

Campaigns & Elections

July 1, 1998

Accentuating the Positive in Nebraska's GOP Race for Governor

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Mike Johanns was outspent by \$2 million, never mentioned his opponents' names on TV - and won a big primary victory

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On primary night, Tuesday, May 12th, we stood in a packed hotel ballroom in Lincoln, Nebraska. The room was overflowing with campaign workers, reporters and supporters, all waiting for the imminent arrival of Mike Johanns, whom the Associated Press had just declared the winner in the Republican primary for governor. There were cell phones ringing and reporters going live on the air, and the moment when Mike, his wife Stephanie, and children Michaela and Justin finally walked in, the crowd erupted into cheers and applause that could be heard from Omaha to Scottsbluff. We were reminded of the day when we first met Mike Johanns, more than a year earlier, when this night seemed a long way off.

In the spring of 1997, we had traveled to Lincoln to meet Johanns. As the mayor of Lincoln, he had earned respect and accolades for his conservative leadership style and ability to get things done. The city had experienced unprecedented economic growth and enjoyed a AAA bond rating while seeing cuts in property taxes and an increased number of police on the streets. (First elected mayor in 1991, he ran unopposed for re-election in 1995.)

The Johanns had been campaigning for almost two years at that point, attending parades and state fairs, meeting voters, and establishing one of the most remarkable and hard-working count-by-county organizations we've ever seen. Gov. Ben Nelson (D), who is term limited, was serving his last term, and the seat would be open in 1998.

That spring, we signed on to work with Johanns as his campaign's general strategists, media consultants and pollsters.

The advantages for the GOP in 1998 were easy to see. While Gov. Nelson had been popular, in an open seat contest a Republican would have a clear and historical advantage. Republican registration in Nebraska now exceeds 50 percent, and has been trending Republican in recent years.

But first, Johanns had to take on state auditor John Breslow in the primary. While our candidate practiced law and served in local government before becoming Lincoln's two-term mayor, opponent Breslow was a successful businessman with considerable personal wealth before becoming State Auditor (both men were also former Democrats). While Breslow was committed to spending his millions in his effort to secure the nomination, Mike had to raise every dime and quickly assemble an effective finance team.

The dynamic of the race changed when Cong. Jon Christensen (R) unexpectedly announced his candidacy in September of 1997. Christensen was elected to Congress in 1994, beating Democrat Peter Hoagland and contributing to the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives. He had been easily re-elected in 1996, was appointed to the powerful House Ways and Means Committee and was from Omaha, the largest city in Nebraska.

Christensen entered the race as one of Nebraska's most tireless campaigners, strongest conservatives and prolific fundraisers. He also began with nearly \$300,000, by transferring money he raised for his congressional campaign account to his gubernatorial war chest.

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We knew it was going to be a hard-fought contest and we developed a strategy which capitalized on: a) our candidate's proven record of leadership and unique qualities as a candidate, b) a straightforward and powerful message, c) stealth, and d) our predictions about how our opponents would position themselves.

The results of our June 1997 benchmark survey convinced us that if we could raise enough money to be competitive on television, and if we could keep a relatively low profile and avoid being attacked early, no matter how much our opponents would spend we could win.

Grassroots Politics

Nebraska is a state in which the majority of the population is centered in and around Omaha and Lincoln, in the Eastern part of the state. But over 40 percent of the Republican primary electorate comes from the vast stretch of land in Western Nebraska, the Third Congressional District (in past statewide elections, 25 percent of the electorate came from Christensen's Second District). Fifty-five percent of the Republican primary electorate living in the Third District is covered by the Lincoln-Hastings-Kearney media market. This market represented 40 percent of the statewide Republican primary vote (the Omaha ADI covered 38 percent). So in essence, Republicans living in this media market have watched Lincoln's mayor in action on the morning, midday, and evening news programs for nearly seven years. We immediately recognized this for what it was: a potential geographic base.

Mike Johanns also began the campaign with a potential ideological base. Our benchmark and tracking polls found that roughly 43 percent of the Republican primary electorate self-identified as "moderate" or "liberal." We assumed, correctly, that while Breslow and Christensen tried to "out-conservative" each other during the course of the campaign, Johanns would have an excellent opportunity to attract these moderates. Furthermore, our candidate is one of the most conservative elected officials in the nation, with an antitax, anti-crime and pro-family record any Reagan Republican would be proud of. Therefore we knew, in addition to garnering the greater share of moderates, we would get a significant amount of "conservative" and "very conservative" voters as well.

