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"All politics is local"

by Jim Spencer

When Joseph P. Kennedy II announced he was running for retiring Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill's seat in Massachusetts' 8th Congressional District, he was entering an already crowded field.

The candidate to beat

Several other candidates had been actively planning a run for the seat for several years; early polling told the campaign that Kennedy had high name recognition as well as a generally high favorability rating. With these details, Kennedy was obviously the candidate each of these people needed to beat.

Opposing candidates had already lined up most of the major political players and opinion leaders behind their campaigns. Despite Joe Kennedy's innovative work in Citizens Energy, his first-time candidate status did not allow him to have a strong track record to run on.

"Celebrity candidate"

The Boston media had christened Joe Kennedy a "celebrity candidate," which made it extremely difficult to translate the candidate's message through free media. Our opposing colleagues bantered daily about how Kennedy could afford the "best" paid media and would try to influence voters using that medium of voter contact. In a large Boston media market, the campaign would only reach a limited number of voters because of the cost and the amount of time it could buy.

Considering all these factors, the Kennedy campaign was sensitive to being perceived as a candidacy of "style" instead of "substance." The campaign was determined that the most cost-efficient way to mount an effective campaign was to build one...grassroots up, with a voter file.

Jim Spencer was field director for the Kennedy Congressional campaign and is currently working for Congressman Kennedy in his Boston office.

The Kennedy campaign, together with Voter Contact Services, built a voter file for the entire district. The file included name, phone, date of birth, gender, and occupation for every registered democrat and independent in the district.

The 8th Congressional District in Massachusetts is made up of 285 precincts spread over 12 distinct "neighborhoods." The district has diverse demographics including "yuppies," students, academics, seniors, Hispanics, Portuguese, Irish and Italian working class individuals.

"All politics is local."

—Tip O'Neill

Three-tiered targeting

After VCS provided a demographic profile by precinct, the Kennedy campaign created a three-tiered targeting program which ranked each of the 285 precincts for favorability and turnout and push.

In April, we began an ambitious door-to-door issues canvass to reach this diversified constituency. With canvass walk lists supplied by VCS, we sent between 16 to 35 issue canvassers out, five evenings a week, with goals of reaching 40 plus voters per night.

The canvassers were briefed nightly on the major issues of the campaign as well as a weekly briefing with the candidate himself. Together with VCS, the walk lists were designed to preference voters on a 1-to-4 scale, and ask supportive voters three questions:

1. *Would they become involved in the local organization?*
2. *Would they put up a house sign?*
3. *Would they give a small donation to the campaign?*

The canvassers were encouraged to represent fairly the candidate's viewpoints on controversial issues and take personal responsibility to mail specific issues papers out with a cover letter from Joe. They then followed up a week later with a phone call from the canvasser. Undecided voters were encouraged to

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attend a local coffee to meet the candidate. Each night, canvassers were also de-briefed and lists of volunteers and house sign locations (delivered to local organizations) from the canvass were to be contacted within three days by these neighborhood organizations.

A stunning victory

By primary day, the issues canvass had identified over 35,000 voters; local and central phone banks had identified 35,000 more. On primary day, 200 volunteers were able to complete 60,000 phone calls from 10 central locations to deliver a stunning victory for Joe Kennedy.

By building a strong organization and clearly defining and delivering a more personal message door-to-door, the Kennedy campaign was able to avoid a heavy-handed paid media approach that well could have backfired.

The creation of a voter file and Voter Contact Services' timely delivery of products allowed the campaign to create a "technological" grassroots effort that would have otherwise been impossible, a voter contact program which, once again, proves former Speaker Tip O'Neill's favorite adage: "All politics is local."