



CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS SEMINAR HIRING POLITICAL CONSULTANTS

Decisions about hiring political consultants are among the most important decisions that candidates and campaign managers make during the campaign.

This seminar is designed to help you make good decisions. We will describe common pitfalls in hiring consultants and help you understand the advantages and disadvantages of various consultants. Our conclusions are based on interviews of political candidates funded by PEW Charitable Trusts for Campaigns and Elections magazine, our own experience in campaigns, and many years of discussions with other consultants.

GENERAL RULES THAT APPLY TO HIRING ALL POLITICAL CONSULTANTS

I Experience and Expertise

Many consultants have many years of experience working or consulting on political campaigns. They know politics, and they know how campaigns are run. However, these consultants have often worked primarily as campaign managers, field operators, or press spokespersons and are not trained in the art of advertising or the science of polling. Just because a consultant knows how campaigns are run does not mean he or she knows the technical or creative side of media or the complicated and sophisticated science of polling. On the flip side, many consultants are brilliant web designers, commercial advertisers, or experts in the science of polling. However, if they have little experience in political campaigns, they will likely have a hard time effectively applying their skills to meet your needs. *The ideal consultant has both campaign experience and real expertise in the technical and creative aspects of his or her field.*

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Experience

Campaign experience is key. A seasoned consultant has experienced winning campaigns and losing campaigns, confronted the challenges of favorable and unfavorable electoral conditions, consulted during recessions and booms, and worked with challengers and incumbents. All of these experiences are important because each campaign is different. The greater the variety of campaigns a consultant has experienced, the more likely it is that he or she will be equipped to face whatever comes up in a campaign. Someone who has consulted on numerous campaigns over numerous years will know what is and is not important for a candidate to do and will know how to critically assess the (mis)information that flies around campaigns.

Strategic polls for political campaigns, political ads, and campaign websites are very different from surveys and ads created for noncampaign purposes. The most creative, educated, and technologically savvy people in the world will not be effective consultants if they have never applied their skills to a political campaign. For example, to convince voters to choose a candidate, you need to use different information and images than if you want to sell the same people soap. Furthermore, most media and academic pollsters use polls to try to measure opinion as it is *now*. But for a political campaign, you need a pollster who is an expert in what it takes to *move opinion* or to predict what opinion *will be* in the months to come.

Expertise

Finding consultants with campaign experience is much easier than finding consultants with real expertise in their fields. Many political consultants start their careers as managers, field operators, and press spokespersons. They work on a few campaigns, slowly moving to larger and larger campaigns. They cut their teeth on party campaign committees and then set up their own shops or join existing firms. Some media consultants open shop before they have ever made a political ad. Even worse, many polling consultants start their firms having never designed a questionnaire, determined what a representative likely voter sample should look like, or learned the rigorous statistical methods required to do an accurate job. The expertise of your consultants is much harder to judge than their experience—especially when it comes to political polling. Some consultants have worked in their fields for decades but have never learned the techniques and skills needed to do their jobs accurately.

- Be wary of hiring a media or mail consultant who also does polling or a polling consultant who also does media or mail. Chances are high that consultants of this sort are not well trained in one, if not both, of those fields.
- Make sure the consultant you hire with the expertise you need is actually the person who will be writing the questionnaire, putting together the ads, determining the media you buy, and analyzing your polling data. This advice also applies to the issue of experience. If a firm boasts of a partner with lots of campaign experience and another partner with tons of expertise, will they both be spending time on your campaign? If not, you probably want to look elsewhere.

These issues will be discussed further in later sections of this seminar.

What you need to find out:

1. ***Consultants will tell you their win-loss ratio.*** This ratio is easy to provide, and it is often all that is asked of us. As an expert on measurement, I can tell you ***this ratio is a very poor measure.*** It can be easily manipulated and does not actually tell you what you need to know. ***The truth is, the vast majority of wins and losses have nothing to do with the***

efforts of the consultants. A consultant who works only for safe-seat incumbents is going to have a dandy win-loss ratio, but this consultant is not the person you want for your competitive campaign. On the other hand, a consultant who specializes in taking long-shot challengers with low prospects of winning and making their races competitive will have many losses in his or her record. However, this person may well be the best consultant for your team. Indeed, working on a few losing races can be the best learning experience for a consultant. ***Look at races the consultant has worked on that are comparable to yours. Find out if there are any upset victories, upset defeats, or narrow victories by a candidate who should have won easily.***

2. ***Get a recommendation from a losing campaign.*** With 90% or more of incumbents winning elections, many candidates lose despite their consultants doing a terrific job. We think some of our best work has come in losing campaigns. No matter how brilliantly a poll report identifies the right message or how creatively a commercial delivers that message, if the candidate does not have enough money to get the message out to the voters, these things will have little impact.
3. ***Do the people working in the firm have sufficient campaign experience and is that experience useful to your race?*** This question applies not only to the firm's partner who meets with you to get hired but to all the people who will be creating the ad, writing the questionnaire, designing the mail, and writing the survey report. Will the *experienced* consultant be working closely with you and overseeing all aspects of the work being done for you?
4. ***Do the people working in the firm have sufficient campaign expertise and is that expertise useful to your race?*** Again, this question applies not only to the firm's partner who meets with you to get hired but to all the people who will be creating the ad, writing the questionnaire, designing the mail, and writing the survey report. Will the *expert* consultant be working closely with you and overseeing all aspects of the work being done for you?
5. ***Look at the consultant's entire history.*** Consultants are experts in knowing how to make the best case for something. Indeed, this is what you want them to do for you: make the best case for why you should be elected or your initiative should pass. However, this also means that you need to examine their publicity materials critically to find examples that are relevant to your race. Get a list of *all* their races from *all* years, not just from the most recent year. Ask for examples of commercials or mail pieces from campaigns that seem to be missing from their publicity materials, especially if that campaign is similar to yours. Make certain you see a copy of a *typical* polling report. That said, when asking for these materials, you should understand two things: 1) There is a limit to the number of archival materials that consultants can dig out for potential clients. Only ask for these materials if you are seriously considering hiring the consultant; 2) A commercial that looks cheaply made or a report that looks thin may be the result of a low budget campaign. Make certain you understand the context of the material you are examining, especially if you are evaluating material outside of the consultant's typical publicity material.
6. ***Do not be overly impressed by consultants with long client lists of famous politicians.*** These politicians may be flocking to a great consultant, but the list may also be a testament to the consultant's sales ability and insider connections. Those qualities are not what you need from your consultant.

II Does Size Matter?

The size of a consulting firm definitely matters. You should be careful about hiring a firm that is too small or a firm that is too big. Here are some things to consider:

Larger Firms:

Many successful political consultants have built large firms. They take on dozens of campaigns, including some of the biggest campaigns of the election season. They have great name recognition and prestige. However, there are some common pitfalls that you should be aware of if you are considering hiring a large firm.

- **Less attention:** When you hire a firm, you are typically hoping to hire the principal or a senior partner. He or she, after all, gives the firm its prestige. More likely than not, it is the principal who will meet with you in order to get hired. Rest assured if you were a billionaire spending over \$50 million on your campaign, you would get the undivided attention of the principal. However, if you are not in a presidential race, one of the larger statewide campaigns, or among the top dozen house races, you are not likely to receive much attention from that consultant. Your commercial, your polling report, and your direct mail may well be put together by lower level, less experienced employees.
- **Temporary Staff:** Large firms are bottom heavy. They usually consist of one principal or a few partners plus some assistants during the off years. During election seasons, they build up with temporary staff. This is not surprising—after all, that is when the work is needed. However, the larger the firm, the more temporary staff it is likely to hire. These staff members are not likely to have any expertise or experience. They are very often college interns or twenty-somethings happy with a six-month job.
- **Consultant Factories:** Consultant factories are not the large firms working for 8 to 12 of the biggest campaigns and some of the larger political organizations. Rather, consultant factories are the firms that pick up a dozen congressional campaigns, many dozen state legislative races, and lots of small down-ballot statewide and county level races. These firms do very little consulting work outside of the election season. Instead, they market like mad. They pick up every race they can get their hands on. They often offer the cheapest rates. However, they also provide poor service and low quality products. The principals will be stretched thin, often working more as managers of untrained staff than as consultants to you. Surveys, television ads, and direct mail will be heavily templated, with one size fitting all. Corners will be cut, often in vital ways that you will not be able to check. Few of these firms will have the time to work with your other consultants, and they are not likely to spend much time with your campaign if that time is not directly related to being paid.
- **Celebrity Consultants:** The clear advantage of celebrity consultants is their celebrity status. These consultants are loved by the press and have name recognition among people who follow politics. Hiring a celebrity consultant may give the impression to some local media, contributors, and others involved in politics that your campaign has hit the big time. However, having a celebrity consultant does not necessarily mean you have a good consultant. Certainly many celebrity consultants got their celebrity status by being part of an upset victory or a presidential campaign, and some of them are very good. However, there are many consultants who have been key players in upset victories or presidential campaigns but are not celebrities. Celebrity status comes more from being a great media personality or self-promoter than it does from being a great consultant. It is a consultant's job to know how to promote people, so it is

