Access to Political Tools:
Effective Citizen Action

**BY JIM WARREN &
HOWARD RHEINGOLD**

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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*The "Interview" conference on the WELL
is one of my favorite information-grazing
grounds. Around election time 1990, I found
Jim Warren dispensing advice about what
works and what does not work in citizen
political action — working for or against a
candidate or referendum, starting or sup-
porting a ballot initiative. I snarfed the
interview from the WELL and persuaded
Warren to drop by the WER offices for a
chat. The following material is an amal-
gam of his online and in-person advice.*

*If the personal-computer revolution had
a founding father, Jim Warren was he. He
founded the old West Coast Computer
Faires, founded and published InfoWorld
and the Silicon Gulch Gazette, and was
founding editor of Dr. Dobb's Journal. At
the moment, he is putting his energies into
organizing the First Conference on Com-
puters, Freedom & Privacy. You can read
his "Futures" column in MicroTimes
and find him on the WELL, almost daily
(jwarren@well.sf.ca.us).*

— Howard Rheingold

How I Learned What I Learned

In the anti-war sixties, I was
General Secretary of the (Cali-
fornia) Midpeninsula Free Uni-
versity during its greatest growth
and activity. Later, after selling
the Computer Faire in 1983, I
took on San Mateo County for
abusing and exploiting its unin-
corporated rural minority. This
prompted a Grand Jury investi-
gation that supported my com-
plaints. The planning director
was forced to resign and a citi-
zens' appeals board was created.
Later, I was elected a county-
wide trustee of the three-campus
community-college district. This
was a highly politicized position
in a county with a population of
600,000, where it's been said
that the Number One avocation
is politics.

Thereafter, disgusted by the
ongoing abuse of the mountain
and rural residents who were
supposed to be represented by
a county supervisor, "Atherton
Anna" Eshoo, I ran against her
when no one else would. I knew
I didn't have a chance of win-
ning, but I simply wasn't going
to let her arrogance go unchal-
lenged. As soon as I filed, all
sorts of political pros came out
of the woodwork, offering advice
as to what really works, versus
what naive citizens *think* should
work. A lot of it was simple ad-
vice, gained from direct exper-
ience, and proven in numerous
municipal, county, and state-
wide elections.

Folks who recognize these reali-
ties can have much more poten-
tial political clout than those
who are unaware or who refuse
to accept them. Those who use
this information enhance their
ability to cause change in com-
parison to those who disregard
them. All of it takes work, time
and effort. Most of it can be used
by rich and poor alike. Most of
it doesn't require computers,
but they can help greatly.

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Getting Started

• *Start Early.* If you want to run a successful political campaign, you have to start many months before the beginning of the campaign season. Wait until people are thinking of politics and you've waited too long.

• *Do it Right.* If your interest is a candidate or initiative with a campaign already in progress, you can volunteer to work with their organization or start your own. Either way, follow the campaigning regulations, or expect major public embarrassment.

Trivial example: It's useful to send "Dear Friend" cards (more on that below) and other publications. They are more effective with a personal name and address than with a "Committee to Elect" address. But anything funded by, or even coordinated with, an official campaign organization must have that organization clearly identified in it.

The rules are extensive and explicit; you can get them from your county clerk or Secretary of State. Visit the local election officer and say you want to run for office or form a campaign committee or create an initiative. Unless they are real political hacks, they will be very helpful and will provide you with instructions. Nonetheless, you had better assume everything you say will be repeated to any interested incumbents, often within minutes. It depends on how cozy the clerk is with those incumbents.

Amateurs often seriously screw up by failing to meet the reporting requirements of the various campaign reporting laws and regulations. The instant you miss a reporting date or misreport information, your opponents — if they know what they are doing — will accuse you of

VIOLATING the Fair Political Practices Act and LYING in your political reports. And the newspapers will print the accusations.

• *Open a Bank Account.* Open a separate bank account in the name of "The Committee for _____" or in the name of "X for Dog Catcher." Don't let campaign money flow through your own account. Ask people to make checks out to the special account. Some will be drawn to you, personally; just endorse them over to the special account.

Political Action: What Works, What Doesn't

Most professional campaign managers agree that the following are effective campaign tools — listed in approximate order of effectiveness, starting with the most effective.

1. *Face to face contact*, by candidate or supporter, door to door and in public places. If you have volunteers with good people skills, don't waste their valuable

talent stuffing envelopes in a back room. Send them out to meet people. Equip them with some brief comments, a well-designed brochure and a walking-order list of registered voters (I'll say more about these later).

2. *"Dear Friend" notes and cards,* distributed by candidates' or issues' supporters to people who know the writer. The best advertising for anything is still word-of-mouth recommendations from someone you know, even though it may be the most casual of acquaintances. ("This guy, Charlie somebody, told me a Yugo was *much* better than a Honda, and . . . ")

Send out lots of "Dear Friend" cards or notes. They can be very brief — little more than "I support X and hope you will, too." Include your (apparently original) signature. If you use a laser printer, use "Courier" or another typeface that makes them look as though you typed them. Typeset notes are least effective. Most "dear friends" do not typeset their notes to one another.

