



Do Diligence Sounding Board Report

To: Interested Parties

From: Eric Eckl, Water Words That Work, LLC

Re: Review of a Fundraising Email from the League of Conservation Voters

Date: 2/21/2010

Water Words That Work, LLC is preparing to launch a new market research service -- tentatively titled the "Do Diligence Sounding Board" -- for nature protection and pollution control organizations to use to evaluate marketing materials and messages.

The purpose of this forthcoming service is to allow you to **quickly and affordably** pre-test materials *before* they are final -- giving you an opportunity to improve your piece before you release it into the wild. Once the service launches, Water Words That Work, LLC will provide DDSB feedback to our clients in complete confidence.

As part of our field trials for this service, we tested 8 fundraising webpages and emails from nonprofit organizations seeking financial support for water-related work. This report summarizes what two dozen "everyday citizens" have to say about the "Breaking News: Supreme Court Decision Favors Big Oil" page on Clean Water Action's website:

<http://docs.google.com/fileview?id=0BxjtnOJhd9TUMDFmMWY4NGUtMDE2MC00NTNmLWE3NDUtNTE4MTA3NGE5NmRI&hl>

The Do Diligence Sounding Board provides feedback that you can use to sharpen your fundraising message -- finding your way to the words and pictures that successfully evoke a charitable response. However, favorable feedback does not guarantee fundraising success, and negative feedback does not guarantee failure, for the following reasons:

- This report provides insight into the *first impression* that your fundraising message makes. Those who already have an impression of your organization already may react differently.
- You are *competing* for donors' generosity against other good causes, as well as the events that occur in their lives and in the world.

- A powerful message is only one part of a fundraising effort. Successful fundraising also requires regular effort, enough suitable prospects, regular effort, a good reputation, regular effort, and a good system for delivering your message and processing the gifts.

By the Numbers

This email scored slightly below the average of the pilot batch as a whole. The piece earned above average marks for "a problem that has affected me or someone I care about" and "The organization will use donations to correct some kind of injustice." The piece earned very low marks for "I understand how the organization will use the donations it receives."

Statement	1-Strongly Disagree	2-Somewhat Disagree	3-Somewhat Agree	4-Strongly Agree	Average for this Piece	Average for similar pieces
This group is trying to solve a problem that is important to society	1	0	9	12	3.45	3.45
This group is trying to solve a problem that has affected me or someone I care about	1	0	13	8	3.27	2.46
This organization will use donations to help end the suffering of people or animals	6	3	8	5	2.55	3.03
This organization will use donations to correct some kind of injustice	5	2	6	9	2.86	2.63
This organization will use donations to help children	10	5	7	0	1.86	2.34

The group has a clear goal that it is raising money to achieve	2	2	8	10	3.18	3.32
I understand how the organization will use the donations it receives	6	8	6	2	2.18	2.83
I am confident that this group can make a difference if it reaches its goal	5	6	9	2	2.36	2.95
I am confident that others are supporting the group's work	1	6	9	6	2.91	3.06
If the group doesn't reach its goal soon, it may be too late	3	7	5	7	2.73	2.59
Overall					2.74	2.86

Key Findings

Question	Yes	No
Does the work of this organization fit your own personal definition of a "good cause?"	17	5

Question: "Please elaborate on your answer to the previous question:"

They answered like this:

- "Protecting wildlife is immensely important, it's one of humanity's most noble deeds".
- "Animals are our friends and honestly can't protect themselves so it's up to us".

- "Helping the environment is always a good cause, there is only one earth, so we need policy to protect it".
- "Everybody likes a good environment and clean air".
- "Does not tell me who is involved and what they do"
- "Because we now have a new law in effect that will allow huge corporations to donate all the campaign money they wish, the ones with the money are more likely to get their politicians elected. Big oil will advance its own interests, which are detrimental to the planet and our atmosphere".
- "Big oil must be stopped, and has already done so much damage it's ridiculous".
- "Preserving our environment is overall a good cause. I'm not a huge fan of politics in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons, so I don't love their method for protecting the environment, but the overall goal is a good one and one that needs to be done. Without making some changes to the way we treat our environment, we won't have things that we take for granted every day".
- "although it seems futile to compete with big oil. From appearances it seems this group ultimately wants to help pass legislation that will protect the environment".
- "If we trash the planet, where will we live?"
- "They don't say anything about what they do. I cant call something a good cause if I dont know what their goals are".
- "I am a liberal Democrat and pro-environment".
- "Hell yes. I think that decision was terrible. Maybe I'm being overly swayed by the media coverage (Olbermann and all them) but I think this is huge. This is one of those fundamental issues that I learned about in grade school (business will try to exercise undue influence over government if we let them) I think this issue is huge (huge as in good)"
- "I think there should restrictions on the amount businesses and individuals can spend to support candidates".
- "Environmental causes affect human health and eventually economic vitality, as well as the safety of other species, which, in turn, further affects human well-being. The climate crisis, in particular, is a looming threat; yet climate legislation has been notoriously stalled in Congress for some time, and media reports suggest it may not pass the Senate".
- "They are claiming that legislation has been passed to give the big oil corporations, etc. the ability to 'donate' as much as they want to elections".
- "This organization is against letting unlimited spending by companies to not only support officials, but also to protect their own profits even in the face of harming the environment, and our future".
- "From the piece, it is difficult to really figure out that this group is about except that it opposes "big oil" and is in favor of climate-change legislation.. Opposing something without saying what you are specifically trying to carry out is not my idea of a "good cause". It looks like the main function of the group is lobbying".
- "They are fighting for clean energy initiatives and are trying to get big oil companies to do more to pursue clean energy rather than using types of energy production that harm the environment".
- "Climate change is a very valid concern for everybody".