not surprising that some are very good at promoting themselves. A disadvantage of hiring celebrity consultants is that, like all celebrities, they are often not accessible. While well-known political consultants might be considered a plus for some involved in politics, they tend to turn voters off. The voters do not want you to be managed and packaged. They do not want you to be under the sway of political consultants. This is why it is generally better for your consultants to be largely invisible to the mass public. Celebrity consultants, however, will promote themselves (because that is how they make their money), and they—not you—may well become the story in your campaign.

Smaller Firms:

Just as firms that are too big can have their disadvantages, so can firms that are too small. Consultants that work by themselves have less ability to respond to crises and can be more easily overburdened if they take on too many clients.

- **Two heads are better than one:** Consultants are pretty good at talking with each other. Pollsters talk with media consultants and vice versa. However, media consultants compete with other media consultants. Pollsters compete with other pollsters. There is some exchange of ideas at places such as *Campaigns and Elections* seminars and AAPC conferences, but not much and certainly not *during* campaigns. As a result, if your polling, media, direct mail, or general consultants are in a firm that has only one real principal, partner, or associate, then they have no one else *in their field* with whom they can bounce around ideas, who can critique their work, or who can offer fresh strategic and creative insights. They may have some staff, but those staff are rarely equipped to offer advice based on experience and expertise. It is much harder for consultants to get out of ruts, try new approaches, or even catch serious mistakes when they are in a firm of one. This problem can also be a feature of bigger firms. You should note that some firms have multiple partners who live in different cities, and they are not likely to get together and brainstorm for a client. Similarly, some larger firms have multiple partners to save overhead costs. These partners may all be stretched thin and spend little time brainstorming with each other, which they may perceive as being insufficiently cost effective.
- **How fast can they move?** Bigger firms are often well oiled machines. They have staff or lower level associates who make most of the commercials or mail pieces, write the questionnaires, or analyze the data. Thus, if an emergency occurs and the principal is away meeting a client in another city, the staff will be ready to respond. Even in non-emergency situations, consultants need to be able to turn poll results or ads around quickly in a campaign. Time is precious. Experienced small firms who are not overloaded with too many campaign clients are also likely to be set up to move quickly. However, firms with only one principal, partner, or associate are more likely to be stuck if more than one campaign needs a poll conducted or ads cut at the same time. If you hire such a firm, you run a bigger risk that the firm will not be able to move fast when you need it to.

What you need to find out:

- **How many clients does the firm have**—including any non-candidate clients who are likely to be demanding consulting work during the campaign season? Ask yourself whether the client list is a reasonable size given the size of the firm. Refer to *Campaigns and Elections* magazine for the firm's client list for this election and past elections.
- **What clients does the firm have during the off-season?** Consultants who market for a year and then work almost exclusively for campaign clients are more likely to take on too many

candidates. Consultants who have plenty of consulting work not tied to election campaigns have less need to take on a large amount of work during the campaign season, and, frankly, they spend less time marketing to get those candidates. Typically, these consultants are able to schedule most of their non-campaign work so that it does not coincide with the campaign season.

- ***Who is doing the work?*** Make sure you know who will be doing the work—not just in terms of contact with you—but also writing the scripts and questionnaires, producing the ads, analyzing the data, selecting the sample, writing reports, and so on.
- Do the partners or associates in the firm work together to develop ideas and strategies for clients? Do they read, review, and critique each other's work?
- ***How fast do the consultants turn around work?*** Have there been times when speed was of the essence and the firm was or was not able to deliver? Does the firm have a reputation for not making deadlines? ***Ask references about the firm's ability to deliver work when it is needed.***
- ***Will the consultants be there when you need them? Ask references about the consultants' availability.*** Was it the consultant or a staffer who was present for conference calls or advising the campaign about strategic decisions? Did the consultant promptly return calls? Did he or she listen? Did the consultant often seem rushed, distracted, disinterested?
- ***What staff does the firm have?*** How many staff members work year-round, including during the off-election season? How experienced and skilled are the people who will be taking on key technical, strategic, and creative tasks? Be wary of firms that are bare bones during the off-season and grow large during the election season.

III

Conflicts of Interest

As is true in every profession, consultants have many potential conflicts of interest. You should be aware of these conflicts and make certain your consultant is aware of them. Calling a consultant's previous clients and asking specifically about these issues may be the best way to find out how well the consultant truly understands and avoids these conflicts. The American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC) is developing a code of ethics, but this code is still in its infancy. In general, it is a good idea to hire someone who belongs to either the AAPC or the International Association of Political Consultants. Members of these organizations see themselves as belonging to a profession and have a reputation to protect. It is our experience that these conflicts of interest are rarely a problem, but they do exist, and we have seen them.

- **Whom is your consultant working for? (Part I)** Political consultants have worked in dozens, if not hundreds, of races with other political consultants. Even if you win your campaign, chances are better that your consultants will be working with each other in the future than that they will be working for you. Thus, ***consultants have an incentive to work for the interests of the other consultants on your team rather than always looking out for your best interests.***
- **Recommending other consultants:** The most common way the above conflict manifests itself is when you ask your consultants to recommend other consultants for your team. You want consultants who work well together, who respect each other, and who will freely communicate with each other. No one knows consultants better than other consultants do, so you should

certainly ask your consultants who they recommend for the rest of the team. However, keep in mind that if Consultant A personally brings Consultant B into your campaign, Consultant B will be expected to bring Consultant A into a future campaign. ***Thus, you should be wary of consultants who constantly work with each other and of consultants who work hard trying to bring in a specific consultant over other consultants. Your consultant may be giving you good advice, but too often that advice is based on the interests of the consultant and not on the interests of your campaign.***

- The more you spend, the more we earn: Every consultant will tell you from day one that you need to raise more money, and he or she will almost always be correct. By far the biggest reason candidates lose is that they do not have enough money to get their message out to the public. In that sense, your consultants' interest in earning more is consistent with your interest in winning. That said, you do not always need to spend every penny you have on the biggest media buys in the biggest media markets. You may be sufficiently ahead or behind that you would be better off hanging onto that money for your next campaign or for some other purpose like getting out the vote (GOTV). Indeed, this general conflict of interest applies especially to incumbents who find themselves sufficiently ahead and to candidates who have no chance of winning. Consultants, especially media and mail consultants, have an incentive for convincing candidates to be panicked about their prospects, to go out and raise more money, even to take out personal loans—and to spend everything they can. Of course, spending money may help you win, but it is also a good way for your consultants to make money. You want to hire consultants who will be honest about whether you need to pour extra money into the campaign, even though that advice may not be in their financial interests. When consultants tell you how to spend your money, you want them to be thinking about your strategic advantage—and not about their own economic interest. You want your consultant to be basing advice on a solid and realistic understanding of your chances. The most reliable advice you can get will come from your pollster, who has less financial advantage to mislead you. Make certain your pollster is sufficiently independent from the other consultants and is working for your interest and not theirs.
- **Whom is your consultant working for? (Part II)** We recently came upon a campaign where a well-known pollster was working for two candidates in the same election, and neither candidate knew it. This is a brazenly unethical act and, happily, it rarely occurs. Slightly more common are consultants who work for other politicians or organizations in the same state—some of whom could be supporting your opponent or even be your opponent in a future race. ***Consultants should reveal all past and present clients who might be actively opposed to you or might challenge you in the near future. Furthermore, consultants should never share information from your campaign with outside people or organizations without your explicit approval.*** Most consultants avoid these conflicts, but these conflicts demonstrate why hiring a consultant who works for only one party is a sound decision. While there are advantages to hiring a consultant who has a lot of experience in your state, a consultant who specializes in any one state may well have many past, present, or future opponents as clients.

