



Campaigning 101

10 Simple Rules for Running for Office

By Jim Nintzel @nintzel, Tucson Weekly, 11/1/2007

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• Rand Carlson

When Tucson voters go to the polls next week, they'll be filling in the ovals on a pretty lame ballot. With the exception of Proposition 200--the water-and-trash initiative that has the city's power structure spending three-quarters of a million bucks on an opposition campaign to thwart John Kromko's latest nitwit scheme--the races have all been about as exciting as your average hour of C-SPAN.

Only one City Council race--the contest between Democrat Rodney Glassman and Republican Lori Oien--has been remotely competitive. Despite a formidable Democratic registration advantage, the closest thing to a Democratic challenger to Republican Mayor Bob Walkup was a homeless guy preoccupied with lasers and Rio Nuevo.

Walkup is now facing a Green Party candidate, Dave Croteau, who says he just doesn't have the time to learn how the city budget works when we ask him how he'd pay for his various proposals. Croteau says he'll have people smarter than him explain it all to him after he's elected.

Don't sweat it, Dave--there's not much chance of that happening.

Oh, there we go again, making fun of people. We've done that occasionally over the last few months, leading to the usual complaints about how mean we are. (Those are balanced by the complaints that we aren't mean enough, by the way.)

So we think it is time that we lay out the bare minimums we expect from candidates, and what we're liable to do, depending on how they approach these items. Future candidates: If you think that the mockery you get for violating these rules is cruel, the response from the mainstream dailies and TV stations will be a lot worse. They'll just ignore you.

These rules, which we've cooked up with help from a few shadowy political-consultant types who would prefer to remain nameless, come too late for this year's batch of candidates, but 2008 is coming up soon (albeit not soon enough for us political junkies in need of a serious fix). We're looking forward to all the blood and thunder, from the big battle between Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and state Sen. Tim Bee to the return of "Cap'n Al" Melvin in Legislative District 26.

Political candidates come in all shapes and sizes. Some are in the game to win and change the world. Some are trying to change the world but will settle for changing the debate, because they're sharp enough to know they're not going to win. Some just want more recognition for their party and to make it a force to be reckoned with by acting like a spoiler.

A solid work ethic and some brains can move a person from one category to another. The first time she sought a state House of Representatives seat, Katie Bolger ran as a Green candidate and lost, although she played a spoiler role by pulling enough votes from a Democratic candidate to allow a Republican to win a seat in a Democratic district. Bolger learned a lot from the experience and became an ace organizer who is now working for Rodney Glassman's campaign. Without Bolger's hard work, the



aforementioned Cap'n Al would have won a state Senate seat instead of losing to Democrat Charlene Pesquiera last year.

Then there's Democrat Steve Farley. He helped defeat a city transportation plan, but then lost a campaign when he offered voters his own alternative light-rail proposal. After that, he signed up with the Regional Transportation Authority to write a new plan that included wider roads, an urban streetcar system and more bus service.

Voters approved that one and eventually sent Farley to Phoenix to represent them in the House of Representatives.

What do they have in common? They figured out how the system works and adjusted their game accordingly. That sets them apart from the people we call vanity candidates--the ones who just decide to put their names on the ballot and hope for the best.

We're laying out these rules for the vanity candidates, but other politicians should take note, because we're out to give pearls of wisdom here, and some of you are just a bad vote or a dirty text message away from vanity candidacies, too.

1. Explain Why You Are Running

It sounds terribly simple, but you would be astonished at the number of candidates we interview who cannot answer this simple question: "Why are you running?"

What motivated you to seek office? Was it a single incident? A series of events? Was your whole life leading up to this one moment? Can you at least make something up? Explain it, and if possible, toss in something about your plan. (See Rule No. 2.)

Here's a clue: We're not the only ones who are going to ask you this question. You need to be able to answer it in both two-minute and three-sentence increments. Why? Because in the cruel Darwinian world of candidate forums, you ain't getting more than two minutes. Memorize what you're going to say. If you don't, and you wind up stopping 45 seconds into your two-minute introductory statement and saying you're "drawing a blank," as Green Party candidate Beryl Baker did at a forum earlier this year, you're going to look like a boob. And if your only reason to be in the race in the first place is to get some attention for the ideas of a third party, you're not helping if you look like a boob.

As for those three sentences, that's about how much we'll be able to squeeze into our story about why you're running--the Arizona Daily Star will give you one. We have been astounded that some candidates can spend 10 minutes trying to explain why they're running, yet they don't utter one sentence that is remotely interesting.

Get your three sentences out there, and if you harpoon the Great White Whale of small-time media coverage--local TV news--you'll have something prepared. If you cannot answer this question, then you are a moron, and we will treat you as such.

