

Nonprofits Can Do Voter Guides - Here's How

Nonprofits are trusted in our communities, making us the ideal messengers to provide people with voter guides.

Most candidate information doesn't motivate average citizens to become engaged. Campaigns and outside groups often create negative ads. Even positive messages only reach a slice of the electorate. Campaigns typically spend their resources on people they're pretty sure will vote anyway, rather than "wasting money" on others, including many people served by nonprofits.



Damon Circosta is executive director of the N.C. Center for Voter Education (www.ncvoterred.com).

Do nonprofit voter guides work? In an era of mind-boggling amounts of information, surprisingly, yes. People are more likely to vote when they're offered non-partisan information designed to help them cast an informed ballot. Consider:

- ▼ The N.C. Center for Voter Education (NCCVE) sent voter guides to half of the voters in three N.C. counties. It increased turnout by 5.4%.
- ▼ After the 2010 election, NCCVE surveyed voters who received its guide in the mail; 43% said the guide made them more likely to vote, and 41% said they voted in some races where they wouldn't have otherwise.

North Carolina's ballot includes positions that are vitally important to our state, communities, and nonprofits. A good guide helps voters navigate races that are not at the top of the ballot, deepening participation down the ballot. Some rules, tips, and lessons:

1 Don't advocate. Guides that appear to advocate for a candidate, advocate for ballot initiatives, or give a point of view will be treated as junk mail. Your nonprofit has many other vehicles for advocating on your issues.

2 Collaborate to get a candidate's attention. You'll need candidates' feedback for your guide. Of course, they're very busy during

election season and get lots of requests to complete surveys. This is especially true for those in higher offices. By collaborating with several nonprofits, you can cut through the clutter and offer candidates a way to reach a wider audience. Start by determining clear guidelines for your partners. Will they have input on questions? Be required to distribute the publication? Be included in publicity?

3 Follow up with candidates. You'll need to send the questionnaire, call, send it again, call, and call again. Suggest a deadline that's a few days before your real deadline.

4 Expect that some candidates will intentionally avoid you. Their strategy may be to target a narrow group of registered voters and rely on attack ads. They may not see a benefit in responding to a nonpartisan survey that focuses on issues outside their usual stump speech. If you have co-sponsors, consider having their board or staff contact candidates about why their participation is important.

5 Remember that grammar skills are not a prerequisite for running for office. You may be surprised by candidate's responses – incorrect punctuation, misspellings, and confusing prose. The recommended practice is to print their responses as written, with no edits. This also helps protect your nonprofit against claims of partisanship. Clarify the editing policy with candidates *before* they write their responses. Set word limits and cut off answers that exceed it.

6 Include more than profiles. People want to know who's

running and what they stand for. Get this information from the candidates themselves. But a good guide also includes information on Election Day and where and how to vote, as well as a voter assistance line and/or website with more information.

7 Be online and off.

Online guides, especially ones optimized for search engines, offer convenience and reach voters who actively seek information. But direct mail puts voter information in the hands of people who may not

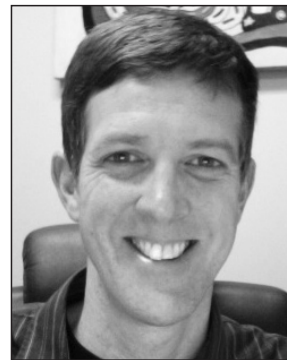
otherwise engage in an election. Using both online and print media is best.

8 Do a press release. When your guide is published, let local media help you spread the word. Also, send it to candidates. They may want to share it with their supporters.

By making honest information available to the public, nonprofits provide an invaluable service and engage more people in our democracy. ■

– Damon Circosta and Greg Borom

Adapted with permission from the authors' presentation at the N.C. Center for Nonprofits' annual conference.



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Watch for these N.C. Center webinars:

- ▼ Nonprofit Voter Engagement Basics
- ▼ Ballot Initiatives – what you can do and tips for getting involved
- ▼ Successful Candidate Forums and Voter Guides
- ▼ Voting in North Carolina – voting laws and basics for nonprofits ■