What you need to find out:

1. ***Past references are a good way to check on past ethical lapses or potential conflicts.***

However, if consultants were fired for conflicts of interests or know that they were an issue in a previous campaign, they are not likely to list that campaign.

2. ***If the media consultant you have hired tries to push out your pollster in favor of someone else, be careful.*** Find out why. Carefully consider the records of your pollster and the pollster the media consultant is pushing. Is there really a strong case for not hiring the pollster you chose? Do the media consultant and his or her favored pollster work together a lot? If so, be suspicious. If the media consultant is trying to push out the pollster due to personality conflicts, then you should probably replace your media consultant. (The one doing the pushing tends to be the one with the more abrasive personality.) Chances are good that when media consultants attempt to replace pollsters, they are working for their interests, not yours. (Note: "media consultant" and "pollster" are used as examples here. Pollsters may just as often try to push out media consultants, general consultants may try to undermine mail consultants, and so on.)
3. ***Make clear to consultants that they work for you, that no information from the campaign is to get out to anyone outside of the campaign without your explicit permission, that all advice they give to the campaign should further the interests of the candidate and not their own interests.*** You might want to put that agreement in writing.
4. ***Obtain a complete list of all past and present clients who have any interest in your campaign, your state, and future offices you might be considering.***
5. ***Political consulting is a hard-nosed business; don't let information generated in the heat of business competition lead you to make a bad decision.*** Like competitors in other industries, consultants have histories with each other and may bear grudges. Be wary of passing on misinformation. You will destroy a consultant's business if you destroy his or her reputation.

IV Chemistry

The importance of having consultants with the appropriate chemistry cannot be overstated. The larger the role the consultant plays in your campaign, the more important chemistry becomes. Chemistry includes having the ability to understand and respect who you are and sharing your ideological and policy goals.

- **Personality:** As is true in all political fields, the consultant business has its share of oversized egos, abrasive personalities, and very odd ducks. It also has its share of truly wonderful, hard-working, considerate people. The best personality for your consultants depends in part on your own personality. However, ***we find candidates are best off with consultants who will work closely together as a team, who will both talk and listen to you and each other, and who respect each other's advice and work.***
- **Under pressure:** Consultants often juggle many campaigns and in the height of the campaign season may be working 90 hours a week. They are often under incredible deadlines and can be highly stressed. ***You need consultants who know how to keep their cool and work well with you and others during highly stressful times.*** While consultants often need to be assertive to do the best job for you, consultants with the reputation of screaming fits and temper tantrums are not helpful to your campaign. They will alienate your campaign staff and the other consultants.
- **Respecting you and the people in your district:** It is not necessary to hire consultants who come from the same region or have the same background as you do. ***What is necessary is that the consultants respect you, respect where you come from, and respect the people you hope to***

represent. Arrogant consultants or consultants who do not understand you or the voters in your district will never be able to deliver the best message for you. Talk with consultants before hiring them. If possible, have them visit you in your district or state. Spend enough time with them to get to know them. Your consultant should also take the time to get to know you. *Avoid consultants who are so busy or distracted that they do not try to get to know you.*

- **Sharing your ideology:** As a Democrat, I am saddened to report that surveys of political consultants have found that Republican consultants tend to be in the consulting business because they care about the issues, the Republican agenda, and getting Republicans elected to office. Democratic consultants, on the other hand, tend to be in the business for the money. Consultants who are in the business for the money may not know nor care about what is important for you. They will care more about their own financial interests than what is best for you or your cause. *Your consultants do not need to agree with you on all issues, but they should generally share and care about your goals.*

V Costs

Costs, of course, depend on which consultant you are hiring, what office you are running for, how competitive your primary and general elections will be, and how much money you are able to raise. Some cost issues pertinent to specific fields will be discussed later in this seminar, but here is a set of general rules to live by:

- **Get it in writing.** You need firm commitments from your consultants that clearly define the work to be provided and how costs are tied to deliverable outcomes.
- **Be crystal clear about fees and expenses.** You will probably have to pay travel expenses above basic costs. Find out if there are any other costs or hidden fees that may arise.
- **Avoid commitments to costs that will stand even if you pull out of a race or raise less money than you expected.** The world of politics is rife with uncertainties, and consultants should accept the risk that you may pull out of the race or fail to raise sufficient money.
- **Negotiate a flexible contract that allows you to adjust the amount of work completed as the needs of the campaign unfold.** Consultants are doing you and your campaign a serious disfavor if they force you to commit to an inflexible strategy and budget before your campaign develops. The only commitment you should make is to use that consultant if you run and to the price structure that the consultant gives you for services rendered.
- **Recognize that consultants are not volunteers—they are business people.** Do not try to force consultants to give you special discounts after the campaign is underway or to carry a serious debt. The consulting business is a competitive and uncertain business. Most consultants charge what the market demands as their lowest reasonable bid; as a result, they cannot afford to give special discounts. Consultants do recognize that some bills may need to be paid after the campaign is over, but asking a consultant to carry too much debt will undermine that consultant's business. Treating consultants fairly is the best way to make certain that they will treat you fairly.
- **Try to avoid retainers.** Retainers allow consultants to decrease their risk when spending time with or giving advice to campaigns that may in the end not raise enough money or pull out of a race. Media and mail consultants incur the greatest risk since all of the mail and media happen toward the end of the campaign. However, retainers can be burdensome financial drains early

in a campaign, a time when campaigns need their money to raise more money. Paying a retainer may ensure that you get your consultant's attention early in the campaign, but there is no guarantee of that. Plenty of consultants will give you their full attention early in the campaign, knowing they will make their money later. Because polling happens early in the campaign, you should not need to pay a retainer for your pollster. If the viability of your campaign is at all questionable, you may need to pay a retainer to your mail and media consultants.

VI Services

This topic will be discussed in more detail later in this seminar, when the specific fields of consulting are covered. However, here is a set of general rules:

- **Ask for examples of what you will be getting from the consultants.** If possible, obtain examples that are relevant to a campaign of your size and type.
- **Availability:** Availability is extremely important. You want consultants who will return your phone calls and e-mails and who will fly out to your state when you need them. You want the consultant *you hired*—not a low-level staffer or consultant in training—to be present on conference calls, to give you advice, and to listen to your questions. Be certain when you hire your consultants that your consultants will be available to you.
- **Advice throughout the campaign:** When you have consultants, use them for advice not only in their most immediate field, but also in *all* aspects of the campaign. These consultants are experienced veterans and will be very useful—but only if you take advantage of having them. Far too often, campaigns have sent out direct mail, made thousands of persuasion calls to voters, or made a crucial campaign decision without asking their pollster for advice on strategy and message. More often than not, the result is a poor strategy or an off-message campaign. If you have hired the consultant and if getting the consultant's advice costs nothing extra—then seek out that advice!
- **Will any services be subcontracted?** If a consultant subcontracts the production, media buying, telephoning, or other key services, make sure that the subcontractor is qualified for and prepared to complete the job and that your consultant will carefully oversee the work.

