

Vote of No Confidence: Eleven Reasons Why Today's Candidates Are NOT Connecting with Voters

Even the most die-hard political junkies are tired of the negativity, bickering, and tendency to ignore the real issues that is so prominent in political campaigning today. Can midterm candidates re-engage voters in time for November's elections? Sure, says Maribeth Kuzmeski, but first they'll need to refresh their connecting IQ.

Hoboken, NJ (October 2010)—With just a month left to go until midterm elections, many Americans are growing weary of the political negativity taking over the airwaves. According to a recent Pew Center/National Journal poll, 77 percent of those polled said, “Republicans and Democrats in Washington have been bickering and opposing one another more than usual.” Coming on the heels of two years of well-publicized arguing in Congress over important issues for Americans—such as healthcare, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economy, and so on—and adding in the midterm campaign negativity, that statistic isn’t surprising. It would seem, says Maribeth Kuzmeski, that many of today’s politicians are in need of a little relationship rehab when it comes to voters.

“In the business world, sometimes you have to rehabilitate relationships or re-engage with clients or colleagues when relationships have gone stagnant or sour, and that is exactly what politicians need to do now,” says Kuzmeski, author of *The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95, www.TheConnectorsBook.com) and the new book *...And the Clients Went Wild! How Savvy Professionals Win All the Business They Want* (Wiley, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-470-60176-1, \$24.95, www.AndTheClientsWentWild.com).

“There’s no better time than an election season for them to re-examine why they are struggling to connect with today’s voters. They need to disconnect from the groupthink that has infiltrated both parties and re-examine what their constituents—and Americans in general—really want from their elected officials.”

Why do so many of today’s politicians seem so incapable of pinpointing what really matters to voters? Maribeth Kuzmeski points out that contrary to what they might think about themselves, many of today’s politicians are terrible at connecting, which makes it very difficult for them to build and sustain quality relationships with potential voters.

Kuzmeski suggests candidates consider an interesting statistic from DemocracyForAmerica.com regarding connecting with voters. The “Contacts per Vote” ratio shows that there is a 1 to 1 ratio for candidates who are able to connect one-on-one with voters. However, voters must be reached twenty times through mail, phone, and TV before the same result is reached.

“Obviously, you can’t go around to every voter in your district to make a personal connection with them,” says Kuzmeski. “But you can place a greater focus on using the opportunities you do have to reach voters to truly connect with them. Politicians today fight, bad-mouth, ridicule, scream, avoid talking about important issues, tell half-truths, and frustrate many. Whether you’re a Republican, Democrat, or somewhere in the middle, I think we would all agree that if there were more listening, collaboration, and compromise among today’s elected officials, a lot more could be accomplished both on the campaign trail and in each candidate’s office. But in order for that to happen, our politicians must learn how to truly connect with people, and that requires more than a handshake, a wink, and a smile.”

Kuzmeski suggests that today’s politicians need to stop talking about what other people are doing and start focusing on what *they* can do.

“The truth is that the negative political ads and other tactics that we are witnessing from candidates from both parties serve only to further alienate many voters,” she continues. “Complaining and blaming, regardless of whether you believe you are right or wrong, hurts everyone. The goal here isn’t to be unreasonably or illogically optimistic, but to have hope that we elect politicians who can actually get things done the way we all must do in business, in our families, with our children and neighbors.”

Here’s a look at why today’s candidates are struggling to connect with voters and advice from Kuzmeski on how they can start getting it right:

They revel in campaign negativity. The California gubernatorial race serves as the perfect example of a political race that has put productive political discourse aside and devolved into a cycle of negative ads. Democratic candidate Jerry Brown has referred to his Republican opponent, Meg Whitman, as Pinocchio in his ads, and Factcheck.org has pointed out that Whitman has presented information about Brown that is “misleading or worse” in her ads. Brown also has been recorded calling Meg Whitman insulting names. One thing is for sure. There is more negativity than ever in campaigns coast to coast—from Alaska to West Virginia to Delaware.

“A primary reason many candidates haven’t given up on negative campaign ads is that they often work,” says Kuzmeski. “Negative ads can be a very effective way to turn the electorate one way or the other. What I think candidates should consider is what kind of connector do you want to be? What do you want the foundation of your relationships with your constituents to be? Remember, it’s a small world, and burning a bridge today may hurt you in the future. I think you build stronger relationships both in business and politics when they come from a place of honesty and positivity. Make sure you always take the ethical high road. Don’t make decisions based on how they might negatively affect your business or political career. Do what’s right and you will have nothing to be ashamed of and much success down the road.”