3. *Candidate statements included with ballot materials.* There is a word limit to these optional statements; they are written by the candidates (i.e., they have broad latitude in, uh, "accuracy"), and their printing costs are shared among those candidates who choose to have such statements distributed as part of the official ballot materials.

These are the statements that most voters read and are given the greatest credence by voters — in spite of the fact that they are candidates' "un-refereed" propaganda. This is something an outside activist can't do, except possibly in the "for" and "against" statements for a ballot

initiative. It's something over which outsiders have no control, but I include it in this list because of its importance. If your candidate is thinking of not including a ballot-packet statement, find another candidate.

4. *Directly distributed materials* — letters, brochures, leaflets. These are usually distributed by direct mail, but can also be distributed by hand, door to door. If you want to influence an issue or a candidate's campaign, you can do a lot without opening an office and a bank account. Simply write and distribute your own note, letter, leaflet, newsletter or tabloid.

Cover your neighborhood ("My family and I live nearby and feel this is so important that we have hand-delivered this to you . . ."). Distribute your publication to your business clients, if you dare.

In warm months, hand them to drivers at stoplights and bank drive-up queues. If it is a sufficiently sincere and effectively written item, you might risk putting it on automobile windshields (the risk is that recipients' irritation with the leaflet will act *against* your cause). I used to paper Silicon Valley with "windshield editions" of the *Silicon Gulch Gazette* and received *no* complaints, to my absolute amazement.

5. *Television advertising* can be powerful, but only for creating emotional bias — for and against. And it isn't within reach of average-income folks. Nuf sed.

6. *Radio advertising* runs a distant sixth, and is often considered almost useless except for costly drive-time ads. Paid radio advertising is not feasible for citizen activists. Call-ins to talk shows, however, can be really valuable.

7. *Signs and posters* are unani-

mously considered to be almost completely useless except for encouraging the candidate's volunteer campaign workers — who want to see them and want to display them. Ditto for lapel buttons. Junk! If you do put up political posters, it is far wiser to pay a political poster company to do it than to waste limited volunteer resource time.

Negative Campaigning Can Be Done With Integrity

It's a bitter pill to swallow, but the reason we see so much negative campaigning is because the pros know it works. The same holds true for avoiding making commitments. That sucks. All of us hate it — a lot of the politicians that do it, hate it — but it works.

One of my supporters, a successful pro of twenty years' experience, once told me, "Look, you have to realize that when you take positions on ten issues and somebody likes nine of them but opposes the tenth, they will vote against you because they've

found something to dislike." That's why professional politicians simply don't make any commitments about anything except God, mother, and apple pie. Then the only thing remaining for them to say is to criticize their opponents.

Negative campaigning can be legitimate. Back to County Supervisor Atherton Anna Eshoo. She spends most of her time running for office; any office. When she ran for U.S. Representative, after years of screwing the county residents she was supposed to represent, I publicized her record — and believe me, it was negative, but legitimate, campaigning.

Just before the election, I made up a flyer. It was a 14-inch sheet of heavy-stock paper, had nothing but type on it — no pictures, no graphics, no color, no stars and stripes. It was folded and folded again into approximate letter size. The return address said "Jim Warren and Neighbors." The area to the left of the address label said: "We're from all political parties, and we're totally *fed up!* We're paying for this from our own, personal pockets. No party politics, no PACs, no outside special interests, no 'business contributions' — and no more patience!" That probably overcame the biggest single problem of direct-mail promotions — getting people to glance beyond the return address.

After the address fold, there was a series of boldface headlines, each followed by a brief explanatory paragraph. One headline said, "Eshoo Opposed Housing for Single Parents & Small Families." Another said, "Eshoo Overran County's Budget Limits," followed by "Budget Balancing? Eshoo Didn't Do It!"

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Another said "Eshoo Dodged Ocean Dumping Problems," and still another said, "Eshoo Opposed Coastal Preservation Initiative." Each following paragraph detailed the headline's justification and how anyone could verify it.

At the end — very important — I listed the names and addresses of those supporting the flyer. No politicos; just fed-up neighbors.

It was a negative campaign, but it was completely justified. Eshoo had been campaigning as pro-environment, pro-housing, a single mother, and fiscally responsible. We simply publicized her actual public record that exposed the hypocrisy, and gave the means for verifying her statements and votes.

Her opponent won — by a tiny margin.

Computer Power For the People

Maintaining and sorting databases for direct mail and walking-order lists can best be done by machine. Computers have long been a powerful weapon for the wealthy and knowledgeable political parties. Now, personal computers are a "great equalizer."

Seek volunteers with personal computers and skills in database management and/or desktop publishing. Professional political campaign support companies often charge naïve campaigners big bucks for list processing. You can save those costs and leverage your power using personal computers.

