

Case 8-5 A Classic: Free the Texas Shopper!

Some behavioral scientists say that the “silent majority” can be riled up only once a decade, after prolonged and careful focus on the subject of controversy. However, this tenet may be altered when it comes to issues that hit the general public close to home. For example, shopping.

Background

Before 1985, the state of Texas had legislation on its books called “blue laws.” These blue laws were based in the Christian ideal that everyone goes to church on Sunday—or ought to—and were responsible for keeping most retail stores closed that day. Most states once had such laws, but nearly all had been repealed. Not in the Bible Belt state of Texas, however.

A coalition was formed of like-minded retailers, including Target Stores, Kmart, and Zales, who believed it was time to do away with the blue laws. Organizations against repeal of the law were nonchain retailers, large department stores, car dealers, and especially churches.

The coalition was caught in a bind, because they knew Sunday shopping would mean greater sales but were concerned they would lose customers angered by the campaign. There was a long-standing assumption that fundamentalists, other church groups, and people living in rural areas would be against repeal, but no one knew for sure.

Time for Research

The coalition decided to arm itself with data in order to know where the people of Texas really stood. A massive survey uncovered data that told them that:

- Two out of three Texans wanted the law repealed.

- Support for repeal was broad, including substantial support in rural areas and among fundamentalist groups.

Research was specific enough to determine *how each legislative district felt*. These data were subsequently made available to the legislators, who had to vote on repeal. Coalition representatives felt this was a very important part of their effort. When a legislator opposed the bill, evidence of support by his or her constituents was available.

Campaign Philosophy

The coalition decided to run a straightforward, honest, open, objective campaign so nobody could criticize them on those grounds. Retailers stressed their solid reputations in the communities, their support of local nonprofit agencies, their substantial business operations (representing a large share of total retail business in the state), and the large number of people employed.

Members of the coalition were accused by the opposition of being out-of-state companies, trying to change the Texas lifestyle and overturn local values.

But Target Stores’ programs of social responsibility and community participation paid off. “After 16 years,” they said, “we feel as much a part of the state as others do.”

Moving Thousands to Action

After gathering the research and deciding on a campaign philosophy, the coalition’s next task was to convert expressed support to active support. This is how it was done:

1. Newspaper ads were run that strongly advocated action (see Figure 8-6). The bold copy and strong illustration generated

It's time for "Old Blue" to go . . .

Free The Texas Shopper!



The Texas Legislature is considering a bill that would repeal the notorious and unfair "Blue Law." The law restricts your rights to shop for what you need, when you need it.

A small group of powerful store owners have mounted a deceptive campaign to keep "Old Blue" in and YOU out!

It's time to change the Blue Law and FREE THE TEXAS SHOPPER!

Here's what you can do:

SEND A MESSAGE TO YOUR STATE REPRESENTATIVE AND STATE SENATOR TODAY BY FILLING OUT THE COUPON OR CALLING CALL 1-800-BLUE LAW!

YES! I WANT TO REPEAL THE UNFAIR TEXAS BLUE LAW AND TELL MY LOCAL LEGISLATORS I FEEL THIS WAY!

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZIP _____

TELEPHONE NUMBER (____) _____

Send to: Texans for Blue Law Repeal, 402 West 7th, Austin, Texas 78701

Our operators are standing by to receive your call and to register your opinion. So call now!

YES	NO
	
	
	
	

1-800-BLUE LAW!

FIGURE 8-6 Ads run by coalition that echoed in media and word-of-mouth

Source: (Courtesy of Target Corp.)

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substantial media coverage and word-of-mouth publicity.

2. The same ad was used as a bag stuffer in coalition members' stores.
3. An 800 number was set up for people to call to obtain information. Operators gathered personal information from callers, especially their shopping habits and location. They also read a prepared statement and requested permission to send it to each caller's legislator over that person's name. The 800 number was prominently carried in the newspaper ads and bag stuffers.

This strategy gathered 80,000 names in the coalition's databank. When the vote was being taken, if a legislator wavered, the coalition called these registered supporters and suggested they contact the legislator.

Defusing the Opposition

The Texas Automobile Dealers Association—effective lobbyists with a long track record of political support for candidates—was a powerful force to be up against. They did not want to open their showrooms on Sunday. The coalition needed to devise a strategy that would remove them from the equation. The bill, as it was finally adopted, excluded them. They would remain closed on Sundays. They were then standing on the sidelines, no longer in the battle.

Final Decision

The Texas Senate required a two-thirds majority to have the matter put on the docket for vote. Once on the docket, it needed only a simple majority to pass.

Documented research and personal contacts from people in their districts spoke loudly to legislators. The coalition expected the bill to take at least two legislative sessions to pass—but it took only one.

Testimonial to Research and Planning

The campaign lasted six months and showed how effectively public relations can influence public policy. It also showed how important public relations is to the bottom financial line; retail sales subsequently increased because of Sunday shopping. The key was fact finding, discovering that the people of Texas support Sunday openings. This knowledge put the coalition in the position of representing the will of the people. Without the research, or with different findings, an entirely different approach would have been required—with, very possibly, a different result.

Blue Laws Update

In recent years, blue laws have faded as an issue of public concern. However, they are still debated in some states. Beer and liquor sales are limited in Massachusetts, but not in the competing neighbor states of New Hampshire and Vermont, which is a controversial issue for some merchants and customers. Counties and municipalities in Bible Belt states are often “dry” by local ordinance even though state statutes allow the sale of liquor. On the opposite side, in 1991, Kansas car dealers proposed a new blue law to prohibit automobile sales on Sundays. This proposal caused great conflict and debate, and the bill did not pass. ■

BLUE LAWS ADDRESS MORE THAN JUST SHOPPING

In addition to blue laws that keep stores closed on Sundays, there are other blue laws on the books. Some states still have anti-adultery laws, for instance. Though ignored as archaic by law enforcement agencies, these laws have been used by some people to keep spouses in control, especially in divorce proceedings, and some people have attempted to have their spouses arrested if caught in the act of adultery.

Questions of violations of rights to privacy have arisen. But this is a relatively new

“right,” formulated by Supreme Court Justice Brandeis in the early years of the twentieth century. To many, the repeal of blue laws is imperative. Others would welcome more laws regulating personal conduct according to what they believe is “proper” conduct. When any specific action is taken by specific groups in either direction, emotional debate usually ensues—and you can be sure public relations counsel will be in the thick of it, ideally representing both sides so each gets its point across and the public can make an informed decision.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Suppose research showed that about half of the key Texas population opposed Sunday sales, while half supported them. What counsel would you have given the retail group? How would you have dealt with opposing groups?
2. If you were counsel to the opposing group, what would you have suggested they do to defeat the repeal proposal?
3. Assume that your employer is moving into a new state and wants to build the type of consumer support that Target and its allies created. What types of activities would you pursue? Draw up a plan.
4. In light of Chapter 2, what are some of the considerations that go into strategic thinking leading to a plan and a program? What are some of the elements beyond media and messages? Is your response to this question reflected in your response to questions 1, 2, and 3?