- "The environment is everyone's responsibility, and unfortunately but realistically, it is Washington, DC, that holds a lot of the power over the success or failure of the environment. Thus, a group that works to elect pro-conservation leaders does good for everyone".
- "It appears that this organization is against freedom of speech. Or perhaps it only wants its freedom of speech protected".

Their Initial Reaction

Question: "Pick one word that summarizes the feeling this piece evokes in you:"

They answered:

- "noble"
- "support"
- "hope"
- "Informed"
- "confusion"
- "anger"
- "worthwhile"
- "Frustration"
- "misdirected"
- "Doubt"
- "tacky"
- "leary"
- "rage?"
- "Fair"
- "Ambivalent"
- "anger"
- "Anger"
- "confusion"
- "Apathy"
- "angry"
- "anger"
- "Disgust"

Your Message in Their Words, Part I

Question: "In your own words, please describe the work of this organization:"

They answered like this:

- "Conservation of wildlife and alerting people to the problems of big oil".
- "Helping animals".
- "to elect pro-environment elected officials to create policy in which Big Oil won't have the leverage it has now".
- "Its a conservation group that lobbies to protect the environment"

- "Working against "Big Oil"
- "The League of Conservation is a lobbying group that will attempt to influence politicians regarding clean energy as a counter to the big oil lobbyists".
- "Opposing big oil's relentless pushes for deregulation".
- "This organization is trying to protect the environment, specifically by supporting political candidates who support environmental issues the same as this organization does".
- "To help elect pro environment officials to government office. In direct competition with big oil companies, the goal is not to outspend the oil companies but to outmaneuver them with smaller funds but better organization".
- "To protect the planet from pollution"
- "Support clean energy"
- "This is a lobbying group working on pro-environmental legislation".
- "They want to fight the supreme court decision that went through yesterday, the one that allows corporations to donate as much money as they like to influence elections. It looks like they're specifically targeting Big Oil but, as it looks like they're going after the decision itself rather than big oil, I imagine that if they were successful it would affect any industry".
- "Oppose lifting restrictions on money businesses can spend to support political candidates".
- "The League of Conservation Voters works to promote aggressive environmental legislation and strong regulatory action on environmental issues, including with regard to the climate crisis".
- "This group is trying to pass climate change legislation and to keep big businesses from overtaking their efforts"
- "This organization fights towards getting clean/renewable energy bills as well as bills that effect the climate by lobbying and get representatives into elections. In order to due this they rely on donations to support campaign and lobbying efforts".
- "The organization appears to be a lobbying group that is trying to limit the influence of "big oil" and wants to see climate-change legislation passed".
- "They are fighting against court rulings that remove limits restricting the amount of money that big oil companies can spend to assist candidates in federal elections".
- "Lobbying for legislation to protect against climate change".
- "LCV works to organize conservation's fight within the political realm and bring pro-conservation politicians into power in Washington".
- "To pass climate change legislation that they believe will protect the planet"

Your Message in Their Words, Part II

Question: "In your own words, please describe the people or animals this group is trying to help?"

They answered like this:

- "Itself mainly, this is an article about raising money to fight a ruling and stop big oil".
- "Every animal, and specifically for this any of them that could be affected by big oil".