VII Location, Location, Location

Big debate exists among consultants, politicians, and political interest groups about whether it is better to have consultants from inside or outside Washington, D.C. Naturally, those in D.C. argue for the former and those outside D.C. argue for the latter. Consultants in D.C. argue that they are more politically connected, more in tune with the latest political trends and information, and better able to communicate with other consultants, interest groups, and the like. Consultants outside D.C. argue that they are less captured by D.C. interests, more in touch with what is going on in the real world, and more capable of thinking outside the box because they are not caught up in the narrow D.C. mindset. Both arguments are right in some ways and wrong in other ways. On the whole, whether the home base of your consultant is important to you depends a lot on what you are looking for. Here are some basic things to keep in mind:

- Fifteen or more years ago, D.C.-based consultants had clear advantages. Now, however, with the new economy, the Internet, overnight mail, cell phones, and fax machines, most of those advantages have disappeared.
- Many D.C. consultants are better networked with other D.C. consultants and political actors than are consultants outside of D.C. However, with these networks come increased chances for nepotism, favoritism, and conflicts of interest. In addition, consultants, no matter where they are, rarely get together to discuss how to run better campaigns. Networking with other consultants is usually aimed at finding ways to market oneself to candidates. This kind of networking is helpful to the consultant, but not to you.
- Any consultant working on any campaign anywhere, whether he or she is based in D.C. or not, has to be well informed about the latest political information and trends. Consultants read the major newspapers, are on political and party mailing and fax lists, and have access to all of the polls. In the information age, a consultant no longer needs to be in D.C. to get this information. That said, beware of consultants—in D.C. or elsewhere—who sell themselves too much on having access to the latest polls and all of the latest trends. You want a consultant who is open-minded and focused on your state or district and your campaign. Trends that apply elsewhere, even nationally, may not be relevant in your state.
- Be wary of a D.C. based media or polling consultant who claims to be well connected to D.C. interest groups and contributors that can bring money into your campaign. This claim is often a ruse. Contributors are a savvy and strategic bunch. They are not going to contribute to your campaign simply because your pollster knows them. They want to contribute to a winner, and they will make their decisions on that basis. You should hire consultants based on their polling and advertising ability and advice, not based on their political connections in D.C. or elsewhere.
- A consulting team whose members are all from one region or all from D.C. is probably too homogenous to serve you well. Having regional diversity in your consulting team might broaden the perspectives and the advice you get.
- More important than whether your consultant is based in D.C. is ***whether your consultant has previous experience in your state or region and whether he or she has nationwide experience.*** If you are running for state government, a regionally focused consultant may be all you need. However, even then, nationally focused consultants might be useful to you because they often have a wider range of races on which they have worked and, thus, a broader perspective.
- Even if they are not from your state, polling and media consultants can get to know your state, its economy, political culture and history, and all the relevant political actors and policy issues. The key is to hire a political consultant who will take the time to learn those things and not one who will step in without giving your specific situation much thought.

HIRING GENERAL CONSULTANTS

I Why Hire a General Consultant

Most campaigns do not need general consultants. *General consultants are most useful for candidates running in big, expensive races for the first time. These races require a consultant with the experience to assist the candidate and the campaign manager in understanding all campaign processes. If your campaign does not fit that definition, then a general consultant may be unnecessary, and you will be better off hiring a very experienced campaign manager.* Furthermore, all of your consultants should be experienced enough with campaigns to offer you general advice. *If you do not hire a general consultant, make sure your other consultants can and will offer general campaign advice throughout the campaign.*

If you do hire a general consultant, it makes sense to hire him or her first. One of the general consultant's first tasks will be to work with you and your campaign manager to put together the rest of the consulting team.

II What to Look for in a General Consultant

- *More than with any other consultant, you need good chemistry with your general consultant.* The general consultant will be working with you the closest, and you need to rely on your general consultant to make decisions related to your other consultants. Spend real time with your general consultant before hiring him or her.
- Since the general consultant will be working closely with the other consultants, the other consultants must respect the general consultant and vice versa. At the same time, *take extra caution to ensure that the general consultant does not simply hire his or her friends.* Do not cede complete control over hiring your consulting team to your general consultant. If your mail, media, or polling consultant is doubling as a general consultant, be especially careful about allowing that consultant to bring in the other consultants. Seek his or her advice, but no more than that.
- If your general consultant is also your mail or media consultant, you need to recognize the possible conflict of interest between the needs of your campaign and your general consultant's financial interests.
- You have less material with which to evaluate a general consultant—no media reels, mail pieces, or polling reports—so *obtain a list of all previous campaigns and be diligent in checking references.*
- When checking references ask: 1) How much time did the consultant devote to the campaign? 2) Did the consultant's advice make a big difference or could an experienced campaign manager have given the same advice? 3) How good was the consulting team that the general consultant put together? 4) Were there costs/fees over and above what was expected? and 5) Was the consultant available when needed?
- One task of a general consultant is to write a *campaign plan*. Ask to see examples of plans from previous campaigns.

- Although a general consultant must be assertive to get things accomplished, you are the boss. The general consultant you hire must listen to you and obey your orders. At the same time, ***do not micromanage***. (This advice applies to all consultants.) The purpose of hiring consultants is to give you time to devote to raising money and meeting people. If you are micromanaging your consultants, you will not be doing what you need to do to win.
- The roles of the general consultant and the campaign manager must be well defined, and the two must be able to work well together. You do not want to pay for duplication, and you do not want a task to fall between the cracks because each thought the other would take care of it. Make it clear who works for whom.
- ***Experience is everything for a general consultant.*** Before you spend precious campaign dollars on a general consultant, be sure he or she has campaign experience, especially in campaigns similar to yours. For general consultants, experience in your state is a definite advantage.

HIRING POLLING CONSULTANTS

Because I am a pollster, I have particular insight into and a lot to say about hiring polling consultants. Just because this section is the longest does not mean that your polling consultant is the most important or the most difficult to hire.

I Why Hire a Polling Consultant

If you plan to spend over \$100,000 on media, a polling consultant is an absolute necessity. The pollster's job is 1) to find the best message for your campaign in order to persuade voters to vote for you or your initiative; 2) to find the voters that are most persuadable—the target audience for your media; and 3) to find the voters who are most supportive—your target audience for getting out the vote (GOTV). The pollster must also be able to clearly communicate the strongest message to you, your campaign, and your other consultants. If the pollster does his or her job well, you will get much more out of your media than you would have without the pollster. In the long run, a good pollster will save your campaign money; a bad pollster can lead your campaign seriously astray.

II What to Look for in a Polling Consultant

Polling consultants can be the most difficult to evaluate because you are not likely to have the technical knowledge necessary to assess their methodological and statistical skills. Furthermore, pollsters do many things that are vital for conducting accurate and representative polls that you will not be able to see or judge. Doing these things right often costs pollsters more money and requires that they have a lot of statistical training. Not doing these things right is more profitable for the pollster and allows untrained pollsters to work in the field—and you may never be the wiser. To hire a well-trained pollster who will do what it takes to design and conduct a good poll, make sure you ask the following questions:

1. Does the pollster use ***a phone bank with well-trained interviewers who are carefully monitored?*** Although some political pollsters have their own phone banks, most do not. There is no guarantee that pollsters with their own phone banks have better trained or monitored interviewers. Some pollsters have their own phone banks because it is another

- way to make money. Others subcontract reliable, well-trained phone banks. The key is to make sure the pollsters carefully monitor the phone bank.
2. Is the pollster purchasing *the best listed (for primaries) or random-digit dialing (RDD—for general elections) sample*? One can turn to many sources for samples. Some are poor but cheap, and others are good but more costly for the pollster.
 3. Is the pollster *carefully considering both census data and exit polls from previous off-year/presidential elections to determine likely voter turnout in each geographic area of your state/district by gender, age, and race*? This question cannot be stressed enough. The differences among political poll results during presidential campaigns—which can be quite large as seen in the most recent election—are in large part due to different estimates of voter turnout. Cost-cutting pollsters will do little to estimate voter turnout accurately.
 4. Is the pollster *checking the data against expected turnouts and weighting the data to compensate for inevitable selection bias* that occurs in telephone surveys?
 5. Are the interviewers *calling back the same numbers* three times or more to ensure a high response rate? Many pollsters have interviewers call down lists of numbers to find someone and *never* call back numbers where a) no one answered the phone, b) it was busy, or c) where the respondent asked the interviewer to call back at another time. This approach is much cheaper for the pollster and will maximize his or her profit margin. However, this approach also leads to tremendous selection bias, and no weighting in the world will make this sample representative.
 6. Is the pollster taking the time to *field test the survey* to be certain that interviewers understand how the questions should be read, that the questions are understandable to the respondents, and that all possible responses to the question have been considered?
 7. Is the pollster appropriately *oversampling any geographic or demographic group that might be crucial to your campaign but too small to analyze without oversampling*? If so, is the pollster appropriately weighting that subgroup to reflect its true proportions of likely voter populations when analyzing the data?