They forget the business side of politics. Most of us would get fired (or at the very least severely reprimanded) if we talked about our coworkers to customers the way many of today’s candidates talk about their opponents. What today’s politicians need is a lesson in the all-important practices of compromise and collaboration.

“In business, progress is made through collaboration and consensus, and that should be the way things are accomplished in politics,” says Kuzmeski. “Just because you are saying something more loudly than your political opponent doesn’t mean you are forming a better connection with voters. Today’s politicians need to have a vision that looks past the next election. They need to be able to show voters that they will be able to work well with others regardless of party. They need to focus on what is best for their constituents rather than beating their opponents.”

They have low social IQs. At first glance, you might be thinking, *Politicians must have high social IQs. They have to in order to get people to vote for them!* But consider that at its most basic level, your social IQ is the awareness of how others react to what you say and do. It is made up of a person’s own social awareness including empathy, inclusion, control, influence, and self-presentation. Do you think your elected officials really understand how you perceive what they say and do? If they did, would they constantly get bogged down in bickering and negativity?

Unfortunately, if there were a Mensa for social IQ, many of today’s politicians would not make the cut. A simple way for politicians to determine their social IQ (This will work for you, too!) is to think about how they currently interact with people. They should consider whether they are exclusive, controlling, and distant, or inclusive, empathetic, and warm. How often do they reach out? Do they take into account what others think? And most importantly, how do they make others feel?

In *The Connectors*, there is a “Connector Assessment” that helps readers categorize their connector skills and determine the areas where they need improvement. The following quick and simple assessment will help politicians and the rest of us increase our social intelligence:

- Review the day and your interactions with colleagues and staff.
- Rate today’s positive impact on others (Grades A-F).
- Write down the notable successes and failures from the day.
- Prepare for better future interactions.

“I think today’s politicians might take for granted the opportunities they have to connect with others,” says Kuzmeski. “If they would just take a second to think before they speak. Better anticipate how people might react to what they say. Commit to communicating positively. And, always, always, always be mindful of the fact that their words and actions have a powerful effect on others. Then I think they would truly start to connect with us on a more powerful level.”

They speak before they think. Too often today’s political discussions seem to go off the rails of productive political discourse into name-calling, finger-pointing, and blame-dodging. Sometimes it just seems that politicians can’t get over themselves enough to focus on what is best for American citizens.

“Today there is so much anger and partisanship that much of the time when a politician is speaking it’s to attack an opponent or offend the opposing party,” says Kuzmeski. “Anger breeds more anger. You can’t connect with other people and work productively with them when there is so much distrust and animosity. Politicians must find common ground and start showing each other some respect. When their negativity carries over into the legislative process and derails legislation that could benefit Americans, it wastes taxpayer dollars and negatively impacts the future of the nation. Perhaps, what our politicians could really use is a reprimand from my grandma, who would scold every one of them for not playing nice.”

They are two-faced. Politicians are infamous for portraying one persona to the public while acting another way behind doors. Doing this only lends itself to short-term gains, no real long-term wins. The truth always comes out!

“Politicians are constantly caught saying and doing things that go against the public persona they create for themselves,” says Kuzmeski. “Politicians should start using a standard that we can all use to keep our authenticity levels in check. And that’s to constantly assess if the messages we are delivering behind closed doors are the same messages we are putting out to our clients, employees, and other stakeholders, or in the case of politicians, their constituents and their staffs.”

They focus too much on number one. It’s a dog-eat-dog world, and the urge to look out for number one can sometimes be overwhelming—especially for politicians. They may say they are doing what they are doing for their constituents, but are they really just doing it to get elected or re-elected? Sometimes it’s hard to tell. And of course, other times we can see right through them. (Rod Blagojevich, that’s you!) But, and this goes for politicians and all the rest of us, while primarily protecting your own interests might ensure your survival, you probably won’t experience across-the-board success until you put others first. Instead of asking, “What’s in it for me?” how about asking a crazy question, “What’s in it for *them*?” That’s how things get done.

“Make no mistake, putting others first is hard work,” says Kuzmeski. “It’s amazing how far a welcoming demeanor, empathy, and authenticity can take you. If you’re ready and willing to stand with your constituents, clients, employees—whomever you need to reach to be successful—and help meet their needs, they may just return the favor. That’s the true path to greatness: It lives not *in* you, but *through* you.”

They fight anger with anger. When confronted by an angry person, the knee-jerk reaction for almost all of us is to argue back. However, many studies have shown that fighting anger with anger seldom works. No matter how tough it is, whether you're being confronted by an angry voter, an angry client, or an angry colleague, do the opposite of what you feel like doing. Don't strike back. It's ugly! Take a deep breath and remain calm.