- "Pretty much all people and animals, since we are all on the same earth".
- "They are trying to protect all life from over drilling and oil spills".
- "I think it is just trying to help the environment which in turn will help people"
- "They're trying to help all animals and people, through ensuring that we have a clean environment with alternative energy sources that are better for us and the planet".
- "Anyone who is, or could be, affected by big oil and the pollution it causes and environments it destroys".
- "There is no one specific group of people that this group is trying to help, other than the politicians that they support. They are trying to support a broader cause, which can affect everyone".
- "They were in specific about what their actual goals are. But ultimately their goal is to help protect the environment which is good for all people and animals".
- "All residents of the planet"
- "Attempting to support people who care about clean energy".
- "The environment affects everyone and needs to be protected".
- "SCOTUS decision affects everybody. This group is trying directly to help all Americans, but indirectly to help all those people in other parts of the world whose life is affected by decisions that the US gov't makes. Witness, the Kyoto accords...that means pretty much everybody everywhere".
- "None"
- "The League is trying to build consensus to address the climate crisis, among other conservation-related issues".
- "This group is trying to help people and animals by trying to gather enough funds to try to enact climate change regulations".
- "This group is trying to help everyone and everything who lives on this Earth. This group is fighting for not only clean energy for a better environment and future, but simple rights of American citizens who do not have the money big companies have to persuade government officials"
- "The group is trying to protect the environment by opposing "big oil" and advocating for climate-change legislation".
- "They are trying to help everyone. Clean energy is something that effects everyone".
- "This group is trying to help the world by preventing global warming that could change things for all people and animals".
- "Directly, LCV helps pro-conservation politicians trying to win election. Indirectly, it helps us all by increasing the number of pro-conservation leaders who are proposing and voting on policy".
- "It is trying to help its group of members, the League of Conservation Voters. It wants money to foster its agenda".

Shop Talk vs. Plain English

Question: "Imagine that your friends, coworkers, or family member are looking at the piece themselves. If there are any words or phrases that might be difficult for them, please share them below:"

They answered like this:

- "None"
- "the whole piece just wasn't clear"
- "None"
- "PAC"
- "none"
- "The tone is a little liberal-sounding. Reaganites and Fox -news fans might not dig on it. But then, what are the chances that they'd be contributing to this issue anyway? If the issue is polarizing (which I assume it is) then its okay to use polarizing rhetoric to discuss it. I think the ad strikes a nice balance. Emphatic without seeming crazy".
- "It seems pretty basic, most people I know would understand this".
- "I did not find any words or phrases that are difficult".
- "I'm not even sure that my friends and family would read this piece. There really isn't anything in it that would be difficult to read".
- "easy to read but hard to understand"
- "There is nothing difficult here. Some might have trouble with the concept of "clean energy"

Strengths of the Piece

Question: " In your opinion, what is the strongest or most compelling thing about this piece?"

They answered like this:

- "That big oil is destructive and we have to stop them".
- "That big oil should not be allowed to influence everyone".
- "Tempering Big Oil"
- "Direct to the point of the story and very informative"
- "This piece was not strong at all- I understand they are fighting a government ruling and fighting for our rights but I was not sure at all what right was being jeopardized "
- "The urgency of this campaign is compelling. It appeals to the voters' feelings of injustice and inadequacy to have their voices heard in light of this new law".
- "That we can't let big oil do whatever it wants because what it wants is in no one's best interest but theirs."
- "The overall tone and urgency of this message makes it very compelling. I know exactly what this organization wants me to do, why it wants me to do that, and that is compelling and motivating for people".
- "That big oil companies have a leg up with new legislation that has been passed".
- "The language"
- "Strong claims. (Big oil will destroy clean energy future)
Specific goal. (49,910 by Jan 29)"
- "Mentioning Bush's legacy and the impact of his nominations to the Supreme Court".
- "The writing is very good. Maybe it also has the advantage that its timely since, as I'm writing this, the decision is only one day old".
- "Very timely".

- "The most powerful aspect of this piece is its clarification of the increased clout opponents of climate action will have in the wake of the Supreme Court decision on campaign financing; elections could become more like everyday lobbying in Congress, which is to say business actors with parochial interests could achieve greater influence than those of average citizens".
- "The fact that the Supreme Court would allow these huge corporations to spend so freely, yet this group is relying on getting that certain figure \$49,000 to reach their goal, rather a David and Goliath kind of attitude".
- "Uses names of the 'culprits' behind the problem, which allows people to put a face to the injustices that are occurring".
- "The most compelling point of the piece is raising the fear that "big oil" will "destroy" a clean energy future if left to their own devices".
- "It really isn't too compelling. But the most compelling part of the piece is that the supreme court removed spending limits for donations in federal elections".
- "Sets the tone for urgency".
- "This piece presents a clear enemy - big oil - in advocating for its cause. It provides specific information about what this enemy has done and what it has the capability of doing".
- "There is nothing strong or compelling here".

Weaknesses of the Piece

Question: " In your opinion, what is the weakest thing about this piece?"