Since these things will be difficult if not impossible for you to evaluate, *you may want to rely on other cues that are often related to (but not a guarantee of) whether a pollster will take the necessary technical steps to produce accurate polls:*

1. *When choosing a pollster, do not automatically choose the cheapest one.* Pollsters who offer great bargains are probably cutting corners in ways that you will never see but that will result in inaccurate poll results.
2. *Make certain your pollster has extensive statistical and methodological training—especially in the field of public opinion research.* Too many pollsters start a firm after working in campaigns and "seeing lots of polls." They may have taken a couple of statistics courses in college or even a couple of graduate level night courses. That experience might be enough to justify hiring them as lower level employees in a political polling firm, but that amount of experience is insufficient for the person in charge of writing the questionnaire, devising the sample, analyzing the data, and writing your report. Even if the principal of the firm tells you "we have a staff member who knows all that technical stuff," if the principal does not know it, can he or she really assure that it is being done correctly?
3. *In the polling report, does the pollster clearly explain response rates, callbacks, how likely voter turnout was determined, and if the sample was weighted to match expected*

turnout by age, gender, region, or race? These methodological sections make for dry reading and are often ignored by candidates and the other consultants when the report is being read in the middle of a campaign. However, if a pollster takes the time to explain these methodological steps clearly in the report, then the pollster is probably following the necessary steps. A pollster who is less clear or does not report these things may be a pollster who is not taking these steps and cutting corners at your expense. Beware of anyone who reports response rates of over 70% in a campaign poll, for that pollster is either lying or using inappropriate measures of response rates to obscure the problem of selection bias.

4. The vast majority of political pollsters are not **part of a public opinion professional association such as the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)** nor do they often **contribute to or follow professional or academic research and conferences on the science of polling**. If a pollster is *not* part of such an association or does *not* participate in public opinion research or conferences, it certainly does *not* mean that the pollster necessarily cuts corners or is not technologically trained. However, a pollster who *is* an AAPOR member or follows opinion research is highly likely to take all the appropriate methodological steps to ensure accurate and representative results. Membership in AAPOR requires signing an ethical professional code that includes openly and accurately reporting polling methods and response rates, and anyone who follows and contributes to the research of polling science is certainly aware of the latest and most appropriate statistical survey methods.

Other things you need to consider:

- **Experience:** While expertise is the most important and the hardest thing to judge when hiring a political pollster, you should also hire an experienced pollster who has conducted strategic surveys in a number of campaigns—ideally including campaigns similar to yours.
- The quality of the report and the quality of the questionnaire: (These things are discussed in detail in the next section.)
- **You need a pollster who will be candid with you.** Consultants who work for you want to make you happy. It is much easier to give you good news than to give you bad news; it is always tempting to make things sound rosier than they actually are. Many pollsters will tell you that an election can be won with your message or by using your pet issues because that is what *you* want to hear. You should hire a pollster who will tell you the truth, even when the truth hurts. Without accurate information, you could dig yourself into a financial hole, or be unable to turn around a campaign that is going in the wrong direction.
- **Speed can be overrated.** Some pollsters will tell you that they will be able to turn around a baseline polling report in only a few days. **YOU DO NOT WANT THIS!** While you do not want a pollster who is overburdened and will sit on poll results for weeks before delivering a report, you also do not want to pay good money to have a pollster give scant attention to the results, to ignore important contradictions and puzzles in the data, to perform only the simplest analysis, and to give you lots of canned and pat phrases—just so you can get a finished report in a few days. This is a good way for a pollster to make a fortune by increasing the number of campaigns he or she can take on in any one election, but it is a lousy way for you to get good public opinion research. **Your pollster should be able to turn around the actual numbers and the tracking poll memos quickly, but your polling consultant should take the time—**

one to two weeks—to analyze and consider your results fully and to write a clear and cogent report.

- ***Avoid polling consultants who try to sell you the idea of polling every voter through automated calling.*** First, you cannot poll every voter because the vast majority of voters will hang up on any automated call. Thus, no matter how big of a sample you get, the data that comes out of such a poll is extremely biased and worthless. Second, if voters find out who is calling, they will not be happy with you. Third, you will not be able to test the impact of negative information about yourself, for you hardly want to provide the entire district with such information.
- ***Avoid pollsters who offer to use their phone bank for persuasion calls.*** Interviewers who engage in persuasion calls are the wrong kind of interviewers for objective polling. Any pollster who mixes these activities is not a legitimate pollster. Be especially wary of pollsters who engage in push polling. Push polling is persuasion calls masquerading as a poll; in push polling, instead of calling a small random sample of voters to measure opinion, pollsters call large groups of highly targeted persuadable voters and give them negative information about your opponent. By using the guise of a poll, they give the information a sense of "neutrality" and "objectivity" that the information would never have if it clearly came from a persuasion call coming from your campaign. This practice seriously undermines actual polling, and anybody engaging in it is unethical and not to be trusted.
- **Services:** When hiring a polling consultant, you should consider the following factors:
 1. **Availability:** Will the pollster be available and actively stay in touch with your campaign throughout the entire campaign? Will the pollster review the scripts to television and radio ads, the direct mail, and the telephone persuasion and GOTV scripts to make certain they are on message? You do not want a pollster who only conducts the poll, writes the report and then is never heard from again. Also, be clear which person in the firm you will be communicating with. Ideally, you will be communicating with the principal or a senior partner in the firm—in other words, you should be communicating with the person you are hiring and not a less experienced low-level staffer.
 2. **Types of polls:** Ask your consultant what types of polls you need for a campaign your size. All candidates should conduct a large baseline poll for any competitive primary and general election. Slightly larger campaigns should conduct one or two smaller tracking polls before each competitive election. The largest campaigns will have budgets that allow daily polling during the last several weeks of the campaign. If your budget allows for it and you have hired the pollster early enough, you should consider a medium-sized poll a year or a year and a half before the election. This can be especially useful for elected officials who can use early polling to build a public record in their current office, before they begin their campaign for higher office.
 3. **Focus groups:** *Be wary of a pollster who pushes focus groups as a great way to find your message.* Focus groups have their purposes and can be useful, but they are often abused and overused by political consultants as fast, cheap (but profitable) ways to measure opinion without using statistics. Some candidates and campaign managers like focus groups because a roomful of voters talking feels more real than a bunch of numbers from a report. (We generally recommend that a candidate not attend a focus group session but watch it on tape instead.) Focus groups may be easier to understand and make you feel as if you are in touch with real people, but they are neither representative nor reliable. A couple of two-

hour focus group sessions each with ten voters who are willing to give up an evening in exchange for about \$50 may not reflect public opinion across your state or district. ***Never use a focus group to verify a message found through a survey, and whenever possible, try to verify findings from a focus group by testing them later in a survey.***

Only large campaigns can afford the luxury of focus groups. ***Focus groups can be useful for those campaigns in two situations:***

- A. ***Very early in the campaign, before the baseline survey(s), when you want a sense of how the voters think and talk about issues.*** Focus groups can help pollsters and the rest of the campaign to think of ways to phrase issues and talk about concerns in clear statements that relate to ordinary voters. The conclusions that are drawn from these focus groups can then be tested in surveys to see if (or which of) these statements convince voters to support you or your initiative over that of your opposition. These early focus groups may also be useful ways to test visual impressions of the candidate and the candidate's speaking style, campaign slogans, symbols, and early literature.
- B. ***After the baseline poll has been completed and commercials or rough cuts/scripts of commercials have been made.*** The purpose of these focus groups is to test visuals, graphics, voices, images, and other aspects of your media that could never be tested in a survey. For very large campaigns you might consider using dials in focus groups. These groups are larger, and they evaluate visuals and lengthy speeches using dials to rate their feelings. This method is only worthwhile if you have many visuals to test.

- **Costs:** All costs should be clear. There are a number of cost issues for you to consider:
 1. ***Your entire polling costs should amount to no more than 8% to 12% of your media budget.*** If your campaign has a small media budget, that percentage will be on the higher end of this scale. If your campaign has a larger media budget, that percentage will be on the lower end. Be suspicious of any pollsters who tell you otherwise, for they are either offering you cut-rate prices (which will be reflected in their work) or they are trying to fleece you. You need enough research to proceed with accurate and well-targeted media, but you do not want to limit the amount you can spend on media by investing in too much research.
 2. ***Is there a retainer?*** Ideally your pollster will not charge a retainer, and you should expect to get advice from the pollster throughout the entire campaign even if you do not pay for one. However, if the pollster is concerned that you might pull out of the election, he or she may charge a retainer before the poll is conducted so that his or her time is not wasted. It is unusual for a pollster to charge a retainer in the middle of a campaign after a poll has been conducted.
 3. ***Polls are typically priced by the length and sample size of the survey.*** A pollster's price should cover the cost of the sample and the phone bank, the writing of the questionnaire, the survey results in the form of frequencies and crosstabs (within a couple of days after surveying has been completed), a full report (see below) within a couple of weeks, a meeting or conference call to present the results, and continual availability for questions about the results. A pollster should be willing to fly to your state or district at no extra charge to present the results, although you will have to pay for expenses. Be wary of any pollster who suggests there will be additional costs (such as an hourly rate) for consultation after the report has been delivered.

