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# USING CONSUMER MARKETING TO INCREASE VOTER TURNOUT

The Center for Civic Literacy was founded in 1992 with the simple premise that consumer marketing disciplines could identify the barriers to civic participation and create informational products and campaigns that would increase voting and other forms of civic involvement. This presents highlights of our research which confirm this hypothesis.



## BACKGROUND

Currently, most non-partisan communication programs - albeit well-intentioned - do not have a consumer-driven approach. Most non-profit good government and civic education groups do not have the skills or resources to do target audience research and often stick to one well-worn format for their communications.

News organizations often focus on "horse-race" coverage or conflict to provoke interest. They do not appreciate how much basic information and context about the issues and government operations the public needs - and have little incentive to use valuable airtime or space to provide this information with effective frequency. Partisan campaigns tend to use visceral or hot button issues to distract the public from more essential, but harder to solve, core issues.

In 1992, there was an evolution toward more direct to voter communications with members of the public being able to question candidates directly. While a good start, it did not attract any new voters from underrepresented segments - ethnic minorities, young people and less educated/low income groups. In light of the Motor Voter law which provides increased opportunities for registration, The Center for Civic Literacy (CCL) has particularly focused on communications that help registrants feel better prepared to vote and motivated to show up.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In initial CCL research, barriers to voting fell into two main categories: attitude-related and information related. After deeper probing with the different target audiences, many of the negative attitudes about government and the political system were discovered to stem from lack of information.

### Why People Don't Vote

#### *What They Say:*

- don't like the choices
- fed up with the system
- vote won't count
- takes up too much time
- inconvenient

#### *What They Mean:*

- don't know the candidates/issues
- unclear on personal impact
- don't feel opinion matters
- don't know how to vote
- intimidated by the process

Audience-oriented information can have a direct positive impact on voter involvement. It can provide an immediate approach to re-engaging the public with the democratic process while longer term political reforms are being pursued. Increasing the share of voice of non-partisan communications versus partisan messages can also dilute the dampening effect of negative campaigning on voter attitudes and turnout.

CCL research has two main strands: information needed by all types of voters and the specific needs of new voters. For both, there has been an unmet need for: 1.) user-friendly non-partisan information about the key issues and candidates' positions; and 2.) opportunities to talk about issues with people with different viewpoints. Many report getting prepared to vote is a "chore" and "feels like taking a test". New voters also need help on how to vote and peer reassurance to overcome intimidation with the process.

### **Performance Anxiety Across All Voters:**

#### ***First-Time Voters***

- many can't read the Sample Ballot
- uncertain what will happen at the voting place
- voting feels like taking a test

#### ***More-Experienced Voters***

- wait until the night before to "cram"
- feel they can't fulfill their "duty" to be well-informed on all races

CCL has developed and tested communications that address these concerns. To fill critical gaps in current offerings, we created products like the *Easy Reader Voter Guide* and have also helped expand the reach of existing non-partisan vehicles. There is an opportunity to strengthen the impact of non-partisan messages from different sources by consolidating complementary efforts into integrated campaigns.



## **COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS OF THE TOTAL ELIGIBLE VOTING AUDIENCE**

**Methodology:** Multiple focus groups among both voters and non-voters were conducted in California after the primary and general elections in 1992 and 1994, discussing why/why not vote, the sources of information people use to make their voting decisions and reactions to new information vehicles.

#### ***Key findings:***

- In 1992, the main sources people used were the materials from the Secretary of State and Voter Registrar, the Presidential Debates, newspaper summaries and discussions with family and friends
- The respondents felt the biggest gaps were in reliable non-partisan sources and more in-person dialogue with other points of view
- Additional findings in follow up groups: the process people use to make up their mind about public issues is to read, talk, reflect - and repeat this until they feel comfortable; if they don't feel prepared, "performance anxiety" will lead many voters to make up other excuses about deciding not to vote

#### ***Indicated actions/outcomes:***

- 1) In partnership with the California Public Library, CCL developed and tested a "one-stop" easy to use non-partisan source for major candidates and ballot measures, the *Easy Reader Voter Guide*. It has been expanded through California with help from major partners like the LA Times, San Jose Mercury News and Wells Fargo bank. Portions will be available nationally for the Fall 1996 General Election.
- 2) CCL helped pilot and expand issues discussions programs in various settings in partnership with local newspapers and TV to provide the citizens with the opportunity to define which issues are most important to them and work with other members of the public to examine areas of common ground.



## COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS OF NON-VOTERS AND THE DISENFRANCHISED

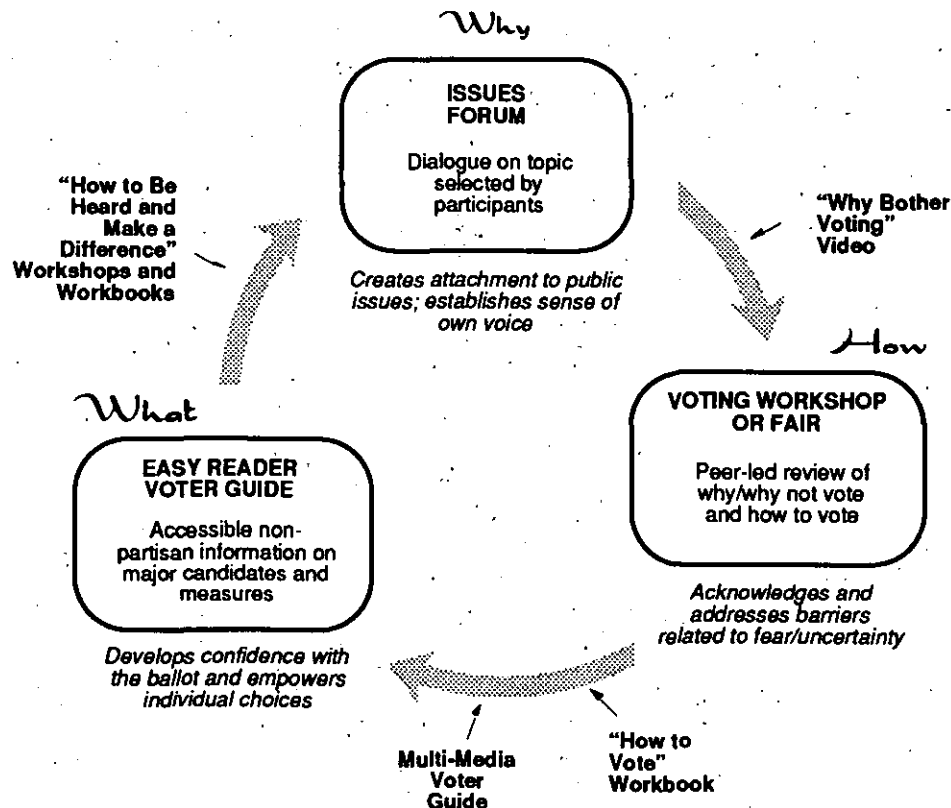
**Methodology:** Through a series of focus groups, community surveys and subsequent working groups, representatives of less educated, low income and ethnic minority target audiences helped identify barriers to participation and helped design communications to reach their peers.

### Key findings:

- These "disenfranchised" groups are in fact very interested in making positive changes in their communities and will vote – but they need to start by understanding the connection to their concerns, rather than being told it is their "duty" or "responsibility" to vote.
- This audience needs very basic information about how to vote that most current voters received in school or home; role modeling/peer presentation of the information reduces intimidation and mistrust about the voting process
- Literacy is a real barrier for access to non-partisan descriptions of the issues; most printed non-partisan materials are written at a 12th grade level, effectively excluding over 40% of the population. More non-partisan/bi-partisan coverage needs to be in broadcast format.

### Indicated actions/outcomes:

- 1) CCL developed and tested a comprehensive model that covers the *why*, *how*, and *what* of voting for disenfranchised audiences. Results in the Bay Area pilot in 1994 were very successful on a qualitative basis. Statewide quantitative testing will be conducted in conjunction with the Fall 1996 election.



- 2) A fifteen minute motivational broadcast program - *Why Vote?* in English and *¿Por Que Votar?* in Spanish - was developed in partnership with members of the target audience. The video format dramatically expanded access to the messages about why to vote and how to vote versus the bulk of non-partisan communications which are print-based. The longer-length format was designed to provide a more complete message than existing PSA's. The video has been used on local TV stations in California, in educational and community settings. A national version has recently been introduced.

## OTHER FINDINGS ACROSS BOTH GROUPS

- Knowing that one doesn't have to vote on everything helps reduce anxiety. People need to know that voting is not a test. They choose the issues they want to vote on and can take their "notes" with them.
- There is a lack of basic knowledge about types of elected officials, levels of government, beliefs of various political parties, etc. This type of information has been very popular even with experienced as well as new voters.
- All audiences need a fully integrated campaign to be motivated and prepared to vote - no one communication mode is adequate. More than PSA's are needed to convert lapsed/non-voters (PSA's can be a reminder but not the core selling message).
- Eligible voters are ready and willing to help shape the agenda; they are very capable of articulating the priorities for their communities. If issues are presented as having multiple options (instead of just an "either/or"), the public is motivated to examine the solutions rather than focus on conflict between opposing sides.
- The sense that "other people are doing it" can be motivating. Registration deadline-oriented events, voting fairs and peer-led programs have been successful at drawing out new and lapsed voters.

The Center for Civic Literacy (CCL) is a non-partisan organization dedicated to improving the public's ability to participate in the democratic process. CCL's focus is on using target audience research and user-based design to improve the non-partisan communications provided by election officials, the news media and civic organizations. CCL research to engage new voters has been supported primarily by the U. S. Dept. of Education via LSCA grants from the California State Library with the Santa Clara County Library. Other work has been sponsored by the Kettering Foundation/National Issues Forums, UC Davis Extension, Project Vote Smart and various non-partisan media and community programs.

CCL was founded by Susan S. Clark, formerly a consumer marketing executive who has held positions as VP Planning and VP New Products at Del Monte Foods, Director of Marketing for the California State Lottery and as a brand manager at Procter & Gamble. Ms. Clark is an Associate of the Kettering Foundation and serves on the boards of the California Voter Foundation and Kids Voting.



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