THE ROLE OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIP IN MOVING PEOPLE TO ACTION: THE MESSENGER AND THE MEDIUM MATTER

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BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE CONFIRMS ORGANIZER INSTINCT

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ABOUT 270 STRATEGIES

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

270 STRATEGIES SEEKS TO CREATE A WORLD IN WHICH PEOPLE ARE FULLY ENGAGED IN SHAPING THEIR CIVIC, POLITICAL AND CONSUMER LIVES.

At 270 Strategies, we believe that engaged communities are healthy communities. We work with campaigns, causes and organizations to engage people and move them to action.

We specialize in building people-focused, data-driven, digitally sophisticated engagement efforts that meet people where they are.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We are tremendously grateful to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for commissioning this research and to SPUR for partnering with us on the execution of our experiment. Thank you!

We would also like to acknowledge the following thought partners who allowed us to interview them and glean important insights into their work in civic engagement and research methodology during our literature review and discovery process.

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- Dan A. Lewis, Northwestern University
- Hahrie Han, University of California, Santa Barbara
- Arden Rowell, University of Illinois College of Law
- Grace Turke-Martinez, AFL-CIO

Finally, we would like to thank Hustle for allowing us to freely use its application to conduct this test.

IN THIS REPORT...

WHY THIS EXPERIMENT?

WHY THIS, AND WHY NOW?

"The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." – Alexis de Tocqueville

At 270 Strategies, we seek to create a world in which people are fully engaged in shaping their civic, political and consumer lives. We believe that engaged communities are healthy communities. As engagement specialists and campaign strategists, we draw from a large body of research on voter behavior. Political scientists and practitioners have uncovered a number of behavioral principles that nudge voters to the polls – from applying social pressure (Gerber et. al, 2008) to plan making (Nickerson and Rogers, 2010) to appealing to identity (Bryan et. al, 2011) and more.

However, less is known about what drives people to go beyond voting and engage as activists and volunteers. What motivates people to participate actively in their city or neighborhood? How can civic organizations more effectively engage people to attend meetings and engage in dialogue?

As organizers, we believe that a personal relationship is the most important ingredient in moving others to action in the civic space. With the support of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, we designed an experiment to explore our hunch.

EXPERIMENT DESIGN

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What role do messenger identity and personalization play in engaging people and moving them to take action in the civic context?

Does a request from a real person on behalf of a civic organization more effectively move people to engage and take an action than one made by the organization?

HYPOTHESIS

We hypothesized that individuals who are contacted by a real person would be more engaged and more likely to take action than those who are contacted by an organization and asked to take the same action. We theorized communication that feels warmer and connotes a person-to-person relationship (as opposed to a person-to-organization relationship) would be more effective.

To execute the experiment, our team partnered with SPUR, a member-supported nonprofit organization in the San Francisco Bay area that promotes good planning and good governance through research, education and advocacy. Our total sample universe totaled **2,405** SPUR members in San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose. Within that sample, we randomly assigned **50 percent** to treatment group A, and **50 percent to** treatment group B.

All subjects – regardless of treatment group – were contacted with an invitation to attend a SPUR lunchtime forum to take place in their city. The contact consisted of:

- An **email** inviting them to attend a lunchtime forum
  (sent in the afternoon seven days before the event)

- A **text message invitation** to the lunchtime forum
  (sent in the afternoon five days before the event; not sent to those who had RSVP'd "No" to the email)

- A **confirmation text message**
  (sent the day before the event)

TREATMENT A (SIGNED BY "NOAH")

The email and text messages that treatment group A received contained the same information and were sent at the same time as those received by treatment group B. However, all of the communications to treatment group A were signed by "Noah," the SPUR program director. This means that the email and text messages were written in the singular form of first person. The emails sent to treatment group A also contained a paragraph of personal narrative and some personal injections (Ex: "It would be truly great to have you there!") from Noah.