5. ***Not all 18-minute questionnaires are alike.*** Survey length can be very subjective. If you are comparing the price of pollsters, compare past questionnaires of "comparable length" and see how much information they actually give you. Overstating the length of the questionnaire is a great way for a pollster to earn more, while paying the phone bank less and analyzing and writing less.
5. ***Visits to the campaign.*** Typically, the pollster will be the consultant you are least likely to see face to face. Pollsters can do their jobs very easily and quite well from a distance. It is not uncommon in smaller campaigns for a pollster to never set foot in the district. If your campaign budget is small, it is probably not worth the cost in expenses to fly your pollster out. However, if your campaign budget is larger, you should fly him or her out during major brainstorming sessions with all your consultants and to present the results of the baseline survey. Obviously, you will have an opportunity to see your pollster whenever he or she conducts focus groups. Find out how many days of travel are included in any contract or if you have to pay extra fees for days of travel.
6. ***Focus groups.*** Here are a few things to consider when evaluating focus group costs:
 - A. ***Typical focus groups cost can vary between \$4,500 and \$7,500 per group*** depending on the cost of facilities in your area, the number of groups you do in a night, and the difficulty of recruiting the respondents. You will also need to pay travel expenses for consultants who attend.
 - B. ***We strongly recommend doing a minimum of four groups over two nights in different parts of your district or state,*** and more—if your budget allows it—for campaigns in big or diverse states.
 - C. ***Focus group costs typically cover everything but travel expenses.*** Make certain there are no hidden fees or expenses.
 - D. ***Focus group costs typically include a report, a transcript of the session, and coded written responses from participants.*** If you only need a short memo, you may be able to negotiate the price down somewhat, but not too much. ***The most time-consuming part of focus groups is the preparation beforehand.***
 - E. ***As with surveys, there are many ways for polling consultants to cut corners in focus groups to make them more profitable for the consultant and less valuable for the candidate:*** 1) Focus group participants are ideally recruited from a Random Digit Dial sample or from a list of voters who have never participated in a focus group—but not from the facility's list of regular participants (the latter being the easiest and cheapest to recruit); 2) The recruiting process should include a careful screener and should set quotas to get a variety of respondents along demographic lines; 3) The focus group facilitator should be well prepared with a detailed focus group guide written for him/herself and the observers; 4) Focus groups should be done in a professional facility designed for focus groups; 5) The groups should be conducted in very different parts of the state or district—both regionally and demographically; 6) The focus group facilitator should be the polling consultant you have hired or someone from the polling firm who is well versed in your campaign and trained in running focus groups. Do not accept a subcontracted professional facilitator who knows little about your campaign.

III The Polling Report

It has been said earlier in this seminar, but it is worth repeating: *get an example of a typical previous polling report* that your pollster has written. Polling consultants may tell you that they cannot let you see previous polling reports because they contain privileged data that belong to their clients. Don't believe them. Any pollster can take the time to make at least one previous polling report anonymous by replacing all identifying names and places with fictional names and places. Once you have the report, remember that it may not be a typical report for your type or size of campaign. Find out how comparable this report is to what you would get in your campaign.

The polling report covers your baseline survey—the largest survey conducted in your campaign, and it aims to accomplish three tasks: 1) testing voter support and impressions of the candidates or initiative, the issues, and all positive and negative information about you and your opponents; 2) identifying your supporters and the persuadable voters; and 3) finding the best message for you to convince voters to support you. The survey is usually conducted and the report written just before the candidate is ready to go out with his or her media (i.e., television, radio advertisements, and direct mail). Larger campaigns may have lengthy surveys at several different times: when the candidate enters the campaign, before going out with the primary media, and before going out with general election media.

Look for the following things in a polling report:

- Does the report have an executive summary or a bulleted section that distills the report into straightforward points and states the strengths and vulnerabilities of the candidate or initiative, the message, and the target audiences clearly and precisely? While you want a full report, you also need something to which you, your consultants, and your campaign staff can refer to quickly find the most important points.
- Does the report identify persuadable voters? How are persuadable voters defined? Are persuadable voters simply undecided voters? (very simplistic); Are they voters who moved toward supporting you during the course of the survey? (slightly more sophisticated); In identifying persuadable voters, does the report take into consideration a number of factors, possibly including the above as well as partisanship, feelings toward the candidate, and issue positions? (the most sophisticated).
- Are the demographic and regional characteristics of persuadable voters, base supporters, and the opposition's base clearly defined so that the campaign and the media and mail consultants will know exactly whom to target?
- Does the report carefully consider your message and the possible variations on that message depending on whether it is delivered to your base, persuadable voters, or other specific demographic or regional subgroups?
- Is the candidate's message determined by integrating issue concerns, candidate attributes, the degree to which positive and negative statements of all candidates are persuasive, the specific context of the campaign, and the political culture of the state or district? Indeed, the author of the report needs to demonstrate a good understanding of the context of the campaign, the candidates, and the political culture of the district or state—over and above what comes from the poll—in order to really understand how to interpret and use the results of the poll.
- Look at the paragraphs describing the candidates and the positive and negative statements in the questionnaire. Do these sections reflect votes, issues, occurrences, scandals, or positions

that are specific and unique to the candidates in the races and the district in which they are running? Alternatively, do these statements look like typical issue positions and standard template statements that could be used in any questionnaire in any election? The statements tested in your questionnaire should be well researched to reflect your district, your votes and positions, and those of the opposition. The statements should not come from a template that requires little thought and less work on the part of the pollster. Finally, are these statements well-written, clear, simple, straightforward ways to express information? The best of these statements will end up in your political ad, so they should be written in the questionnaire as clearly as you would want them to be in the ad.

- The report should not simply repeat the top-line results (also referred to as frequencies or marginals). You can read the questionnaire and get the marginals, but you need the author to analyze how these results relate to each other and to interpret these results for you. Not all reports need multiple regression (although it is sometimes called for), but the statistical analysis reports should do more than look at the frequencies and the basic cross tabulations of a few variables. You need your consultant to be well versed in sophisticated, multi-variate analysis.
- Is the report well written? Does it read well? Are its conclusions clear? Survey results are almost always messy and contradictory. However, your pollster should never give you a messy and contradictory conclusion. Your pollster needs to work through the confusion and contradictions to develop a clear and precise conclusion on which your campaign can act.
- Your pollster should give you more than numbers. Your polling consultant should be able to translate those numbers into clear ideas. It is not your responsibility to figure out what the numbers mean—that is your pollster's job.
- Finally, many pollsters will have lower level staff analyze the data and write 90% of the report. The consultant you hired will then go through and add a few sentences of analysis here and there. Your campaign deserves more attention from your consultant than that. Be wary of your pollster if you see "analysis sections" or "thought boxes" scattered throughout the report. It may well be that those little snippets are all that the consultant wrote.

HIRING MEDIA CONSULTANTS

I Why Hire a Media Consultant

The media consultant will likely be responsible for spending 50% to 80% of your budget. Needless to say, you should decide very carefully which media consultant to hire. Although some take on other services, media consultants handle mostly television, radio, and convention videos. Television and radio ads are the only way to get your message out to the vast majority of the voters—especially the voters you need in order to win the election. Thus, you need to hire someone who knows what he or she is doing and who will deliver your message in a way that makes you comfortable.