2. Have a Plan

What are you going to do when you get elected? This is your plan. If you're especially deft, you can make it dovetail into Question No. 1, which will help you develop a narrative for reporters to latch onto when they write their stories. But even if you don't pull that off, you'd damn well better be able to explain to the voters what you intend to do once you get elected. BTW, to the Green Party candidates

we've been talking to: Your flakey "10 key commandments of relocalized sustainable renewosity," or whatever you're calling it, doesn't cut it, especially when the complaints about runaway growth are coming from a guy who lived in Washington state a year ago.

Get with it: What are you going to cut? What are you going to spend? What ordinances are you going to propose and pass? What problems are you going to fix? Be specific! Explain how you're going to use the instruments of government to achieve your plan of making sure everyone lives, shops and works in their bio-cluster.

Platitudes get on our nerves here at the Weekly. Yeah, yeah, we know: The whole system is corrupt, and fat cats run it, blah, blah, blah ... but we're not going to buy "we need to tear down and reconstruct the whole system" as a viable "plan."

Also: If you manage to articulate specific changes you can make within the framework of a representative republic, don't be surprised if we actually question you about the potential consequences of your plan--intended or otherwise. This will be the bulk of the story we'll do on you, so it would behoove you to put a little time into pondering this question, or we will make you look like a jackass.

3. Have Some Idea About How Government Works

You don't have to have a master's degree in public administration, but if you're going to run a government, it would be nice if you had some idea about how it works. For starters, you should have some passing familiarity with the jurisdiction's budget, since taxing and spending is going to be your prime responsibility. Telling us you'll figure it all out after you're elected doesn't reassure us that you're ready to take the reins.

It doesn't help to tell us that we need new creative ideas if you don't have any of your own. Earlier this year, Democrat Ken Green, who got a whopping 20 percent of the vote against Regina Romero in the Ward 1 primary, was at a loss when we asked him what his new ideas were. After a moment's reflection, he blurted out that we needed a light-rail line from downtown to Raytheon's southside headquarters. How would he pay for it? He reckoned that developers could be talked into it.

Look, if you haven't done enough homework to figure out that KB Home isn't footing the bill for public transit, you don't belong on the Tucson City Council.



4. Have a Campaign Strategy

"How are you going to win?" is one of the thornier questions out there. It pisses people off that we ask anyone this question. It's as if they feel this question is unseemly. Too bad.

In the real world, donors, supporters, your party and, yes, we in the media elite are going to ask you this question. If you have \$38 in your campaign report when the filings are due, we're going to notice.

Here's the dirty little secret of campaign coverage: Even if you're a legitimate candidate, you'll get about four stories, total, in a given election cycle (unless you get indicted, in which case, we'll be delighted to write all kinds of stories about you).



The money story will be one of them. Do you have to be Midas to win an election? No. In this year's city elections, you only had to raise about \$45,000 to max out, provided you had the organization to apply for matching funds.

But if you've only got \$38, you'd better have a kick-ass ground game. If we call you on it and decide to do a story on your door-to-door operation, you and your peeps had better have your game faces on. It shouldn't be you rolling with some clown in a "Beavis and Butt-head" T-shirt.

We get a lot of dodgy answers to the "how are you gonna win" question. There are a lot of schemes that sound like they were cooked up by Rube Goldberg: "Well, if every Libertarian shows up, and Democrats all suddenly come down with West Nile fever on the evening of the lunar equinox, we should be able to pull this one out."

Guess what? You ain't fooling anybody with that crap.

Is winning everything? Nope, but it's pretty damn important. If it is obvious that you're not going to win, you should at least be able to demonstrate that you are setting the agenda, upsetting the fat cats' plan or being a spoiler. We are constantly amazed that many of the candidates are not even striving to jump over that low of a hurdle. If you can't follow the first three rules, you are probably on your way to bombing this one, and you are sucking up oxygen and wasting our time.

5. Raise Money

This dovetails with Rule No. 4. We know that it's uncomfortable to hit folks up for contributions, but without money, you're not going to establish name ID or get your message out to the public with mailers, radio and TV ads, phone banks and other advertising. And unless you do those things, you're not going to win.

Don't expect us to fill our pages with stories about your candidacy, especially if you're not raising enough money to be a legitimate candidate. Many candidates seem to think they're going to win once the newspapers and TV stations tell their audience how amazing they are. You need to understand something: We're not going to spend a lot of time talking about you if you've got no chance of winning.

Particularly guilty on this score are the Libertarians who complain that we ignore their campaigns. These are people whose entire platform is based on market forces, but when we fail to give them media welfare in the form of coverage--even though they're lucky to get 5 percent of the vote on Election Day--they whine that they're being denied equal time. You want equal time? Raise some money and get your name out there. That's what the market is all about.

