



Joe Slade White
& Company

The 9 Principles of Winning Campaigns

“Never mistake having a lot of money
with being good.”

- Joe Slade White

Principle 1: Break the Code

“Conventional wisdom is often right, and sometimes wrong, but the insight that comes from breaking the code to an election is almost always unconventional.” – Joe Slade White

“Every election has a unique dynamic that has to be unlocked or “broken” like a code. That unique code defines how voters view a campaign. Not how the experts or the insiders see it, but how voters see it.”

“Voters will always break the code for you, but you have to be quiet, and really listen – to be open for the “click” of the tumbler, just like in the movies when someone is trying to open the impenetrable safe.”

“My friend Bob Gogerty taught me that breaking the code of a specific election, is like deciphering any code, and takes discipline, research, but also a genuine leap of intuition that looks at a puzzle in a way that’s never been done before. You have to be open to being wrong, something that’s hard for some people.”

“People who are afraid of uncertainty – who are absolutely sure they know in advance what a campaign is all about – find it very difficult to break the code, usually because they don’t want to believe it actually exists.”

“Once the code is broken, the answer will often fly in the face of conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom is often right – and sometimes wrong – but the insight that comes from breaking the code is almost never conventional.”

“It helps if the hitter thinks you’re a little crazy.” - Nolan Ryan

Principle 2: Timing is Everything

“Under fire, you have to wait for just the right moment to make your move. And of course, when you’re under fire, it’s damned hard to wait for anything. But in hard campaigns, timing makes the difference between winning and losing.”

– Joe Slade White

“Take control of the dynamic of a campaign at the critical moment of the campaign – even if that means letting your opponent make the first move.”

“Define, or redefine, the race coherently and decisively on your terms from your very first step.”

“But unleash your strongest positive and strongest negative at the right moment – usually much later than you think.”

“All campaigns want to move voters who are against them, immediately, to being for them. But most voters need to move first to undecided. If you try to short circuit that step, and try to push voters too far, too hard, and too suddenly, you risk never moving them at all.”

“Campaigns that depend solely on a sudden surge of emotional momentum, too early and without strongly anchoring their lines, risk being blown off the mountain at the first strong gust of negative. Emotional surges are central to every upset – but the timing must be perfect and as late as possible.”

“A strong compelling and emotional spot that tells the candidate’s story, and that links issues and values to the elements of that story, is the best way to anchor lines securely.”

“When you come to a fork in the road, take it. – Yogi Berra

Principle 3: The Voter is Your Messenger

“The emotional response, the message of an ad, must occur in the voters, not in the ad. How an ad makes the voter feel – how it makes them respond, becomes the most important design element of an ad.”

“When the message and emotion is in the audience, it creates within each voter a unique response, which is deeply felt, lasting, authentic, and powerful. It moves voters further, faster.”

“If the desired emotion is anger, the ad must not be angry (a mistake in 90% of all negative ads) – instead, you want the voters to feel angry, and feel it themselves – not because they’re told to, but because it’s their genuine, authentic, and irresistible response. That is at the core of the Responsive Chord.”

“If an ad’s message is honesty, don’t even use the word – instead, tell a story where the audience responds with the word ‘honest’. Most campaigns try to ram messages down peoples’ throats. It’s why even the best standard political ads are so popular that consultants claim they need 1,300 points.”

“As my mentor Tony Schwartz said, a resonance approached doesn’t begin by telling the audience the message... you need to strike a responsive chord in people. And only at the final stage of communication do you consider the content of the message.... That message will be determined by the effect you want to achieve.

“In an age of cynicism, brought on by counterfeit sincerity and gimmicky ads, low-key emotional authenticity is an ad’s (and a campaign’s) most powerful weapon.”

“Most campaigns try to beat information into voters – assault them. Voters resist. And campaigns then turn up the assault. Voters don’t like being told what to think. No one does.”

A Responsive Chord ad touches chords within each voter, and each voter responds, and creates the message themselves, each in a unique and deeply personal way.”

– Joe Slade White

*“I made some mistakes in drama. I thought drama was when the actors cried. But drama is when the audience cries”
- Frank Capra*

Principle 4: Research for Movement and Patterns

“Look for patterns – watch for the anomalies – good polls are three dimensional maps and no hard battle is won without understanding the terrain.” – Joe Slade White

“Sometimes, ninety-eight percent of a good poll will confirm what you already know – which is fine – but it’s the two percent of surprise that gives you an edge – and the surprise will make sense only once you feel it through, as well as think it through.”

“Out-dated assumptions account for most campaign fatalities. Good polling cures that. Bad polling reinforces it.”

“Good pollsters tell you ‘what’ – better ones tell you ‘why’ – but the truly great ones are able to say, ‘Here’s something that’s really interesting, but puzzling...’ and then they dig into the puzzle to figure it out.”

