

KEYS TO WINNING AN ELECTION

By Jack Heath

In support of PEO's goal of having 11 engineers in the 2011 legislature, we've invited elected officials, past and present, to share their views on how the aspiring politicians among licence holders can become more involved in the political process.

CONGRATULATIONS TO PEO for encouraging members to become involved in the electoral process, federally, provincially or municipally. Innovative! Engineers bring an awareness of public infrastructure, a practical approach to accomplishing tasks large and small, and an understanding of community building. So why not more engineers in elected office?

In this column I will address some general purposes of a campaign.

Your first priority as a candidate is to demonstrate that you're a potential winner. Voters can tell if you've got a chance. It amazes me when they narrow a field of seven into two or three contenders and limit consideration of others. How do the others become also-rans? Poorly designed literature? Irrelevant issues? Funding shortages? My view? Subconsciously, voters think, "I haven't got much time for politics; this indicator or that will help me decide which ones are contenders."

In most Canadian cities, there are no official parties in municipal elections. At the provincial or federal level, however, you will first have to show your party that you can carry them to a general election win. Again, your primary purpose is to demonstrate confidence and win-ability—initially to a small group of party officials, then at the nomination and, finally, to the electorate. Can you create a buzz around your potential? A leader's visit? A great article in the newspaper? A special connection to the electorate? Each tells people you are special.

The second purpose is to fit you into the expectations of Canadians for politicians in the 21st century. You probably already match the mould but you have to understand it and the public needs to know it. People should see you as an interesting person, not afraid of the truth, one who is positive, trustworthy and willing to work hard, and one who is intelligent with good ideas on issues that matter. You can't take shortcuts in politics these days.

Ours is a cynical era. Negative media coverage can be your death knell. Spend over the limit, get caught stealing signs, fail to apologize for an incorrect fact—many things will lead to negative discussion of your candidacy. Public standards are moving in strange ways; it is more detrimental today to lie about a divorce than to be divorced. Canadians expect you to know how to handle the limelight.

Possibly the most important purpose of your campaign is to identify supporters. Ask yourself, "What are my motivations and priorities? What are my issues? Which groups of individuals or organizations are most likely to respond positively?" If you cannot answer these questions, where do you expect to find workers and supporters? The outcome of this analysis is campaign targeting. Even if you don't have the best-funded organization, newspaper articles, independent polling and previous election results can also be very helpful as you design a plan to find voters who will say "yes" to you.

Understanding the purposes of an election campaign, and properly implementing a strategy based on them, will provide the greatest chance of success on election day. Σ

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