In the rural Third District communities, grassroots politics is the key to victory. Johanns wanted to be organized in all 93 counties, and so during his many trips across the state, racking up over 100,000 miles, he met with potential supporters, many of whom ultimately became part of our organization. It was during this time, as well, that we established relationships with the local media outlets, including community newspapers all across the state. We knew that having the best organization and getting a majority of the newspaper endorsements would be an important part of our victory.

Step One: Get an Early Start

One advantage we had over both our opponents was time. Mike and Stephanie started campaigning in the summer of 1995. That was almost three years before the Republican primary was to be held. But that early start led to a slow, steady build-up in name identification and organizational support, which grew right up to primary day and beyond. It also enabled us to assemble a list of loyal and generous small donors that totaled in the thousands - low-dollar contributors that helped keep us "on-the-air" through the end.

Betting (most of) The Ranch on Early Media

Our strategy was to take advantage of our early start and potential geographic base with an initial media buy during the fall of 1997. Unable to afford statewide television, we laid out a five-week, 1700 GRPs (gross rating points), buy in the Lincoln-Hastings-Kearney media market in October. We wanted to introduce Mike Johanns, drive up our support in our "base" media market and increase our statewide vote total.

We risked the dollars our candidate had worked so hard to raise because we believed it was critical to "get in the game" and show the kind of poll numbers that would help us raise money over the winter. We felt Breslow would be on the air January 1st and would never go off (Breslow went on in late January and never went off). We had to show our donors, opinion leaders and the news media that we could move votes and win.

At the end of those five weeks, on November 17th, 1997, we went into the field with a statewide survey. We found that Johanns was in first place with a two point lead over Christensen statewide, and a substantial lead over both Christensen and Breslow in the Lincoln-Hastings-Kearney media market.

It's never fun to "go dark" while opposition television commercials are running (as happened to us from late January to early March), but our October-November 1997 media gave us an initial lead and put us into a position to raise money for a strong finish and move numbers more quickly when we came back on the air in March. The gamble paid off.

Step Two: Keep A Low Profile

The Long March

After we went off the air and Breslow went up with his statewide television buy, we expected our numbers to drop a bit during the first two months of 1998. During this period - a time we privately called "the long march" - we hoped for no published polls (we couldn't afford our own) and a strong fundraising effort from Johanns and his finance team. We were blessed with both.

Although Breslow and Christensen released polls showing us in third place, they also showed themselves in first place. This cast enough doubt in the minds of donors and opinion leaders as to who really had the advantage. The only advantage we cared about was the one on election day.

In those winter months, while the conventional wisdom put the race between Christensen and Breslow, we kept a low profile, worked on building our statewide finance and grassroots organizations behind the scenes, and waited, content to let both our opponents underestimate our level of support. Neither Breslow nor Christensen spent time defining Mike or trying to build a contrast with him - they felt they only had to "out-conservative" and outdistance one another.

It was this strategy - this deliberate attempt to keep Johanns below our opponents' radar screens until the last possible moment-that allowed us to come out with just over two months to go and define our candidate in our own terms.

Enough Money To Win

The primary was the most expensive in the state's history. But the one thing we knew that our opponents did not know, is that we would have greater resources than anyone expected we would have. (The popular mayor of the state's second-largest city is going to have a strong financial base.)

Nebraska television is relatively inexpensive. Five thousand gross rating points of statewide TV time in the second quarter would cost roughly \$550,000. That was our goal. If we could raise and protect those dollars for the final weeks of the campaign, we knew we'd have enough to get our message out. We never purchased cable television - we couldn't afford it.

Our budget called for the campaign to raise and spend \$1.5 million by primary day. Although this was certainly less than would ultimately be spent by either of our opponents (Breslow spent approximately \$3.5 million, Christensen \$2.6 million), it gave us a 10-week buy in Lincoln, eight weeks in Omaha, and five weeks in the smaller markets (Cheyenne-Scottsbluff, North Platte, Rapid City and Sioux City).