II What to Look for in a Media Consultant

- Good media firms are good for a range of reasons. Some are very creative and interesting. These firms have a better chance of being heard over the clutter of ads during a campaign, but they can be risky and the creativity can obscure your basic message. Other firms produce safer commercials that are very good at delivering your message, but tend to look like all of the other political ads that fill the airways. Which strategy is better for you depends on your situation: the political culture of your state or district, the nature and expected tone of your campaign, whether you enter the campaign as the favorite or a long shot, and your own personality.
- The first rule is to ***never hire a media-consulting firm based solely on their reel***. A reel consists of 15 or so of the best commercials the firm has ever made. These commercials may give you a sense of a consultant's style, but they are not a good enough measure of what you might get in your campaign.
- Ask for a complete list of the firm's campaigns and choose two campaigns that are most comparable to yours—at least one of these should be a losing campaign. Ask for references from and all of the ads made for those campaigns—including ads that were never aired. Ask the consultants to explain the context for the ads: the status of the campaign when they made the ad, the creative process in making the ad, how they incorporated the message from the poll, whom they were aiming the ad at, how much the campaign was willing to spend, what kind of effect the ad had, or why the ad never ran. After listening to the consultants' explanations, ask the references from that campaign if they concur with the consultants' assessment of the context.
- Ask for the slates—the “count-downs” that occur before the ad—which will give you the number of the ad. Skips in the number may mean that there was a weak ad that the firm is not showing you or that the firm had to make many changes in the ad before airing it.
- When you look at all the ads from one campaign, ***look for consistency over the course of the campaign***. If the ads diminish in quality, it may be a sign that the firm takes on too many clients and is stretched too thin during the height of the campaign season.
- ***Find out who the media buyer is***. Sometimes the media buyer is someone in the firm, and sometimes the media buyer is a subcontractor. The success of your media depends on the buyer's knowing when and how to buy advertising time. Your media buyer will be handling your largest expenditure, so it is crucial that he or she has experience in political campaigns.
- ***Speed is a very important quality of your media consultant***. Most of the time, your ads will be part of a planned schedule developed early in the campaign, and the media consultant will have a reasonable amount of time to write and produce each ad. As long as it has not taken on too many clients, any experienced campaign firm should be able to produce an ad in that amount of time. ***There will be other times when you need to get an ad out quickly in response to changing events or an opponent's ad— sometimes overnight***. These “reaction” ads are not planned and are off schedule. Should you need an unplanned reaction ad, you will need a media firm who can respond fast. ***Speed can be important, but faster is not always better***.

- ***Having the right chemistry with your media consultant is also important.*** Your media consultant will be presenting you, for the first and perhaps only time, to most of the voters in your district. That person must know you well and must be able to portray you in a way you want. For this reason, you will definitely need to spend time with your media consultant. At the same time, do not micro-manage. Respect your media consultant's creativity and give serious attention to their strategic advice, or find another media consultant you can trust.
- ***Production costs must be clear.*** Hidden fees and unexpected costs can easily pop up in production costs—be careful and pay attention.
- ***Many media consultants are paid on commission***—the more media time you buy, the more you pay the media consultant. This is true even when the big costs for the media consultant have already been covered in the production costs. This situation easily leads to conflicts of interest. A media consultant has a financial incentive for you to buy as much media as possible. The consultant may also have a financial incentive for you to make few commercials that run for a long time, rather than more commercials that run for shorter time periods. If you can arrange flat-fee payments instead of a commission, you can avoid this situation. Otherwise, be aware of this conflict—ask references how well the consultant handled this conflict, and ask the consultant directly about it.
- ***The pollie awards:*** Media consultants will brag about their pollie awards. Pollie awards are given every two years by the AAPC for the best media in a range of categories. The winners of these awards are chosen by other consultants. While these awards certainly go to good ads, this process is not very objective, and there is a fair amount of favoritism and who-knows-whom influencing the selection.

HIRING DIRECT MAIL CONSULTANTS

I Why Hire a Direct Mail Consultant

Almost all campaigns will have some direct mail, but direct mail consultants are most important and make up a larger proportion of the budgets in races with small districts and in districts that are only a small part of a very expensive media markets. Direct mail can be very highly targeted. With good voter lists, you can be much more certain that the right person (based on likelihood of voting, region, party affiliation, and demographics) is receiving your message. The cost of reaching each voter through direct mail is usually higher than using television or radio ads. Furthermore, the fact that you got the message into their mailboxes is no guarantee that they will read and absorb the message. Voters receive a direct mail message just once, whereas they may see your political commercial 4 to 8 times. If they toss the mail aside, it will be a serious lost opportunity. However, if they sit down and read it, it will have a much greater impact and deliver a much richer message than a 30 second commercial can. As a result, it is important that your direct mail be on-message and creative enough to draw in the reader.

II What to Look for in a Direct Mail Consultant

- We noted earlier that you should avoid consultant factories. That said, you should realize that mail firms tend to take on many more clients than other firms do. They will take on many state

legislative races because it is not uncommon for a state senate race to spend as much on mail as a congressional race does. ***These large firms may be factories, but size alone will not tell you whether a direct mail firm is a factory.***

- It is more difficult for large direct mail consultants to predict how much business their list of clients will generate. Their work is much more cyclical and tied to elections, and they need a big list of clients compared to other consultants because each client has a smaller mail budget. ***As a result, a direct mail consultant runs a higher risk of having too many clients and being stretched too thin and of having too few clients and not making enough money.*** The best way for you to address this problem is to ask the mail consultant how he or she avoids this problem and to ask past references if this problem came up in their campaigns.
- ***Be clear about who is designing, creating, and overseeing the mail.*** Making mail pieces requires a lot of formatting work, so you should expect a staff of young twenty year olds to be working on them. However, your consultant and/or his or her senior associates or partners should be the ones who develop the concepts, write the text, have the final say on the layout and photos, and approve the end result. They should also be the ones who work with the mailing list and determine targeting.
- As with media consultants, ***look at but do not base your decision on the mail in the consultant's promotional materials.*** Consultants will only include their best pieces, and it is easy to make one great mail piece per campaign. To evaluate a mail consultant, you want to see an average, or worse, piece for a campaign. The promotional material may give you a sense of a consultant's style, but not necessarily the overall quality of his or her work.
- ***If you are seriously considering a mail consultant, ask for all of the mail created for two or three comparable campaigns.*** Ask for references for those campaigns. Ask the mail consultant to explain to you the context of the mail: the status of the campaign, the message in the poll, how the mail delivered that message, the process of creating the mail, and how he or she worked with the campaign and the pollster to create mail that was on message. Most mail goes through 2 or 3 versions before being sent. Find out to whom the mail was targeted, how the mail was targeted, how much mail was sent, how much the mail cost the campaign, and how much mail there was relative to media and why. Then call the references and see if they have the same perceptions as the consultant does.
- When looking at examples of direct mail, ask yourself two questions: 1) is there a clear message being delivered? 2) is the mail creative and catchy enough to lure the recipient into opening it to read the message? Far too often, an on-message mail piece with little creativity ends up unread in the trash. On the other hand, a mail piece so creative that the message is poorly delivered will be read but will not have the desired persuasive effect.
- ***You will have to decide for yourself what kind of style you want your mail consultant to have.*** Some consultants are especially good with humor, some are best serious, and some have a good balance of both. Some are stronger on positive mail, and some are best with negative mail. Some are edgier and riskier; others are more typical but safe. Your choice will depend on your own personality and history, what you feel comfortable sending into people's home, the political culture of your district, whether you are a challenger needing to shake things up or an incumbent hoping for a safe ride, and what you think your eventual message might be. Since you can never be sure what your message will be, you are probably best off with a consultant who is not too much of one thing—even if the consultant does that one thing extremely well. (One thing to consider with direct mail: because it is highly targetable and

because it is often delivered below the radar screen, direct mail is a particular good medium for delivering a negative critique of your opponent without causing you any damage).

