



WLN Academy

Becoming a Local Opinion Leader In Your Community

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Introduction. Many political battles are waged through TV ads, radio ads, direct mail pieces, and the like. Sometimes, though not very often, fighting battles in this way is enough. But no political campaign is complete without a ground game or some strategy to engage people directly in their communities. Phone banks, knocking on doors, and putting up signs are examples of ground game tactics. But a big part of a ground game is to secure the support of local opinion leaders in a community who are able to leverage their stature to persuade voters looking for guidance about what to do. This training is intended to help you become a strong local opinion leader.

① What is a Local Opinion Leader?

OPINION LEADERS are people whose opinions are considered by others when trying to make up their minds about something. Within the realm of public policy, newspaper columnists, religious leaders, authors, and media personalities are examples of opinion leaders. Walter Cronkite, once considered the most trusted man in America, is an example of a national opinion leader. Concerning the Vietnam War, president Johnson purportedly said, "If I lost famous Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." Opinion are sometimes as influential as political leaders themselves and can sometimes change the direction of a community, state, or even the nation.

LOCAL OPINION LEADERS do the same thing, but on a smaller scale. Local opinion leaders may include activists, respected neighbors, local office holders, members of the local clergy, business leaders, and so on. Almost ANYONE can be an opinion leader whether the influence one have extends to just a few people or thousands. Opinion Leaders have three things in common: A) They share VALUES with the people who listen to them, B) They are seen as CREDIBLE and COMPETENT within there area of knowledge and, D) They can ARTICULATE and PROJECT information, ideas, and opinions within their personal and online networks, public forums, and media outlets.

② Use Your Position in the Community to Establish Credibility.

Almost everyone has SOME position in the community that can be leveraged to extend your range as an opinion leader, or at least as a starting point to become an opinion leader. Though not an exhaustive list, here are some examples:

- A. Public Officials.** By virtue of the fact that they have been elected or appointed to a public office, almost every public official starts out with two kinds of credibility even if nobody knows them: 1) Credibility as a chosen community leader and, 2) Credibility as a knowledgeable person within the scope of their office. Public officials can blow their credibility to be sure, but voters generally give them the benefit of the doubt.
- B. Political Activists.** Political Activists can build (but seldom start out with) credibility as a community opinion leader. Their credibility grows with their track record. Political activists are the ones who demonstrate passion about their issues. They have taken the time to do the homework necessary to become knowledgeable. They put in the time, sacrifice their evenings and weekends to work for what they believe, and this engenders respect.
- C. Community Volunteers.** Are you a volunteer sports coach? Are you a member of a service club like Lions, Eagles, VFW, American Legion, Kiwanis, Rotary, Optimists, Toastmasters, or a Chamber of Commerce? Do you do service work with a church or other charitable organization? If you are serving your community in ways that put you into contact with others, you already have a base of credibility and can immediately start acting as an opinion leader.

③ Things You Can Do To EXTEND YOUR SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

As an aspiring local opinion leader, you probably already know people who respect your opinion and sometimes seek it before casting a ballot or taking some position on public policy. You can extend your sphere of influence with just a little effort and a little thought. Here are some tips!

- A. Get Out of the Echo Chamber and Identify Who You May Influence.** All of us have circles of friends we share values with and who tend to agree with us. But we can all extend our spheres of influence. Think about the people you know and the circles you function with. Identify which circles of people you might have direct or indirect access to. These are people you might be able to influence and can be your next step in expanding your sphere. They might be members of your club, readers of the local newspapers, members of your church, or folks living in your neighborhood.
- B. Find Ways to Project Your Message.** It is important not to be too intrusive, but look for opportunities to project your opinions into their activities. If you are a member of a club, find out how to arrange for speakers to address the membership. If you are a good writer, think about write regular Letters to the Editor, Op-Ed pieces, and participate in media blogs. Consider whether you are in a position to hold a coffee or party for neighbors where you might have a candidate or campaign representative speak. Look at your life and think about avenues at your disposal to project your message.
- C. Remember – It Doesn't Have to be You!** If you are a shy or reserved type, or if you have a job requiring you to keep a low profile, you can STILL be a local opinion leader. In cases like this, you can still consider the two points above. But instead of personally doing outreach or extending your name, find friends and supporters willing to do thing who you can coordinate behind the scenes!

④ SPEND THE CAPITAL You Build by Taking Stands on Issues and Races!

If you invest time in becoming a local opinion leader and developing a sphere of influence, you will eventually want to influence something! Here are some ways local opinion leaders can work within their sphere's of influence (again, the list is not exhaustive):

- A. ENDORSE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS.** As a local public official, an experienced activist, or a community volunteer, issue a press release, go on a talk radio show, and write a Letter to the Editor endorsing the candidate or ballot measure campaign of your choice. Doing so will signal to your sphere of influence who you support and affords you the opportunity to show your reasoning. Contact the campaigns you support and offer to write them a statement of endorsement they can use publicly. Ask the campaigns you support to *(NOTE: If you endorse based on your position as a public official, be sure to note that you are representing yourself, not your governing board as a whole!)*
- B. ARRANGE LUNCHTIME SPEAKERS FOR LOCAL SERVICE CLUBS.** Civic, social, and service clubs are FULL of local opinion leaders typically across the political spectrum. And while many of them have strong opinions of their own, they can be persuadable when it comes to particular issues and candidates. Such organizations will often take the general direction represented by the speakers they host. For this reason, find out who arranges speakers for these clubs (or become this person yourself!) and work with them to book as speakers the candidates or ballot measure representatives you support along with others who support your overall orientation.
- C. PROJECT YOUR MESSAGE PUBLICLY.** Always telling people who you are in terms of what you do or what positions you hold, write letters to the editor, participate in blogs, issue press releases, call into talk radio shows, hold a neighborhood coffee, and engage in the other forms of activity you have decided will allow you to expand and influence those in your ever-expanding circle! If you have found people to act as your proxies, make sure they follow through!

Before taking on such activities, it is always a good idea to coordinate with the campaigns you support. They will know what messages are most effective and may be able to tell you where and how you can do the most good.

Conclusion. This document is intended to introduce the concept of LOCAL OPINION LEADERS to the reader, offer some tips toward becoming a local opinion leader, and some ideas about how the reader can influence public policy and political outcomes by leveraging their positions as local opinion leaders. Such persons offer political candidate, ballot measure, and other campaigns a way to penetrate the culture of a community in order to communicate their messages, share their ideas, and persuade them to act. Make the most of the position you have in your community!