TREATMENT B (SIGNED BY "SPUR")

Those assigned to treatment group B received communications that contain the same information as treatment group A but were signed by "The SPUR Team." These communications did not identify real people on the SPUR team, and did contain any personal narrative.

TREATMENT A (SIGNED BY "NOAH")

Subject: Lunch plans next Wednesday?

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Hey everyone,

What are you doing for lunch next Wednesday?

Nothing? *Great!*

Because we are hosting an awesome event that I'm truly excited to share with you!

As some of you may know, before I came to SPUR five years ago I spent several years creating planning and urban design solutions for communities around the world, including several here in the Bay Area. During that time, I was able to see first-hand how local cities, agencies and organizations can positivity affect their neighborhoods through the creation of public spaces that are inspired by, and support, the communities that surround them. One of my favorite cities, Oakland, is doing just that.

I'd love to invite you to next Wednesday's lunchtime forum, "Creative Placemaking at the Foot of Lake Merritt," here at SPUR Oakland.

South of Lake Merritt the city grid gives way to big institutions like the Oakland Museum of California, Laney College and the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center. All are poorly connected to the lake, as well as one another, but a new initiative is exploring ways to tie these spaces together through art, design and events and reveal the area's wealth of hidden assets. Come learn more from those involved!

Here are the details:

What: Creative Placemaking at the Foot of Lake Merritt
When: Wednesday, May 18th @ 12:30pm
Where: SPUR Oakland
1544 Broadway
Oakland, CA 94612

[Click here to RSVP, and let me know if you're able to join us! It would be truly great to have you there.](#)

Thanks for all you're doing to help make our cities better!

Hope to see you Wednesday,

Noah

TREATMENT B (SIGNED BY "SPUR")

Subject: Lunch plans next Wednesday?

--

Hey everyone,

What are you doing for lunch next Wednesday?

Nothing? *Great!*

Because we are hosting an awesome event that we're truly excited to share with you!

South of Lake Merritt the city grid gives way to big institutions like the Oakland Museum of California, Laney College and the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center. All are poorly connected to the lake, as well as one another, but a new initiative is exploring ways to tie these spaces together through art, design and events and reveal the area's wealth of hidden assets. Come learn more from those involved!

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Click here to RSVP, and let us know if you're able to make it!

Thanks for all you're doing to help make our cities better,

The SPUR Team

Hey! It's Noah from SPUR. Are you able to join us for our lunchtime forum, "Community-Based Planning 101?" It's next Thurs, May 5 @ 12:30pm. [Address] Text me back if you can make it!

SPUR is hosting a lunchtime forum, "Community-Based Planning 101" next Thurs, May 5 @ 12:30pm. [Address] Respond to this text to let us know if you can make it!

THE RESULTS

EMAIL

Both treatment groups included a combined 2,405 people with email addresses and cellphone numbers.

The email invite was the first step in the event invitation process. In this step, we see slightly more RSVP signups from email group B. Overall, there were 90 "Yes" RSVPs collected via online sign-up forms.

Only **42** of them were able to be matched to our files. The matching challenge could be for a number of reasons: It could be that people signed up with a different email address, multiple people signed up under a single account in a household, or people may have forwarded their email invite to people not in our treatment groups.

