussions, we created an outline of what an acceptable Republican looks like to non-Republicans. In addition to insights about the language of the persuadable voter, we derived useful quantitative data. We identified the iconic issues that were to frame Faulconer as “not your typical Republican.”

COMPREHENSIVE POLLING



The major poll we conducted had specific objectives: benchmark the race, understand the dynamics of voter opinion, identify persuasive messages and messengers (on both sides) and segment the electorate for targeting purposes. The 500-person poll with 80 datapoints was designed to answer all these questions, and it did.

M-POWER



Our patent-pending message-testing system winnowed ten promising Faulconer messages into three well-honed winners. Municipal pension & finances reform, the Neighborhood Fairness Plan and bipartisan leadership moved persuadable voters. We also learned that former Mayor Jerry Sanders still had pull, and would move the needle for Faulconer.

Results

Magic happens when all research data is employed toward the unique needs of a campaign. Faulconer won, and serves as San Diego’s Mayor.

The Faulconer team’s solid trust in Competitive Edge Research & Communication, and the proven methodologies we employ, was the foundation for our great relationship.

They did not treat research as a sort of magic amulet to wear into political battle. Instead, the campaign team worked with us to understand how to use our distilled information, and they wielded it effectively.

DIAL TESTS



Dial tests were conducted to provide the campaign moment-to-moment results on ad rough cuts. There would be no guessing with the TV spots. The team learned exactly what to be concerned about in an air war – the other candidate’s on-screen charisma. The team also learned what needed tweaking in Faulconer’s ads – the taglines, among other things. From these tests, the campaign made six-figure ad buys.

TRACKING POLLS



The real gold in our tracking was not the horse-race, but seeing which messages were penetrating and actually working to move the electorate. We were also able to measure the positive effect earned media was having on Faulconer, thereby giving the campaign additional confidence.