“Focus groups are best for revelations – polls are best for testing – just the opposite of what many campaigns think and do.”

“Emotional details revealed in focus groups are the key points of strength and vulnerability in your opponent and in yourself, that trigger an emotional response in voters, both positive and negative.”

“The ‘Ah hah’ moments, where you break the code of an election almost always happen in focus groups. It’s usually after hours of boring talk, when one voter says something unexpected and spontaneous, that cuts through all the clutter and reveals the code in a single surprising moment of clarity.”

“Respect the voters. If respected, voters will tell you everything you need to know. They will also be surprised because they’re not used to campaigns respecting what they feel.”

*“Creative people apart have the ability to improvise and adapt to change – a knack for looking beyond the obvious – seeing new uses for things, new ways for doing things, connections between things that seem, on the surface, to be unrelated. Many of us spend our lives trying to avoid uncertainty, killing our creativity at its roots.
– Nancy Ross-Flanigan*

Principle 5: Storytelling Unlocks the Code

“‘Tell me a story.’ is a universal human experience and memory. Storytelling strikes chords within each of us. A well-told story delights the listener, even if it’s a sad story. It has an almost magical power to transform the ways we see things and unlock amazing emotions within us.”
– Joe Slade White

“Every person in the world, in their life, has some unique and remarkable story to tell – something that has changed their life. Every issue can be expressed through a story. Story telling initiates the spark of an emotional connection. It makes candidates three-dimensional, and issues come alive.”

“Two-dimensional candidates are vulnerable. A flat figure is always easier to knock down. Emotional depth is the third-dimension.”

“All good story telling causes the audience to participate – more with their imaginations than with their logic. All good stories start with a mystery – something that draws the listener in. Don’t telegraph the punch line.”

“Too many campaigns present issues in only one dimension – appealing only to the head and not to the heart – and never move anyone anywhere except by dragging them against their wills.”

“Good stories and the Responsive Chord create multiple layers of messages within each individual voter. And because of that, they ignite an energy more powerful than ads that try to hammer in a single point of view.”

“You know, my brother always said the town board was a group of lying, thieving sons of bitches...and it’s not improper for a lady to quote her brother, is it?”
– Daisy Minchen – 83 year-old dowager of a small Iowan town

Principle 6: Focus. Keep it Simple.

“Thirty seconds is plenty of time to do a lot, so long as you don’t try to do too much.” – Joe Slade White

“Some of the most important statements one makes in life are expressed in less than thirty seconds – ‘I love you.’ ‘I’m sorry.’ ‘Will you marry me?’ ‘Please.’ ‘Thank you.’ ‘Eat your peas or else.’ ”

“But never try to fit 34 seconds worth of words into a 30 second ad. Voters will dislike you for doing it, without even knowing why.”

“One test of a political ad is simple: can you diagram the ad in the same way you can diagram a good declarative English sentence? Does the ad move a strategy forward? Does the ad have a structure and contain details of strategy (spoken and unspoken) that are there for a purpose?”

“Quality IS strategy. Mediocre ads drain a campaign of resources (time, momentum, and money) and send a message that is at once both weakened and vulnerable.”

“Never mistake expense or complexity for quality. Quality is the result of dedication to details and strategy. In certain situations, the simplicity of a message means that the right spot is simple and therefore, inexpensive. The secret is in making the right strategic choices within a budget.”

“Most political ads appear not to have the slightest idea what they’re about, what they’re trying to do, and a moment after they’re done you wonder, what the hell was *that* all about?”

“People always want to get in one more thing. Don’t.”

Principle 6 continued... Focus. Keep it Simple.

“Another test for television ads: Turn off the sound and Look. Does it work? Then look away and listen. Does it work?”

“Write the way people talk – not the way people read – and those are totally different things. Any script that reads like a very good print ad is a very bad TV ad.”

“Three points of simple straightforward information, delivered in a clear, and low key manner, can be the most effective way to set up a surge of voter movement. The initial movement will be negligible, but once delivered, the information can transform the terrain of a campaign so basically and so completely that momentum, once ignited, burns like a wildfire. Yet without that initial and underestimated step, a campaign can find itself slogging away for every inch as if through quicksand.”

“At some point, in every campaign, a candidate needs to look voters in the eye and reveal something about themselves – who they are, what they believe, and what they want to do.”

“Give voters something to vote for. You can sometimes win solely by giving voters something to vote against, but hard fought victories, in genuinely contested races, happen when you give voters something to vote for, and to vote against, for the same reason.”

“Clutter on television is a great ad's best friend. It makes a great ad stand out. But clutter inside your ad or your strategy is your worst enemy.”

“Creativity that is disconnected from strategy is self-delusional and self-destructive. It's a car careening out of control down a curving mountain road. It's no longer a question of whether or not something bad is going to happen, but when – and when it does it won't be minor or reversible.”