GROUP A   **GROUP B**

1,212   1,193   Emails Sent

15   27   Email RSVPs
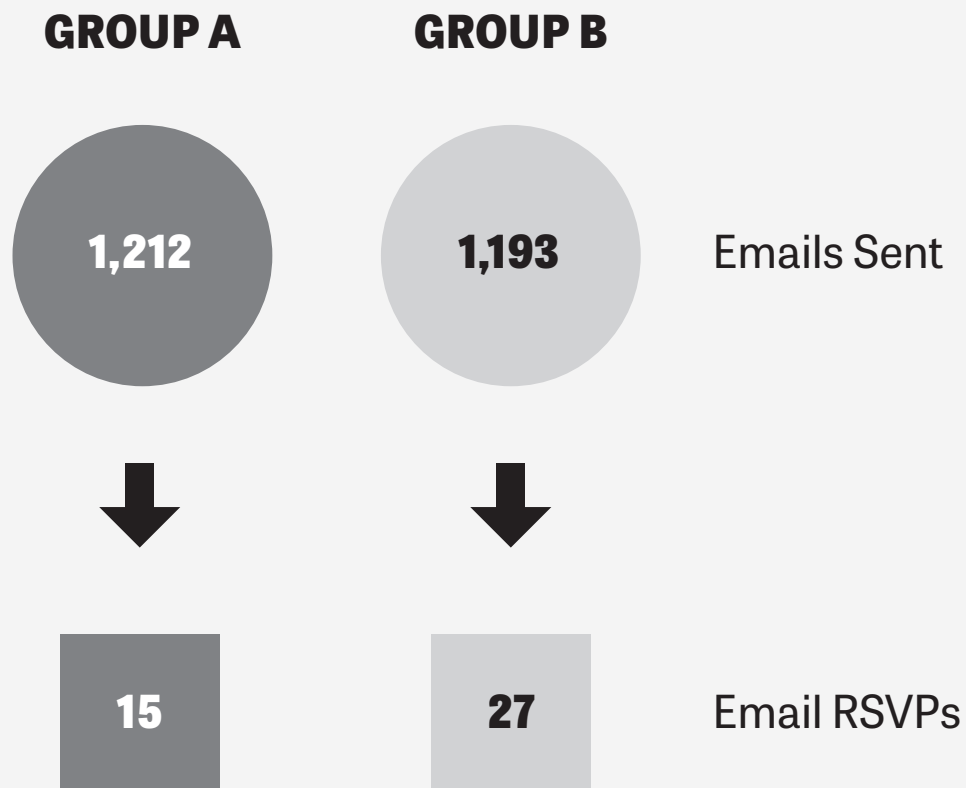
TEXT

After responses of "No" were scrubbed from the list, all available mobile numbers received an invitation message corresponding to treatment group.

After two rounds of text messages were sent, the group A messages had 32 more RSVPs than group B.

Additionally, we saw a dramatically higher number of positive responses to the group A message even when recipients were not able to attend the event (more than 3.5 times the number of recipients who responded to treatment B).

Group A received 573 replies versus 158 replies in group B suggesting that recipients were not only more interested in the event but felt more compelled to respond to a real person sending them a message.

GROUP A   GROUP B
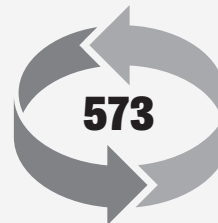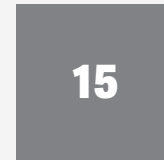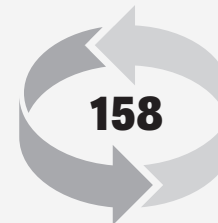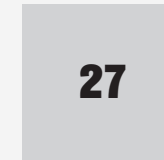
1,212	1,193	Emails Sent
15	27	Email RSVPs
573	158	Text interactions

In addition to some people being removed for declining the initial event invite, some people were scrubbed for non-working mobile numbers or landlines that were mislabeled as mobile numbers.

There were 174 total attendees at the three events held for this experiment. We were able to match 61 to either group A or group B.

When email and text message are combined, we received 111 total RSVPs.
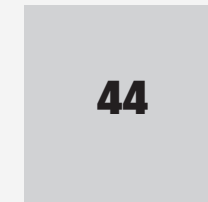
Seventeen people responded affirmatively to both the email and text message RSVP. The attendance rate for both groups of RSVPs was 55 percent.

In terms of raw numbers, group A had a larger share of both overall RSVPs and event attendees that were matched to the treatment groups.

