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What's in a name?

By Rich Schlackman and Dick Pabich

Political specialists have long recognized that ethnicity can be a powerful factor in determining voting behavior. It is recognized that, for example, in New York City, Jewish voters tend to vote somewhat differently than Italian-Americans, or in Hawaii, Japanese-American voting patterns are rather distinct from those of Caucasians and other ethnic groups. In some races, a voter's ethnic heritage can be the *most* important variable, surpassing age, political affiliation, income or other factors.

Traditionally, consultants and candidates have tailored their campaign messages to ethnic groups using vertical targeting methods, usually precinct, ward or other geographic units. Voters in a certain precinct on the South Side of Milwaukee might reasonably be presumed to be of Polish ancestry, for example.

Yet this method is far too imprecise for the sophisticated targeting needs of today's campaigns. Increasingly, consultants are utilizing extensive ethnic surname files, such as that of Voter Contact Services, in designing their direct mail, fundraising and other campaign programs.

Voter Contact Services began developing ethnic coding in 1976 and currently has 24 "surname dictionaries," classifying approximately 150,000 surnames. (See *box*.) More are in development.

VCS teams painstakingly built the dictionaries by hand, classifying names found in voter files, phone books and, in some cases, reference books of surnames. Most often the classifications are based on unique beginnings or endings of names, or combinations of letters within them. For instance, you can count on a name ending in "-scu" to be Roumanian.

The dictionaries are invariably not 100% accurate. Sometimes they err on the side of underinclusiveness. Very rare surnames might not be included. Additionally, some names might possibly occur in more than one ethnic group. A Chinese-American voter with the last name "Young" is not included in that file because obviously that name could just as well belong to a WASP. Wherever conflict over such a name occurs, VCS chose to be conservative and, chances are, the name is *not* included in the dictionary.

In unusual cases, the dictionaries are somewhat over-inclusive. This can occur with black voters, who may be listed among Irish, Scottish or French surnames. Think of baseball legend Willie McCovey or TV star Robert Guillaume. Over-inclusion can also occur for women who have changed their name after marrying a man of another ethnicity.

But these problems are significantly less probable and, when measured against the advantages of ethnic appeals, they are well worth the few errors. Inaccuracies can usually be reduced by meshing the files with other data. You might eliminate predominantly black precincts from a selection of Irish voters, or eliminate women titled "Mrs." from certain targets. In addition, the appeal should always be designed so as not to be offensive to anyone, including someone who is not of the targeted ethnicity.

These exceptions illustrate some important things to keep in mind about ethnic surnames. Rarely will they be used by themselves in targeting. Most effectively, surnames are merged with other key factors, such as sex or party affiliation or location.

The message is also a key consideration. Usually you will not want to send a "Dear Armenian" letter, but rather a more subtle appeal to such voters based on the candidate's ancestry, supporters or issue positions. And, of course, surname dictionaries should only be used when poll data or demographic political analysis indicates that certain ethnic-derived distinctions exist in the electorate involved.

Here are just a couple of ways in which VCS's ethnic dictionaries have been used successfully in the past:

- A liberal Democrat of Italian-American ancestry needed to improve his support among more conservative voters of his ethnicity. So his campaign manager selected Italian-surnamed homeowners, including Republicans, in conservative precincts, and sent a brochure stressing his Italian heritage and traditional family values, complete with photographs of his ancestors.
- A conservative Republican congressman in a dis-

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trict with a large number of Jewish voters used VCS's Jewish-surname dictionary to send a mailing describing his strong record of support for Israel, thereby cutting into a constituency which might have gone heavily to his opponent.

An imaginative campaign consultant will easily recognize that the possibilities are endless:

- A Hispanic candidate might use the Spanish-surname dictionary for repetitive messages to bolster voter turnout in his base, or for targeting unregistered homeowners for a registration campaign.

- A Republican congressman who favors a strong U.S. military presence in Europe might stress this position to older Democratic voters with surnames that are Russian, Slavic, Lithuanian, Rumanian, Czech, Ukrainian, Hungarian and Polish.

- A Chicago candidate might send a mailgram from Alderman Ed Vrdolyak to Polish-surnamed homeowners in the candidate's district.

- A Greek candidate for Mayor of San Francisco might use the surname dictionary to send personalized laser fundraising appeals to Greek-Americans in high income precincts throughout California.

- An Irish candidate for Boston City Council might send an endorsement letter to Chinese-surname voters signed by ten prominent local Chinese-American supporters.

As with other direct mail targeting techniques, ethnic surnames allow campaigns to control their messages to subpopulations of voters. Mr. Vrdolyak's endorsement, while helping a candidate among Polish-Americans, would undoubtedly be less favorably received by black voters. (Again, though, the appeal should be properly designed so as not to offend any other group.) Unlike radio or television, direct mail using ethnic surnames allows you to make the right appeal to the most receptive people.

VCS's surname dictionaries are particularly effective in exploiting cross-loyalties in a voter. They allow a candidate to get votes across party lines or age boundaries which might normally be foreclosed to him or her.

Of course, ethnic surnames aren't the sole answer to any candidate's political strategy. But they are one of a number of effective ways to reach voters through individual voter contact, appealing to their personal characteristics in influencing their voting choice.

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ETHNIC SURNAMES AVAILABLE FROM VOTER CONTACT SERVICES

Jewish	Czech
Chinese*	Hungarian
Japanese	Dutch
Polish	Slavic
Italian	Ukrainian
Irish	American Indian***
Finnish	Lithuanian
Armenian	Norwegian
Russian	Swedish
Greek	Arabic****
French	
Spanish**	
Polynesian	
Roumanian	

* includes Korean and Southeast Asian.

** includes Filipino.

*** includes Eskimo.

**** Includes Iranian.

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