6. Put Up a Useful Web Page

We've noted that you're not going to get much attention from the media. Instead of bitching about us, bypass us by putting up your own Web page, where you can lay out all the info you want, just as you want it to appear. You can control your bio, your platform, your list of endorsements and everything else about your candidacy. And for all intents and purposes, the space is unlimited.

This would be a good place to lay out your plan. Avoid going off on a lengthy diatribe about the coming apocalypse and how we can avert it by shopping locally. As much as we might agree with you

that shopping locally is a good idea, government probably can't force people to go to Epic Café rather than Starbucks.



Give some specifics. If one of your solutions to our job and water shortage is making Tucson the waterless composting toilet capital of the world, as Dave Croteau proposed on his Web page, explain to us how you're going to build the waterless composting toilet factory. Are you going to use tax dollars to construct it? Will you require all new homes to have waterless composting toilets? Will future city buildings have waterless composting toilets? Will you offer incentives to developers who include waterless composting toilets in their master-planned communities? Inquiring minds want to know.

Here's another idea: If you're a serious candidate, update your Web page once in a while to reflect recent press coverage, upcoming events, new proposals or whatever. Otherwise, once again, it appears that nothing is happening with your campaign.

7. Have Some Relevant Experience

We get a lot of people who want to be leaders who get their names on ballots. Their qualifications run the gamut from slumlord to magazine salesman. While past performance does not guarantee future results, it sure helps voters figure candidates out.

Having experience that demonstrates you've led something beyond a Cub Scout troop shows there's some reason voters should elect you to office. If you want us to take you seriously, you should have a life or experiences that give people confidence that you are not going to embarrass them as their representative.

Another point: If your first experience in talking to a newspaper comes when you're running for office, you've already screwed up. Leaders are newsworthy. The best candidates are those whose names are out there for a positive reason, long before they even decide to run: They created this homeless shelter or fought against that tax. They don't just appear like mushrooms on a lawn in the morning.

8. 'Fess Up

Speaking of embarrassment: If you are a crook, have never voted, have filed for bankruptcy, have liens or lawsuits, or are running from the law on a kiddie-porn warrant, we will find out. It might not happen right away. It might be in your second year of office when it causes more damage. But it will come out.

Candidates tend to delude themselves into minimizing or ignoring these kinds of embarrassments altogether, but these issues have a way of emerging right at the moment when they will make you look the most hypocritical or downright creepy, shaming the very people who have been your supporters. Get that shit out sooner rather than letting us find out later. Trust us on this.

9. Call Us Back

We told you that as a candidate, you get about four stories. You're on your way to knocking yourself down to three if you never call us back. A lot of people do this to us. We end up making them look a) lazy, b) out of touch with the voters they want to represent, and c) like they're hiding something.

Of course, calling us back would mean you should have a phone, a mailing address or access to e-mail. If you are living in a van down by the river, you're not giving us that warm and fuzzy feeling you can run a city or a state.



10. Rehearse Your Lines

At some point, you are going to be in a forum with a million other candidates. You each will get two minutes, and you're likely to be waiting around at least 10 minutes until you get to answer the next question. At a minimum, you might want to practice your answers to the, "Why are you running?" and, "Why should people vote for you?" questions.

Minimums don't win you elections, though--maximums do. If you are a third party or third-tier candidate, you should strive to say something interesting in those two minutes that will separate you from the anointed candidates like Rodney Glassman and Regina Romero. And it would be good if you can do this without sounding like a complete loon.

Presidential candidates like Ron Paul and Mike Huckabee have capitalized on their debate performances to capture the audiences' imagination and/or a role in setting the agenda. Paul did it by injecting a contrarian view into a pro-war Republican Party, and Huckabee did it by being 5,000 times more polished than his opponents. One of them might end up getting a vice presidential nomination. (OK, so that's a stretch for Ron Paul.)

Here's the point: It's unfortunate that the media works mostly with soundbites, but that's part of the game you need to adapt to. A warning: You'd better have something to back up the soundbite. If you say, "It's time for a change," you'd better be able to articulate what that change is if a reporter asks you. When you can't riddle out what the City Council is doing wrong and right, you've got no business being in the race.

Following these rules will not guarantee victory, but failing to follow them ensures defeat. It also ensures your candidacy will be an advanced course in humiliation.

We believe that leading your community is serious business. If you cannot be bothered to pay attention to these things, you are demonstrating that you are not taking your own candidacy seriously. If that's the case, then why should we?

Web Article: <https://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/campaigning-101/Content?oid=1089460>.