



Project Description

Garrett County doesn't look or feel like the rest of Maryland. While the bulk of the Free State voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama, for example, Garrett County was the state's only jurisdiction to vote more than 2-to-1 in favor of John McCain. The county is contrarian, too, in its blue laws, which were strongly reaffirmed in most of the county in 2008.

But in three Garrett County sub-districts, you can now have an alcoholic beverage when dining out on Sunday as a result of a neighbor-to-neighbor campaign planned and executed by Sandy Hillman Communications (SHC) on behalf of the Garrett County Evening Dining Coalition (GCEDC), a group of local restaurants and hospitality businesses.

Challenges

SHC had to overcome the legacy of a divisive (and decisively negative) vote on the same issue a decade before. That effort to overturn Garrett County's blue laws had gone down in lopsided defeat. Further complicating the initiative would be vehement opposition to the initiative from local churches in a community where Mennonites are as common as Baptists and local perception that views outside intervention in local political matters with derision.

Research

SHC conducted a thorough review of the previous effort to overturn Garrett County's blue laws – an initiative led by out-of-county alcohol distributors who had funded a full-scale repeal campaign. The agency also conducted impromptu focus groups with members of the hospitality business community, local politicians and residents and spearheaded a phone survey of voters in three target districts.

Strategic Approach

After reviewing all of its research, three imperatives became clear for the campaign: (1) It had to be "local" in both style and substance; (2) it had to exclude the alcohol distributors who were based outside the county; and (3) it had to be subtle and, to the extent possible, remain under the radar to avoid activating a vociferous response from the local churches.

SHC designed a classic grassroots campaign, based on utilizing the employees of hospitality businesses in an ever-expanding neighbor-to-neighbor effort to share how important Sunday Sales were to their jobs, starting with talking to customers in their businesses then reaching out through their ties to community organizations. The initial strategy also called for an intensive effort in the final days of the campaign to personally reach out to voters in a neighbor-to-

neighbor strategy of phone calls and door knocking, followed by personal letters and reminder notices. Of the 5 districts that were originally part of the coalition, 2 districts opted out of the full-scale campaign because they could not afford the financial commitment. Those districts, however, chose to complete as much of the campaign as possible with a strictly volunteer effort.

Campaign Execution

As the campaign geared up over the late summer, SHC trained local business leaders on grassroots organizing and campaign management, and then reviewed all collateral as it was produced locally. The plan was adapted when even professional phone polling operations found it difficult to reach more than 1/3 of the voters. The results of polling the target voters yielded results that were not encouraging but were enlightening 8 weeks before the election. In the district that the businesses thought most receptive to repeal of the blue laws (Sang Run), repeal was leading by only a slight margin. In the second district with a heavy concentration of hospitality businesses (Swanton), it was essentially a tie. And in the third target district (East Oakland), part of the county seat, it was losing by more than 10%.

The polling however, verified that the strategy of asking voters to approve the repeal by focusing on the benefits in jobs to their neighbors was right (but they still saw the repeal as mostly on behalf of “out-of-towners”). SHC’s careful analysis of the results, however, revealed a more fundamental pattern – most of the voters really didn’t understand what “limited” Sunday Sales were. Despite the fact that almost all of the local leaders and early focus groups had assured SHC that local residents had a grasp of the issues involved, the polling clearly indicated that the more the voters knew just how limited the sales on Sunday would be, the more they decided to support the repeal of the blue laws.

SHC immediately designed an education campaign to supplement the talking points and messaging focused on jobs and local economic benefits. To minimize the response time for the opposition to organize or conduct a campaign to distort the information, the education campaign was scheduled to begin 10 days before the election, to continue the tactics and collateral appearance of the existing neighbor-to-neighbor efforts, and to print the complete text and language of the bill on the back of all materials. That final tactic turned out to be critical, because the actual language the State placed on the local ballot merely said “to allow limited Sunday Sales”, but the specifics referred to classes of license types rather than explaining what the limitations involved. SHC conducted additional focus groups to determine three key points that validated for local voters that the Sunday Sales were “limited”: (1) No bars would be allowed to be open on Sunday; (2) alcohol could only be served with a meal; and (3) sales were limited to 1 pm to 10 pm.

Results

Despite a two-month campaign by churches to retain the blue laws, including letters to the editor, sermons and billboards, when the votes came back, all 3 districts had repealed the blue laws. So had the other 2 (one by a mere 31 votes) who mimicked the effort with volunteers but did not have the funds to send the postcards or letters, or conduct the phone polling. The remaining 12 districts voting on the measure all reaffirmed the complete ban on Sunday sales,

some by overwhelming margins. Today, all of the hospitality businesses who were part of the original coalition are able to offer limited Sunday sales with a meal – a vote achieved without the divisiveness so prevalent in the campaign a decade ago, and a vote that was seen as promoting local interests untainted by “outsiders.”