Stealth Above All

One of the reasons we avoided becoming a target of our opponents' advertising until the final two weeks was because of the manner in which we placed our television buy. Our mantra was "stealth." By buying one week's worth of spots at a time starting at the beginning of March, our opponents believed our fundraising was not just anemic, but on life support. They may have also assumed we would make a 4-5 week initial buy, go off the air, and come back in the final three weeks. They never imagined we'd stay on. We even laid in 500 GRPs in the final two weeks to show them we were trying our best to reserve at least something in the final days.

While we hid our buy, our opponents gave us an illustration of their television strategy early on. By late February, we knew their entire reserved media buy for every week right through to election day. This allowed us to make crucial strategic decisions, such as moving more dollars into the smaller markets out west to cover more of the critical Third District. Being underestimated every step of the way was essential to our victory.

Step Three: Win the Message Game

In 1994, the year when Republicans were sweeping into office on a message of revolutionary reform and anti-government themes, no one would have dreamed of using governing experience as a message. But four years later, voters were less angst-ridden and more concerned with a candidate's ability to get the job done-to govern.

All three candidates running were current office-holders: Breslow is the state auditor and Christensen is a congressman. But as mayor of Lincoln, Johanns had the kind of executive leadership and experience that voters were looking for.

We devised a simple message, based on our candidate's conservative credentials, and reinforced by his actions during his tenure as the most popular mayor in Lincoln's recent history.

All the candidates were talking about cutting taxes and state government with top quality, but conventional, television ads (candidate with farmer, candidate with seniors, candidate with children, etc.). The contrast was that as mayor, Johanns was the only candidate who had firsthand experience in these areas. He had governing experience, and a personal style, which was significantly different from the other candidates. And we wanted to make sure the voters understood the difference.

Our strategy for telling that message was simple: we used spots showing our candidate in a relaxed atmosphere talking directly to the camera. His plain-spoken style came across well and provided a contrast with our opponents, who rarely were on television making a direct appeal.

One such spot, called "Track Record," shows Johanns talking about his accomplishments as mayor - he was running on his record. It opened with: "All the Republican candidates for governor are talking about lower taxes, less government, and their pro-life agendas. Only one candidate has done it: Mike Johanns." Our central message was encapsulated into the tag line the candidate spoke at the end of every spot: "It's about governing...and I've done it."

That tag line worked for several reasons: It fit with Johanns' image as a "straight-shooter"; it conveyed the message of governing experience; and it defined what was becoming an increasingly negative contest in terms of experience and credibility.

We had one message but presented it a bit differently in each ad. In one ad, Johanns talked about cutting property taxes four years in a row. In another, he turned a budget deficit into an \$18 million surplus. And in a spot which struck a populist chord, he tells voters he "gave up the

mayor's car and told every city employee they would not take a car home" - always ending with the message: "It's about governing...and I've done it."

Step Four: Staying Positive

Running a positive campaign was a decision that our candidate had committed to early on. We knew that once we gained momentum and the lead, we would be attacked by one or both of our opponents. Our goal was to peak as late as possible (election day was fine for us) and limit the time, amount of money and number of gross rating points our opponents could put behind attack ads. So while we continued to implement our positive strategy, we prepared for the expected attacks and ensured - through our media campaign and debate performances-that Johanns would have sufficient credibility with the voters to respond to the charges.

Weathering The Attacks

When our internal polling showed we had taken the lead on April 23 (Johanns 30 percent, Christensen 25 percent, Breslow 24 percent), we knew attacks were imminent. Breslow broke first, 17 days out from election day. In his spot, he labeled Johanns and Christensen "two peas in a pod," saying both candidates raised taxes and increased government spending. By grouping us with Christensen as "tax and spend liberals," it blunted the negative on us since no one believed that description fit Christensen (a very well-known tax fighter). Our April 30 tracking poll results showed Breslow dropping to 18 percent, Christensen maintaining 26 percent, and Johanns rising to 33 percent. Breslow's negative worked against him.

