

MAKING THE MESSAGE MATTER

She was passionate, committed, hard working, deeply experienced. But she struggled with developing a compelling message

Susan* had eked out a narrow primary victory four years earlier, and then went on to easily beat her opponent in the general election. Since then, she had been a tireless advocate for her district, spending long hours on community outreach and creating critically needed and successful legislation. She volunteered for the committees whose work would have the biggest impact on her constituents, and she became a leading voice across the city. When her term was up, she had no doubt that she wanted to run again. Yet there was a new primary challenger, and he was a tough competitor.

No matter how great her love for public service, Susan struggled with developing and refining compelling messages when she was meeting donors and speaking at events. She was clearly very authentic, with a naturally compassionate, engaging, and conversational style. She was excited and open to meeting people, eager to connect and have conversations, plus she had great warmth, an engaging smile and a firm handshake.

But her stump speeches were 30 percent too long and overly “wonkish”— a deep dive into policy minutia and statistics that left audiences glassy-eyed and bored. The problem wasn’t a monotone delivery – just the opposite. Her personal qualities came through loud and clear: dedication, generosity, intelligence, drive. But her love for the mechanics of the job undercut her personal appeal and resulted in speeches that, while high energy and deeply emotional, were dull and disengaging. The message got smothered in all that verbal clutter.

Nancy worked with Susan to harness her enthusiasm in a more powerful way, to create direct and compelling presentations for voters and potential funders. Using the communications

coaching framework of look, sound and content, Nancy diagnosed each element of Susan's pitch – including the sequencing of ideas, facial animation, hand gestures, key words and other components of powerful presentations. The initial assessment identified a few areas to focus on that would greatly improve Susan's impact.

The first step was to shift Susan's natural storytelling style into one in which she front-loaded the conclusion and supported it with only the most essential information. Having a headline to lead with took advantage of her highly animated style while giving the audience the satisfaction of hearing something interesting and impactful right away, rather than having to wade through lots of numbers and detail.

The next step was to create better alignment between specific audiences and Susan's speeches. Was this a group who was brought together by a common issue or topic? Was it a gathering of high-net-worth individuals? Was it a public town hall or a small cocktail event in someone's home? The individuals in the room and even the room itself needed to factor into the decision about what she should focus on. Looking ahead at Susan's event calendar for two months, she and Nancy determined the key message for each event that would maximize that opportunity and showcase her many areas of expertise.

The final component of Susan's training was learning to master the art of answering difficult questions—something every successful politician has to do. Susan was reluctant to criticize her challenger, believing that it made her look petty and combative. He had no such hesitation, and she often found herself on the defensive, unable to explain her positions in relation to his actions and accusations. Instead of replying to questions about what she hadn't done, Susan learned to pivot to reflect back on what she had accomplished and on the challenges ahead. Rather than being thrown by hardball questions, she learned to relish them because they enabled her to pull from the many facts she had at her fingertips. The question ended up seeming petty, not her answer.

Once Susan mastered the basics, her performance in front of crowds steadily improved. The result: She ran an enormously successful campaign and was reelected with the highest vote total of any official in the state.

**Name changed*