“When faced with difficult situations with others, instead of giving a reactionary, defensive response, offer solutions,” says Kuzmeski. “Your first reaction may be to explain why you are right, why the other person is overreacting, or to give her additional information so she can better see the situation from your point of view. However, if you check those reactions, and instead start working toward a resolution, your chances of success are much greater. You can't control the way others act, but you can control your own actions.”

They are constant one-uppers. Especially during election season, politicians always seem to be trying to one-up each other. Three words: Don't. Do. It. When you're always trying to top other people, you're ruining communication and very likely losing focus on the issues that really matter.

They don't listen. The inability to truly listen is a problem that plagues many of us. Think about it. What do you do when you are “listening”? You think about what you are going to say next, right? Politicians do the same thing. Rather than listen to the opposing point of view, they think about what they can say or do to win the argument. If politicians listened with less emotional reaction, they might understand more and be able to better connect with the public.

Very few people in this world take the time to practice “curious listening.” We instead partially listen, get ready to respond, and let our minds drift. Here are the four steps of curious listening:

1. Hear the essence of what the other person is saying by repeating back what you heard.
2. Ask questions so that the other person knows that you are actively seeking to understand why something is important to him.
3. Make sure you aren't acting on unsubstantiated assumptions. Confirm with the other person that you have correctly understood what he is saying.
4. Listen for the “remarkable.” In every conversation you have, the person will say something unique and remarkable. If you listen for his “remarkable,” you will be able to come back to that later (even in a subsequent conversation) and connect with him on a different level. The “remarkable” may be something as simple as, “My wife is expecting,” or, “We have ten constituents who have won purple hearts in the past year,” or, “We just landed a new business in the state!” The key is remembering it. It shows you are really curious about what happened, how the other person feels, and what resolution was reached.

“Politicians need to remember that listening is not about just winning the argument,” says Kuzmeski. “The ultimate goal is improving the country. And listening to one another is the only way we will be able to achieve it.”

They flip-flop. “Too often, politicians answer questions in talking points and then flip-flop on their answers depending on who’s asking them what. Pay your constituents the respect of answering their questions with truthful, well-thought-out answers,” advises Kuzmeski.

They aren’t positively passionate. If you’re truly energetic and passionate about what you do, other people will notice. But that energy and passion must be conveyed in a positive way. If you are passionate and it comes out as a combative, my-way-or-the-highway mentality, people will avoid you like the plague.

“You can’t connect with others and work with them if they avoid you,” says Kuzmeski. “I think that one thing we might all be able to agree on with respect to politicians is that by and large they are passionate people. What seems to be the problem these days is that those running for office are so blinded by their passion and belief systems that they can’t find common ground with those on the other side of the fence. It’s time that they realize that their passion can fuel compromise just as easily as it can discord.”

“Obviously, politicians aren’t the only ones struggling to connect today,” says Kuzmeski. “This advice can be applied to anyone in any profession. We all need help at some point learning how to connect with others. What’s important to take away from all of this is the difference that truly connecting can make. For our politicians, it means making compromises that benefit their voters and their country. For those of us in the business world, it means bettering our businesses and reaching our goals. There needn’t be any flip-flopping when it comes to connecting. It is always the right direction to take!”

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About the Author:

Maribeth Kuzmeski, MBA, is the author of five books, including *...And the Clients Went Wild! How Savvy Professionals Win All the Business They Want* (Wiley, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-470-60176-1, \$24.95, www.AndTheClientsWentWild.com) and *The Connectors: How the World’s Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95, www.TheConnectorsBook.com). She is the founder of Red Zone Marketing, LLC, which consults with businesses from entrepreneurial firms to Fortune 500 corporations on strategic marketing planning and business growth. Maribeth has personally consulted with some of the world’s most successful CEOs, entrepreneurs, and professionals. An internationally recognized speaker, she shares the tactics that businesspeople use today to create more sustainable business relationships, sales, and marketing successes.

She is an international keynote speaker and regularly speaks to audiences on topics relating to business development, marketing, and sales strategies. She is also a member of Entrepreneurs’ Organization (EO) and is a regular media contributor appearing on Fox News, ABC News,

WGN-TV, and in publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *BusinessWeek*, *Entrepreneur*, and *Forbes*.

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About the Book:

...*And the Clients Went Wild! How Savvy Professionals Win All the Business They Want* (Wiley, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-470-60176-1, \$24.95, www.AndTheClientsWentWild.com) is available at bookstores nationwide, major online booksellers, or directly from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797.

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