A Direct Hit

On Friday, May 1, with 12 days until the primary, Christensen made the decision to attack us on television as well. At the time our favorable was 48 percent and unfavorable a mere six percent. Christensen had to raise our negative to win. His spot was a direct hit. It stated that Johanns had supported Bill Clinton's famous 1993 budget bill which "included the largest tax increase in U.S. history." (Johanns was on record supporting the deficit reduction and summer job program parts of the President's package.) The spot also included comments our candidate made in 1983 against President Reagan's deficit policies when he was a Democrat running for the Chairmanship of the Nebraska Democratic Party.

Breslow also sharpened his attack with a new commercial hitting Johanns for raising taxes and fees on senior citizens.

That weekend, we responded with Johanns telling voters directly that he opposed Clinton's tax increase, had cut property taxes and favored increasing the homestead exemption for seniors. "That's a conservative and Republican record I'm proud of," he concluded in the ad.

We also were eight-for-eight in newspaper endorsements - including the influential Omaha World-Herald - and immediately aired a spot outlining their support. The editorial endorsements mirrored our overall message - that Johanns was a proven leader, conservative and had cut property taxes.

Our polling showed that while the attack ads were increasing our negatives, voters were also turned off by the ads themselves. But most Republicans were unclear about which one of the remaining two candidates was actually doing most of the attacking.

Breslow had the reputation of running a negative campaign, and his negatives had increased as a result. Christensen wasn't perceived as running a negative campaign, even though he was running as many attack ads as Breslow, because people assumed they were Breslow ads since the "paid for by" graphic was dropped in mid-commercial. Our polling showed that Breslow was getting most, if not all, of the blame for Christensen's attack ads.

And so the credibility issue became increasingly important as voters tried to sort out all the conflicting messages. During this time, we continued to receive newspaper endorsements from every-corner of the state, 15 out of a total of 16 that endorsed candidates by the weekend before the election. These endorsements blunted some - not all - of the charges against us.

But the attacks had been running full-force for a week, and our tracking polls during that week showed that our lead was slipping. By Thursday-night, we had dropped significantly. Voters continued to perceive Breslow - not Christensen - as running a negative campaign. There was no backlash against Christensen.

We believed that if voters understood that Christensen was as much to blame for the mudslinging, we would gain the momentum back and win.

A Flier Too Far

The issue was resolved for voters on the Saturday before the election. Christensen mailed a controversial flier, attacking Johanns on the issue of public access cable television - saying Johanns wanted children to be exposed to obscene programming. That day the mailer, and Christensen, were publicly denounced by Nebraska's Republican congressional delegation. Sen. Chuck Hagel, Congs. Bill Barrett and Doug Bereuter said the flier was "unfair" and "crossed the line."

This became the story of the campaign in the final three days. Once it became clear to voters that Christensen and Breslow had both been engaging in negative campaigning, the contrast with our candidate was unmistakable. Our Monday night tracking poll showed that we had bounced back, Breslow had closed in, and Christensen had dropped.

We stayed positive - never once mentioning an opponent's name in our advertising - building a firewall of credibility, an image of integrity and a personal appeal that ultimately withstood an estimated 3,000 GRPs of negative advertising during the last 17 days of the campaign.

On election day, turnout among Republicans exceeded 41 percent. We knew that if our base in the Lincoln-Hastings-Kearney media market was solid, and if we could keep close to Christensen and Breslow in Omaha, we would win. And that's what happened. We won over 60 percent of Lancaster County (Lincoln) and lost Douglas County (Omaha) to Christensen by only 18 votes.

Mike Johanns captured the Republican nomination with 41 percent of the vote, compared with 30 percent for John Breslow and 29 percent for Jon Christensen. His personal appeal, county organization and campaign message had captured the support of voters in every part of the state, and among both conservatives and moderates. It was a landslide.

That night, and again the next day at a morning rally, both Breslow and Christensen demonstrated their party loyalty by pledging support to Johanns in his general election quest to become Nebraska's next governor.

In the end, we had successfully maneuvered a Republican primary filled with unexpected twists and turns, all based on a strategy we had laid out a year in advance.

It was Mike and Stephanie Johanns' - and the entire team's - commitment to following this plan which enabled the campaign to stay focused, and to communicate our message in one of the most intense, high pressured, come-from-behind upsets we've ever been a part of.

Bob Wickers and Dick Dresner are Republican strategists, media consultants and pollsters who handled the Mike Johanns for governor primary campaign.