“Voters will vote for stupid and sloppy campaigns, but only under duress.”

“I became a good pitcher when I stopped trying to make them miss the ball and started making them try to hit it.”
- Sandy Koufax

Principle 7:

If you're determined to lose, tell voters they're wrong.

“Many campaigns start out with the stubborn assumption that *they're* right and the voters are wrong, and if voters would only shape up and realize it, all will be well. Good luck.” – Joe Slade White

“Anyone who, in the middle of a heated argument with a spouse, has told them point blank that they're WRONG, knows how effective that tactic can be. Yet we do it all the time in campaigns.”

“It's all part of a natural but deadly syndrome that includes: ‘If they only knew...’ – ‘If they'd only listen...’ – or my favorite: ‘Are they CRAZY?’ And none of them work.”

“If people are against you, you can't just make them be for you, at the drop of a hat. It doesn't happen in life and it doesn't happen in campaigns. The first step (and sometimes even the first six steps) is to move people to undecided – carefully. Then, and only then, can you move enough of them to your side to win. It works, and yet it's usually the hardest thing to convince a campaign to do.”

“Never explain. If you're explaining, you're losing. It's just a subset of the “If they only knew...” Instead, change the terms of engagement – offer another way of looking at something – make it compelling. Then let voters make up their own minds. Show voters respect. Ask the right questions – voters will supply the answers.”

“I remember testing an ad that listed a series bad votes by our opponent. The ad ended with the line: “John Doe is NOT on your side!” A woman in the focus group reacted spontaneously, “Don't tell ME what to think!” And she was right. If we'd ended the ad with the simple Responsive Chord question, “So...is John Doe on your side?” she'd have supplied the right answer. And the message would've stuck – because it would've been hers. We changed the ending, and it worked.”

Principle 8:

Turn Your Opponent's Key Strength into a Weakness

“Every campaign has a thousand vulnerabilities, but only one that is an actual trigger point – a point that, if hammered repeatedly, will cause a campaign to collapse in on itself.” – Joe Slade White

“Sometimes a trigger point is an obvious negative, but often, it is actually an opponent's perceived strength.”

“Find that trigger point and hammer it and hammer it again, and when everyone on the steering committee and your best friends say you've absolutely hammered it way too much...hammer it four or five times more.”

“Never assume that an opponent's mistake, having been reported on the front page of the newspaper for days, has influenced even one damn voter.”

“When an attack is focused, low key, and backed with factual citations, voters do not see it as “negative,” especially if the Responsive Chord allows the voters to draw the negative conclusion themselves.”

“Any good attack paralyzes an opponent's campaign for at least 48 hours and then forces them onto your terrain, on your terms. Good attacks invite over-reaction – and that destroys balance.”

“Capitalize on your opponent's mistakes. But don't interrupt them. Never be paralyzed by your own mistakes – correct them if necessary but keep moving.”

“Figure out the one thing an opponent absolutely believes is his or her core strength, and then use it against them. It demoralizes an opponent.”

*“You don't punch at your opponent. You punch through your opponent.”
- Joe Louis*

Principle 8 continued...

Turn Your Opponent's Key Strength into a Weakness

"Never be afraid to apologize to voters for a mistake. But do it from strength, not weakness. The great David Garth virtually made a career out of saving lost campaigns through brilliant 'I made a mistake...' ads. Never whine. Never make excuses. Never blame others. Take responsibility. Take action. Voters are usually shocked when a politician does that.

"Raising doubt against an opponent is, in the end, far more devastating, than being certain. Campaigns are always trying to force voters to be absolutely certain that an opponent is completely wrong, or evil, or a threat to Western Civilization. And it never works, though campaigns keep trying. Certainty can always be undermined – but doubt permeates."

A good negative plan is like modern demolition. Every building has an architectural structure. And each structure has key elemental lynch pins. Destroy those with a very few carefully placed charges and the building falls inward, without even touching the buildings on either side. Old style negative is like swinging a wrecking ball at a building. It takes forever. It's messy. And it's expensive. Smart negative analyzes the key structural points in a opponent's campaign, sets a few carefully placed charges, and throws the switch. There are some small puffs of smoke, the opponent's campaign hovers for a moment, and then slowly at first, but irreversibly falls in on itself. And the voters are left standing, unharmed.

"Humor as a means of delivering an attack defies response. But humor, like all negative, is like working with nitroglycerin – it can destroy your opponent's campaign or it can blow up in your face. It demands calm. And the humor has to be in the audience's reaction, not in the ad."

"The secret to a successful attack? Was the action of your opponent self-inflicted? Go after an opponent's core strength. If the opponent did something on purpose, voters won't see an ad that points that out as being negative – because more often than not the self-inflicted wound reveals a violation of an opponent's self-proclaimed values.