They answered like this:

- "Could use more talk about the animals specifically".
- "Nothing".
- "Needs more focus on where the money will go exactly"
- "Isn't any complaints its well written, informative, and professional".
- "does not say anything about who they are, what they are going to do, how they can make a difference or even what they are trying to achieve"
- "Some folks won't understand what the big deal is with big oil. The Republicans won't be as offended by the new law as the Democrats will, so I guess you could say that it appeals to a partisan audience only".
- "Nothing".
- "I don't like that the organization doesn't give any information about what this new, aggressive campaign is. If I have any real interest in donating money to an organization, I want some idea of what specifically my money is going to do. Without that knowledge, I have a harder time supporting such an organization".
- "Inspecific about how they will spend money"
- "The language - it's highly biased".
- "Zero information about the organization, zero information about what they plan to do with \$49,910. With a monetary number that specific and a specific date deadline, they give them impression that they have a course of action planned out, however they do nothing to convey that to the people they are begging for money".

- "I don't understand how they intend to spend the money and meet their (loosely) stated goals. Lobby for/against legislation? Campaign for/against specific candidates based on their environmental records. there are lots of groups (more well known) out there working on environmental issues. why should I support this one?"
- Why offer me a cheesy backpack? If you are doing good work and I'm a committed member, I don't need some cheesy gift. Maybe a bumper sticker to promote the cause. This is a very dated-looking email. Lots of prose in a boring format/typeface and the only picture is the cheesy backpack. Its tired and old looking. I also really don't like the logo".
- "I think they could use a better photo than just the bag that they're trying to sell. The bag is kind of expensive and maybe 'we're in dire need of your help, please buy this tote-bag' isn't the best road to go down, or at least not the best thing to put right out there on the front page.
- Especially in the wake of everything that's going on with Haiti, I think they could probably find a better photo. Hell, put a picture of Bush's face on there. They already called him out in the text, might as well punctuate it. Also, the chart junk is terrible. You really don't need all those boxes to make your point. I assume that's a temporary element in the design."
- "Nor clear how the money they raise will be spent".
- "Its casual neglect of free-speech concerns was offensive. (Many liberals are civil libertarians.) Merely invoking the label "big oil" does not mean I will oppose the right of such a group to express its views, however repugnant those views are. The free speech rights of big oil are also those of environmental advocates whose voices were previously restricted. It's a complicated issue with merits on both sides. (The climate crisis is more clear cut.) Also, it's a technical point, but Roberts and Alito are not swing voters as that term has traditionally been understood. Yes, Bush appointed them, and they were on the winning side of a 5-4 vote. But this term has traditionally applied to essentially moderate justices, which Roberts and Alito are not (and Kennedy is)".
- "If they could list some specific examples of their work or accomplishments it would go a long way toward getting people behind them and their cause."
- "They say the amount of money they still need to raise, but do not state how much money they have actually raised already, which brings doubt into my mind about the ability of this group to achieve its goals".
- "There is no clear plan of action - the piece says send us money and we will carry out something good and leaves exactly what they will accomplish up to your imagination".
- "They really don't tell what Big Oil is trying to influence with their contributions. It assumes that you know a lot about clean energy and pollution".
- "It is very hard to tell what if anything they are going to do with the money that they are asking for"
- "This piece should provide a link to the exact legislation enacted so that people can read it for themselves instead of reading the interpretation of the organization".
- "It is classic propaganda. Blame Bush, Blame Big Oil. It is full of cliché and hysteria. The tone is whine, whine, whine"

About the Do Diligence Sounding Board

Just whose opinions are these, anyway? The "Do Diligence Sounding Board" is a standing body of U.S. residents who provide feedback on marketing materials and perform related tasks in return for payment.

A major corporation recruits the board members, maintains the system for securing their feedback, and handles the financial transactions. Water Words That Work, LLC pays to access to this service, as do other marketing firms.

The feedback that you receive from the sounding board is different from feedback you receive from your peers, for three reasons:

- The sounding board members who review your materials approach them like actual everyday citizen "in the wild." They are not professionals in the field and have not participated in the drafting of the materials.
- The sounding board members have never met you, and will provide their feedback anonymously. Their feedback will not be influenced by their personal relationship with you.
- The sounding board more closely approximates the demographic makeup (especially race and education) of the U.S. "public" than the staff and board of most nature protection and pollution control organizations.

Demographic Trait	Environmental Professionals	Do Diligence Sounding Board	Traditional Telephone Poll, U.S. Sample	Actual U.S. (Census)
4 Year College Degree	95% or higher	~50%	~40%	24%
White/Caucasian	95% or higher	~80%	~80%	79%

All sounding board answers are verbatim -- including spelling and typographic errors.

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P.O. Box 2182, Falls Church, VA 22042 703.635.4380 <http://waterwordsthatwork.com>