GROUP A   **GROUP B**

67   44   All RSVPs
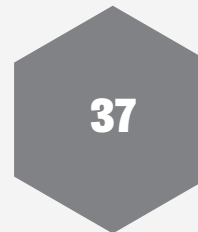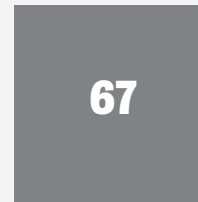
37   24   All Attendees

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

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With an assumed action rate* of 5%, treatment group A has a detected effect of 3.15%, while treatment group B has a detected effect of 2.05% at a 95% confidence interval.

*Action rate = the percent age of people from the control group who are expected to act in the desired fashion (turn out to the meeting) without the intervention.

	Universe size A+B=Total universe size	Outcome collection rate	Percent in treatment group A/(A+B)	Action rate in control	Contact (i.e, treatment application) rate (%)	Predictive power of individual-level covariates (R-squared)	Desired power of experiment	Confidence interval to use (2-tailed)	Minimum detectable effect required from calculator (Intention to Treat, Treatment-on-the-Treated)	Detected effect
San Fransisco text	860+848=1,708	100%	0.503	5%	90%	0	80	95	2.62%, 2.91%	A: 18/860=2.09% B: 12/848=1.42%
San Jose text	125+133=258	100%	0.484	5%	90%	0	80	95	6.75%, 7.5%	A: 10/125=8.00% B: 6/133=4.51%
Oakland text	190+188=378	100%	0.503	5%	90%	0	80	95	5.57%, 6.19%	A: 9/190=4.74% B: 6/188=3.19%
Text all	1,175+1,169=2,344	100%	0.501	5%	90%	0	80	95	2.24%, 2.49%	A: 37/1175=3.15% B: 24/1169=2.05%

Note: At an assumed treatment effect of 5%, we would hope to see a minimum detectable effect of at least 2.24% based on the Intention to Treat. We detected an effect of 3.15% for group A and 2.05% for group B. This means that our findings were significant for group A and just under the minimum detectable effect for group B to be statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval. Given anecdotal data on historic turnout to SPUR forums, we feel confident using a 5% action rate as a starting place for our analysis.

WHAT WE LEARNED

TWO LESSONS FOR CIVIC INNOVATORS

PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

1. MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Our experiment showed that while people who received text messages from a real person ("Noah") were more likely to engage and turn out to the meeting (by 3.15 percent), simply receiving a text message invitation increased their likelihood of turning out (by 2.05 percent). There are many possible reasons for this, but two stand out to us:

1) Text messages have open rates as **high as 99 percent**; a message received via text is more likely to be seen than a message sent over email or over the phone (for comparison, our experience on campaigns tells us that phone conversation rates tend to hover between approximately 10–20 percent on weekday evenings; the vast majority of people do not pick up calls from unknown numbers).

2) Text messages are becoming a more prevalent form of communicating among friends and family. A text message may therefore feel more personal than an email or phone call, even if it is not associated with a specific person. Because of the barriers presented by opt-in laws for mass texting, SMS has not been used as frequently for impersonal, marketing purposes.

As the way we receive and communicate information changes, so does our behavior. Civic innovators will have to keep up with evolving trends. For now, that means using text messages to supplement traditional communication methods. It all comes back to the idea of meeting people where they are.

2. THE PERSONAL IDENTITY OF THE MESSENGER MATTERS

The experiment confirmed our organizer hypothesis: People were more likely to engage (respond) and turn out to the meeting when they heard directly from "Noah."

Our underlying theory here is that humans are relational creatures; we want to connect with others, we feel responsibility and kinship with those with whom we share some form of in-group identity, and we feel accountable to other humans in a way we do not necessarily feel accountable to institutions or even our own intentions.

As organizers and practitioners, we believe this test begins to confirm a long-held belief of ours: If civic organizations want to effectively engage and activate their membership, they must be intentional about scaling personal relationships in even the micro-interactions. Choosing a messenger who resonates with your audience should be at the top of any civic innovator's communications checklist, and we suspect that personalizing and humanizing communications is only the tip of the iceberg.

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