- **Ask the consultant how mailing lists are generated and how he or she targets the mail.** The key to direct mail is getting it into the hands of people who will vote and who find the message persuasive. Thus, the targeting of direct mail is extremely important.
- **Because targeting and message are extremely important, the direct mail consultant must work closely with your pollster.** All consultants should be willing to review and critique your mail, and your mailing consultant should be open to those reviews and critiques. You hire both your media and mail consultants because they are very good at what they do—especially on the creative side. You and the other consultants should not try to greatly influence this aspect of their work. However, other consultants have seen lots of mail and are good judges of what is strong and what is weak—especially when it comes to message. Your mail consultant should work with them to assure that your mail delivers your message as well as it can. Call past references and ask specifically how well the media consultant worked with the campaign and other consultants in reworking his or her mail.
- **Cost is a tricky issue with direct mail consultants.** Like media consultants, mail consultants are financially better off if they have to make fewer mail pieces and send each one to the most people. However, *you* might be better off with more mail pieces, directly tailored to smaller, highly targeted groups of voters. As a result, mail consultants will charge more per piece for the first 10 or 20 thousand mail pieces; the cost per piece then decreases the more mail you send. You need to figure out whether the cost structure is designed so you will only be able to send 2 mail pieces to many more voters than you really need or to voters for whom the message is not as strong, instead of 4 mail pieces with more targeted messages to specific groups of voters that are more likely to be persuaded by the targeted message. **Make certain that sending mail to reasonably targetable groups is not prohibitively expensive.**

HIRING FUNDRAISERS

I Why Hire Fundraisers

When listing the major consultants on a campaign, one usually lists the general, polling, media, and direct mail consultants. Fundraisers are usually left off that list—probably because the other consultants are part of your campaign team from start to finish and usually offer strategic advice about all aspects of the campaign. Some fundraisers might do that, but they are more likely to have a very specialized role that takes place earlier in the campaign. They are rarely at the table when strategic campaign decisions are made in September or October. That said, **hiring your fundraiser should not be an afterthought.** No matter how good and hard working your other consultants are, they will be worthless to you if you have no money. If you are running for a particularly expensive and competitive state legislative office, Congress, mayor of a major city, or for a statewide office, you need to hire a fundraiser.

Too many campaigns try to raise money alone, getting a relative or a well-connected friend to fundraise. This approach inevitably fails. You need someone who has good list of *political* contributors, who will work with you closely to get those contributors on the phone, who know what it takes to

convince them to contribute, and who will be an incredible taskmaster in getting you, the candidate, to make fundraising calls 20 to 25 hours a week. That's right, you will need to spend 20 to 25 hours a week on the phone to raise enough money to run for major office. Because of that time commitment, you need a good and dedicated campaign team—including campaign staff and manager. They should take over running the campaign so that you can do the task that only you can do—fundraising.

Like it or not, in politics today, with districts growing ever larger in population, with voters becoming more detached, apathetic, and bombarded with information, and with cynical journalism, you will not be able to get your message out to the voters without relying on the very expensive media of television, radio, and direct mail. To use those media effectively, your campaign must have money.

II What to Look for in a Fundraiser

- It is a rare candidate who enjoys fundraising, so you need a fundraiser who will not give in when you want to do other things; you need a fundraiser who will force you to stick with the task of fundraising. A friend, a relative, or a staff member will not be able to say no to you.
- You need to have a frank talk with your fundraiser at the start of your campaign. The fundraiser needs to know everything about you and your campaign. The fundraiser needs to tell you how much money he or she thinks you need to raise. The fundraiser then needs to tell you whether he or she can raise the money for you and what you will need to do to raise money. If you are not willing to make the commitment the fundraiser asks of you, be completely up front at the start. If you are not honest, then you will have only yourself to blame if you fail to raise money.
- Most fundraisers do not work on commission. Thus, a fundraiser who fails to raise money for you will be both a financial and time drain on your campaign. It is therefore essential that you find an established fundraiser with a reputation to preserve. A good fundraiser needs to be able to tell you if he or she cannot raise money for you.
- If you go through a series of fundraisers who tell you what you need to do to raise the money necessary to run a competitive campaign, and you tell all of them you do not have the energy or time to do that, then you should reconsider whether you should run in this campaign.
- ***Get references from other candidates and consultants.*** While you should recognize the potential conflicts of interest in getting advice from consultants (as noted earlier in this seminar), ***your consultants are likely to recommend the best fundraisers they know because they have every incentive for you to raise as much money as possible.***
- ***When you talk with fundraisers, get a list of their past clients. Find clients comparable to you and your situation.*** How much did those campaigns raise and why? Talk to those previous clients. Do they believe the fundraiser gave an honest and fair assessment of what it would take to raise money? Be aware that candidates are often very frustrated by how hard it is to raise money.
- If you face a competitive general election for federal office, you will need a D.C. fundraiser and an in-district fundraiser, or a single firm that raises money from both communities. If you face a difficult primary, a D.C. fundraiser may not be useful to you since the PAC community may wait until after the primary to contribute money. If you are an incumbent member of Congress facing a competitive election, a D.C. fundraiser is essential.

- You must have good chemistry with your fundraiser for you will be spending a lot of time with him or her and his or her staff. At the same time, recognize that you need a fundraiser who will be tough with you.
- The fundraiser will put someone by your side, making the calls for you. Find out who that will be and how much experience she or he has. How much time will the fundraiser (not the staff member) spend with you to talk with you about your campaign?
- How has the fundraiser developed his or her list? How does the fundraiser update it? Are these lists old? You do not want the names of the best contributors from a decade ago.
- What methods besides cold calls does the fundraiser use? Will the fundraiser be able to walk you through the offices of key interest groups in Washington or in your state capital?
- Does the fundraiser have experience in your state or have a good list of people in your state? Does the fundraiser have a good list of specific people who might be particularly willing to contribute to you: people from your ethnic group, race or religion; women, if you are a female candidate; people with a particular interest in an issue you champion or with an issue your opponent has a poor record on.

OTHER CONSULTANTS

The consultants listed above are the key consultants in your campaign. With the possible exception of the fundraiser, they should always be at the table to help make strategic decisions. There are other consultants you should consider hiring who are not likely to play a key role in campaign planning and strategy. It is not uncommon for campaigns, especially small budget campaigns, to try to use volunteers, free-lancing college student children of a supporter, or someone within the campaign to take on these other tasks. We do not recommend doing that, for these tasks require both experience and expertise that these people are not likely to have.

I Opposition Research

- Opposition research is a dirty job that needs to be done. If you say, “I plan to run a positive campaign so I do not need opposition research,” you are doing yourself a serious disservice. If you are a front-runner with good name recognition and are well ahead of an opponent with little name recognition, then you won't need to run negative. However, you will still need an opposition researcher, for your opponent will likely go negative. ***An opposition researcher finds out more than just negative information about your opponent. Your opposition researcher will also do research on you.*** An opposition researcher will also find issue positions and voting records that are needed for a comparative—not just negative—race.
- If your opponent's stance contradicts past votes or statements, you will want to be able to point that out. If you have a negative that your opponent can use as part of his or her message, you need to be aware of it and to know how damaging it can be. Furthermore, if your opponent turns negative, you need to be ready to respond—which may call for your going negative.

- You need a professional opposition researcher, for they know how to discreetly find all of the relevant information you need. Someone from your campaign will not be as discreet and will not know what to find out or how to find it.
- You should hire your opposition researcher *after* you hire your pollster. Your pollster needs to be able to work with this person. Then, the opposition research must be completed *before* the poll so that you can test the persuasiveness of the arguments uncovered by the research in the poll. As a result, opposition research will be one of your first consulting expenses.
- The cost of opposition research can range from about \$15,000 plus room and board for research on you and one opponent to about \$30,000 for research on you and two or three opponents who have legislative records. The cost will vary depending on the scope and complexity of the research.
- You should get recommendations for an opposition researcher from your other consultants. Since opposition researchers are almost never in the position of bringing other consultants into a campaign, the *quid pro quo* conflict of interest is not really an issue here. Furthermore, your consultants need the best opposition research to do their jobs, so they will push for the best opposition researchers they know.

II**Web/Internet**

- As in every other field, the hype surrounding the Internet in politics as the new savior and the replacement for all other forms of communication has disappeared. Don't expect to reach many voters through the Internet. However, you should expect to use the Internet to reach party activists, journalists, and other highly specific targets.
- The Internet is also an important tool for campaign organizing, getting forms/flyers/petitions and other information out to regional coordinators and volunteers.
- A volunteer or someone's kid who can put up a website for you really cheap will not know how to make key information available, how to keep you on message, and how to keep the site fresh and updated.
- Hire an editor to ensure that your website has no typographical or grammatical errors.
- We all know about John McCain's fundraising success using the Internet. If you are the next John McCain—someone who can make a huge media splash and inspire support from those who would not normally be involved—then you too can use the Internet as a great fundraising tool. However, chances are extremely good that you are not the next John McCain. It makes sense to set up a contribution page on your web site, but do not expect to get a lot of money from it.