"When you think the opponent's done in, never make the mistake of letting up. Remember all the rules we learned from horror movies when we were young – they apply to campaigns. You think the monster's gone. The monster is NOT gone. It's laying in wait, to see if you'll be dumb enough to let your guard down. Happens in every horror movie and in most campaigns."

"A strategy based on the premise of tactical success alone – victory in a duel of great guns – risks going wrong both quickly and irreversibly." - John Keegan, "The Price of Admiralty"

Principle 9: Anticipate Attacks Turn Potential Weakness into Strength

“Olympic ski racers and winning race car drivers are already three turns down the course in their minds.” – Joe Slade White

“In campaigns, eighty percent of all negative attacks can be predicted. In speeches, interviews, and news releases, an opponent will almost always tell you exactly what the attacks will be, and how they’ll be delivered, weeks in advance.”

“The hardest decision, which only comes from experience, is to know when to pre-empt and when to lie in wait. Pre-empt an attack only when it can be truly destroyed with less effort, expense, and strategic cost than responding later.”

“Pre-emption should turn vulnerability into a strength. It requires guts and finesse and it demoralizes the opponent.”

“But when a great response will actually do more harm to the opponent, lay a trap, wait patiently, and then strike quickly.”

“When attacked unexpectedly, use the energy of the attack to throw the opponent – as in judo. Deflect the attack and counter-attack immediately. Then, before the opponent can recover their balance, attack at once, and strongly, but on a different front.”

“Make sure that you are responding to the real message of the attack – the underlying responsive chord the attack evokes in voters – and not to the literal message of the attack itself. A response that limits itself solely to the literal attack, will only reinforce the attack, and cannot meet the real threat.”

Principle 9 continued... Anticipate Attacks

“Don’t let your opponent define the fight. Remember the moment in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when Indiana Jones, threatened by the warrior juggling two swords, first looks worried, then he thinks for a second, and draws his pistol.”

“Never get drawn into a fight that is stupid and irrelevant. That sounds obvious, but it rarely is under fire. Never change plans if your opponent wants you to. That also seems obvious, but it’s one of the most frequent mistakes campaigns make.”

“But when the time is right, change plans easily and quickly. Patience under fire is sometimes good. Paralysis never is.”

“Beware of detailed plans masquerading as a strategy. Their appearance of substance is the only thing more dangerous than no planning at all.”

“But creativity that isn’t accompanied and grounded by great detailed planning is inviting disaster. A great creative ad that isn’t connected to a strategic plan is like a child’s helium balloon tied with a loose knot – it may be pretty; it may be fun; but it’s going to have a bad ending.”

“Once you get them running, you stay right on top of them, and that way a small force can defeat a large one every time.” – General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson

A Final Thought.

“Anyone who thinks that these or any principles can be applied with mathematical precision and without exception is living in an alternate reality, and I wish them luck.

In the real world, mistakes happen, things go wrong. Get over it. Some of the best ads I’ve ever produced resulted from being forced to deal with the unexpected and taking advantage of accidents. It happens.



Joe Slade White has been recognized as one of the most innovative and successful national media strategists and producers in the field. A thirty-seven-year veteran of over four hundred political campaigns nationwide, Joe Slade White has compiled a lifetime winning record of over 75%. Clients have included Presidential candidates, U.S. Senators, Governors, Members of Congress, and Mayors, as well as statewide and local initiatives, and Fortune 500 corporations throughout the country.

White began his political career at 21, while a senior at Georgetown University, on the staff of Senator George McGovern’s 1972 presidential campaign. His place on the presidential campaign’s traveling staff also earned him a spot as one of the youngest members of President Richard Nixon’s infamous “White House Enemies List.” Joe then served as Senator McGovern’s U. S. Senate Press Secretary, before starting his own company at the age of 23. Joe Slade White has won more “Pollie Awards” for excellence in political television than any other Democratic media consultant. In a study based on the difficulty of consultants’ campaigns, Campaign Magazine named Joe Slade White & Company Inc. as one of the “Four Most Effective Political Consulting Firms in the Country.”

In 2012, Joe helped elect the only Democratic woman governor in the country, New Hampshire Governor Maggie Hassan. White’s 2010 victory for Illinois Governor Pat Quinn was dubbed the “#5 upset in the country” by Real Clear Politics. In the 2008 elections, the Washington Post’s Chris Cillizza chose “Kitchen Table” a TV spot created for Joe Biden as one of the five best in the nation.

The Washington Post named two of White’s campaigns, for Governor Jennifer Granholm of Michigan and for Congressman Chet Edwards of Texas, as two of the “Ten Best Run Incumbent Campaigns in the Nation.” And Salon.com chose one of White’s TV spots for Granholm, “Twins” as one of the five best TV spots in the country. Granholm won despite a billionaire opponent who outspent her by \$27 million dollars.

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