



Wyoming City’s secret to success at the ballot box

John Fox, marketing consultant

In 2012, the small suburban Cincinnati city of Wyoming passed another school bond issue. If it seems like Wyoming has never voted down a tax levy for operations or a construction bond issue, that is almost correct. It’s been nearly 50 years since the nays outnumbered the yeas.

Since 1998, most districts have seen multiple levies fail. However, in that same time, the **Wyoming City** School District has passed four issues: two for operations and two for construction.

How does this city with a population of under 9,000 and one high school of fewer than 600 students consistently pass school tax levies and bond issues?

The secret is research, but not the typical political polling that accompanies most campaigns. Nor is it a survey fielded by a specialized firm that focuses on educational issues. It is *marketing* research I designed, implemented and analyzed based on my prior experience as a Procter & Gamble Co. brand manager and ad agency principal.

I have lived in Wyoming for 29 years. My two children attended Wyoming schools from kindergarten through high school. I have volunteered for countless community activities in sports, music, theater and fundraising. But I feel my greatest contribution has been in the area of tax levy and bond issue research.

It started in 1998, when the school board and administration were not sure if citizens would be willing to take on a sizable property tax increase to fund improvements to the five Wyoming schools. The proposal included construction of a new high school and renovations to the other buildings.

To gauge public sentiment, I designed quantitative research with several objectives that included:

- determining the pulse of the community in favor of or against a basic construction plan;
- assessing the appeal of various add-ons to determine how high a

- cost and tax voters would tolerate;
- uncovering reasons for and against the plan and testing hypothetical reasons from district leadership so these opinions could be addressed in marketing, public relations and other communications efforts before the vote;
- identifying the awareness of key selling points, again with marketing in mind;
- involving community members in the decision and using research to let them know that what is on the ballot is what *they* want, not what the school board and administration want to force on them.

The study was conducted by telephone a few months before the election. The district had the results before deciding to put the issue on the ballot.

If research indicated the issue would fail, it would not be placed on the ballot. This, in and of itself, would be a benefit since there are large fees associated with seeking a tax issue. It also would avoid the stigma of losing a levy vote.

The extremely education-oriented Wyoming community does not like to lose a vote for its schools, which are the main reason families live in the district. To promote levy success, the community and district work together on an independent campaign committee that raises funds for voting-related efforts, including research.

The 1998 study showed 62% in favor of



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

An in-depth look at what works in public education

This article is part of an OSBA initiative designed to share the latest education-related research with school board members and administrators. The association is working with Ohio colleges, universities and education organizations to disseminate studies about what works in K-12 public education. In addition to the “Research Spotlight” section appearing in the Journal, OSBA has dedicated a page on its website to serve as a research repository for members at <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/66017>. For more information about this initiative, contact Gary Motz, OSBA senior editorial manager, at (614) 540-4000 or gmotz@ohioschoolboards.org.

the plan and that some, but not all, of the add-ons were appealing. The issue was put on the ballot at the appropriate tax level, the public relations campaign addressed the issues uncovered in the research and the issue passed with 60% in favor. A new high school was built, the other four schools were improved and Wyoming now had a template for future tax levies and bond issues.

In 2002 and 2005, the district needed operating funds. Each time, I was asked for research similar to 1998, customized for each levy's issues. As before, the studies were conducted a few months before committing to the ballot. Both times research predicted within 1%-2% of the actual vote. Again, approximately 60% voted for the levy, and the schools secured the needed tax funds.

In early 2009, Wyoming turned its attention toward its middle school, which was built in 1928. The district wanted to totally renovate the building or raze it and construct a new one. Research was clearly necessary given the depth of the recession at that time.

I routinely conduct new product research for companies that might be about to spend millions on manufacturing and marketing. I tell them, "If the research tells you to go ahead, it's important.

But if it tells you not to go ahead, it's even more important." This was clearly expressed to the Wyoming district.

The 2009 Wyoming Middle School research was the first study to show less than 50% in favor of a proposed plan, with the poor economy being the main reason for the opposition. With only 43% of voters favoring the project, it simply was the wrong time to ask for a tax increase. The community, despite its confirmed backing of education and the recognized need for a new middle school, expressed this strongly. I recommended that the issue not be placed on the ballot, and it was tabled.

By 2011, the board and administration felt the time might be right to reconsider the new middle school but still weren't sure whether to renovate or build new. This time we used a two-step process.

The first study in mid-2011 tested three alternate plans. It showed that the community preferred renovation with an addition on the back of the school versus tearing down the facility and constructing a new one. It also revealed a major change in some of the negative opinions from the 2009 research.

The second study in late 2011 tested one specific plan. This time a whopping

74% said they were in favor. There was additional encouragement from answers to questions about the timing, the economy and other previously negative issues. The recommendation was to proceed with a vote in March 2012.

A few days before the election, I talked to the district's public information officer who had been involved in every one of these votes and research studies. We agreed the bond issue would pass. But I felt there was no way it would get 74% of the vote — and I was technically right. It passed with 73% of the vote and, once again, came within the magic 1-2% of the research's prediction.

The newly renovated Wyoming Middle School, a model for modern design and technology, opened in 2015.

I've also been involved with similar projects for 12 other Ohio school districts, each with its own educational issues. Online research has made the entire process much more efficient in terms of significantly lower costs, larger sample sizes and faster results. I hope to be helping school districts with this research for a long time. ■

About the author: John Fox is principal of John Fox Marketing Consulting in Cincinnati.

I can make your next tax levy or bond issue painless!

With true **marketing** research (not just polling)

PREDICTS Outcomes

- Indicates whether to be on the ballot **or not**
- Successful within 1 to 2 percentage points

Uncovers The WHY

- Secures voters' reasons for intending to vote for or against, in their own words
- Tests your hypotheses on why a vote might pass or fail

Tells You HOW to pass it

- What to communicate to ensure passage
- The best way to communicate this message

EXPERIENCE in 13 Diverse Ohio Districts (and 2 municipalities for parks/recreation)

- Community-wide research (on awareness, opinions voting intent)
- Preliminary constituents' research (a great, inexpensive first step)

People stopping by my booth at OSBA in November offered these types of comments about having future ballot issues: "Oh gosh, I hope not!" "Thankfully, no." "Whew!" (how they feel when they finally pass a vote). "Thank heavens" (there's no need). "Painless would be good!"

JOHN FOX Marketing Consulting

E-mail: John@JohnFoxMktg.com

Web: www.JohnFoxMktg.com

Phone: (513) 658-3699