Get the list of registered voters on magnetic tape or floppy diskettes, from your local registrar of voters. It should cost very little; incumbents controlling

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The biggest problem with handouts and direct mail is getting the recipient to open the envelope. So eliminate the envelope. Print on a 14-inch piece of paper; fold it twice. Don't staple it.

such fees want them as low as you do.

Get the walking-order address sequences for streets in your district, again in machine-readable form, again at very low cost — from your main Post Office.

As needed, convert that data into a form that your personal computers can handle. If you can't do it, look for "media conversion services." Check around; prices vary widely.

Put that data and other public records (see below) into a per-

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sonal computer database. Then, it's a "simple matter of programming" to produce a walking-order list of voters along each street, or a zip-sorted list needed for bulk-rate mailing labels. This is where computer-literate volunteers are worth their weight in gold.

Combining these lists with personalized letters or cards for direct mail can be a powerful campaign tool. But it can also be a waste if you don't do it properly. Here are some suggestions.

Designing Effective Flyers and Direct Distribution Pieces

• Something with an individual's return address, or from a group of named individuals, is a lot more effective than something from "the campaign to elect . . ." (but follow campaigning regulations).

• The biggest problem with handouts and direct mail is getting the recipient to open the envelope. So eliminate the envelope. Print on a 14-inch piece of paper; fold it twice. Don't staple it. Use paper stock heavy enough to meet postal requirements for a self-mailer.

• Increase circulation of flyers by printing the reminder "please post and circulate" near the top of the document.

• Turn the labeling, bundling, and sorting over to a professional mailing house. Do not waste volunteers' time on bulk mailings.

• Create brochures that espouse your cause in the form of a small set of key points that can be read at a glance (for example: "Eshoo Opposed Affordable Housing: 'There's not a problem; don't fix it!' "). Another exam-

ple that *WER* might use: "The articles in most magazines satisfy advertisers. The articles in *WER* satisfy readers." By the time somebody reads the headlines to determine whether or not they are interested in your document, they've read the statements you want them to read.

After each main point, *briefly* justify it or detail it, for those who give it more serious — or suspicious — consideration.

• Don't commit the most common sin of amateur desktop publishers. Keep it typographically simple. Don't use too many typefaces, too much boldface or italics or underline, too many fancy borders or illustrations.

• Make sure that everything you say is accurate. Nobody trusts political advertising. Make sure nobody can catch you in a lie. Give the reader information about how to verify your statements.

Public-Records Power

When I fought for equitable, community-oriented representation for mountain and rural residents and homeowners in the unincorporated areas of San Mateo County, I used the county's property-assessment lists, in electronic form — public records, rightfully so. When I wanted to address property-based voter action, the logical intersection of voter and assessor lists produced a powerful target list.

In California, all these records are open to the public under the state's potent Public Records Act and copies are available for no more than the direct cost of duplication. Make a copy of the act at your local law library. Keep it handy for obstinate bureaucrats.

Coupled with a faxmodem, the personal computer can be used as a powerful new tool for organizing quick community action.

Because the Public Records Act in California is vague on the issue, some repressive agencies respond to requests for copies, which they are required to furnish, by offering only paper copies, even when the records are maintained in electronic form and copies of large public-records bases are clearly of limited value in paper form. For instance, Palo Alto refused to release its city budget in machine-readable form, even though it was maintained on a computer.

Access to digital copies of digitally maintained public records, for no more than direct duplication costs, *must* be explicitly and clearly mandated in state and

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Campaigns and Elections

For really practical, nuts-and-bolts information about effective campaigning, take a look at Campaigns and Elections. It's been around for 14 years and is the trade journal for working campaign organizers. (It has also carried information detailing how to use computers in campaigns, for years — written for folks who know little about computers and want to know less; they just want to use 'em.) —JW

Campaigns and Elections: $29.95/year (7 issues) from C&E, 1835 K Street NW #403, Washington, DC 20006; 202/331-3222.

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federal freedom-of-information and public-records legislation.

Privacy advocates, please note: God help us if and when those in power prohibit public access to such essential citizen-action information under the guise of "protecting privacy." The powers-that-be already have access to such data, and some don't want voters bothered by any disturbing information from non-incumbents.

Community Power via Faxmodem

More and more people can now receive messages by fax. Many who have personal computers also have faxes. Coupled with a faxmodem, the personal computer can be used as a powerful new tool for organizing quick community action — often needed, as self-serving bureaucrats and arrogant elected officials seek to ram through policies before the people can defend themselves. Weekly community newspapers can be too slow and/or unwilling to provocatively publicize politicians' plans.

In the past year, my rural and mountain neighbors and I have begun organizing an increasingly broad and effective fax-plus-leaflets network. With a faxmodem plugged into the telephone port on my Mac, it's easy to draft a notice and fax it to computer-maintained lists of others interested in these issues, without ever having to touch hardcopy, or to feed it, over and over, through a manual fax.

And many of those who receive these fax alerts have low-cost copiers at home. Many have agreed to make copies of the notices when they arrive, and pass them along to neighbors or post them on local community bulletin boards.

The best "power to the people" is the power of information. ∎

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