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## Congressional Candidate Dan Silver and KNP Communications

After months of long hours, grueling public events, and endless fund-raising, it was finally election night. Dan Silver, candidate for the U.S. congressional seat in Florida's 19th Congressional District, stood at his election-night party, watching the TV screen as the returns trickled in. He was up against Representative Wyatt Tyler, a well-liked incumbent who had been reelected 13 consecutive times. It had been a hard-fought race, and Silver just didn't know if he would pull it off.

Silver himself had been elected to the Florida legislature several times, so he was no stranger to the stresses of political life. However, early in his U.S. congressional campaign, Silver recognized that it would be a formidable challenge to compete with Tyler's ability to personally connect with constituents:

[Having served in the Florida legislature for 14 years, I had a] reasonable amount of confidence that I would be able to transition from the state to the federal candidacy on issues. . . . What I realized real fast, though, was that when you get into a highly competitive race—when you're face-to-face with someone who's been doing this for 26 years, as my opponent had been, [and someone who has a] natural connection with people whether they be Democrats or Republicans—you had to step your game up.

To help Silver compete, Silver's campaign manager, Brian Smoot, had suggested they seek the advice of KNP Communications, a political consulting firm whose aim was to help its clients become more effective public speakers. Silver, hoping to maximize his chance at a successful candidacy, readily agreed to engage the team from KNP. Sitting at the election-night party, surrounded by supporters and waiting for the election to be called, Silver knew he was about to find out whether his investment had paid off.

### The Battleground: Florida's 19th Congressional District

During the 1980s and 1990s, all of South Florida grew dramatically as the region transformed from a vacation and retirement destination to a modern regional economic capital. The 19th Congressional District covered a long, thin stretch of the southeastern coastline from Palm Beach County south into Broward County, taking in pieces of West Palm Beach, Coral Springs, and North Lauderdale. The district's demographic composition reflected its popularity as a place to retire. Nearly one in four residents was over age 65—one of the largest proportions of any district in the country. According to

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2000 U.S. Census data, the district was 85% Caucasian.<sup>i</sup> The median income was \$46,178, compared with the national average of \$41,944, and 4.9% of families lived below the poverty level, compared with 9.2% nationally.<sup>ii</sup>

Republican incumbent Wyatt Tyler had represented the 19th Congressional District for more than 20 years and had been involved in Fort Lauderdale politics for more than a decade before that: as chief city prosecutor, municipal judge, city commissioner, vice mayor, and finally mayor of Fort Lauderdale from 1975 to 1981. In Congress, Tyler's signature legislative accomplishment was his bipartisan work on the Clinton welfare reform bill. By 2006, Tyler's seniority had put him next in line for the highly coveted chairmanship of the Ways and Means Committee, should the Republican Party retain its majority and Tyler win his seat again. Tyler had exceptionally strong name recognition among voters in the 19th Congressional District and had won the 2004 election with more than 63% of the vote. His good-natured, "grandfatherly" persona had broad appeal, and his internal poll numbers revealed that he was extremely well-liked by his constituents. Tyler was a formidable opponent for Silver.

## Dan Silver: Moving Up

Dan Silver was born in 1957 in Cleveland, Ohio, to a public school teacher and a small-business owner. He graduated from the Ohio State University in 1979 and earned his JD from Case Western Reserve University Law School in 1982. In 1985, after practicing law in Cleveland for three years, Dan Silver and his wife, Dori, moved to Boca Raton, on Florida's sunny southeastern shoreline. After building a successful career as a lawyer at a statewide Florida law firm, Silver won a seat in the Florida state legislature, where he served for a decade and a half, from 1992 to 1996 in the Florida House of Representatives and thereafter in the Florida Senate. While in the House, Silver worked to improve education and toughen criminal justice laws. He also passed the Holocaust Education Act, which mandated teaching the lessons from the Holocaust in all Florida public schools. In the Florida Senate, Silver quickly rose through the ranks and became the Senate Democratic leader.

When Silver decided to run for U.S. Congress, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) put him in touch with Brian Smoot, an experienced Democratic strategist. Smoot had played a senior role in Congressman Rodney Alexander's upset victory in Louisiana in 2002 and was tapped to be Alexander's chief of staff, one of the youngest on Capitol Hill. When Alexander switched parties from Democratic to Republican in August 2004, Smoot left Alexander's staff and briefly worked for Representative Nancy Pelosi, who was the House minority leader at the time. At Pelosi's request, Smoot handled the home stretch of a Democratic campaign in Pennsylvania's 8th Congressional District, a long-shot race for an open seat in a district where Republicans held a strong majority among registered voters. It was during this campaign that Smoot met Seth Pendleton, who was volunteering his time with the campaign and helping the candidate prepare for debates. Smoot and Pendleton admired each other's work and remained in touch after the race ended.

After the 2004 election, Smoot met with the DCCC about managing a race in the 2006 cycle. One of the earliest developing contests was Silver's congressional race. "It was early in the cycle and I was interested in finding a challenger that had a chance to go up against an incumbent," explained Smoot. "I had worked for a Democratic incumbent who had switched parties, so I wanted to go back out and beat a Republican . . . and the numbers showed that it was a competitive race."

## KNP Communications

KNP Communications was cofounded in 2005 by Matt Kohut, John Neffinger, and Seth Pendleton. Kohut, a speechwriter and former musician, and Pendleton, a trained actor and member of the Screen Actors Guild, had known each other for years, and both had received master's degrees from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. While working as a speechwriter and researcher there, Kohut met Neffinger, also a Harvard graduate and, at the time, the communications director for the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School.

The three first formally discussed working together after the 2004 elections, brought together by their shared sense of frustration that the Democratic nominee, John Kerry, was not able to adequately connect with voters on a personal level. As Neffinger explained:

While the Republicans connected with voters' emotions, the Democrats were making the case that they had the better policies. . . . Both Kerry and Gore learned oration at their respective fathers' knees. It's a different style, pre-Oprah. Kerry didn't talk to voters like regular folks; he spoke directly to history—you could almost see him imagining his words chiseled in stone.

The KNP principals believed deeply in the importance of a candidate's personal presentation style. They started KNP both to bring attention to the importance of personal communication style and to train others to become more effective communicators. KNP's first clients were in the private sector, and at the time of the 2006 election private-sector clients still constituted a sizable percentage of KNP's business. KNP had also worked with a range of politically progressive professionals and activists, as well as with Democratic political candidates.

KNP's approach distinguished it from other firms in the field. KNP stressed the importance of nonverbal behavior in effective communication, and of projecting both strength and warmth to an audience. KNP believed that presenters who looked "coached" were generally much less effective at emotionally connecting with their audiences and were therefore less persuasive. The firm's goal was to get clients to present in natural, authentic, unmechanical ways. To this end, KNP practiced what it termed inside-out training—a technique for changing behavior by altering attitudes rather than by directly changing physical mechanics (outside-in training). In addition, Neffinger explained that KNP aimed "to tread lightly, to do the surgery with as few cuts as possible." KNP found personalized, tailored ways for clients to get into an effective mood and frame of mind just prior to a presentation, speech, debate, or interview. According to Pendleton, the goal was to get the client to express genuine emotions:

Oftentimes, [a firm's] approach is prescriptive: "This is what you do for every candidate." . . . We found that it's a very tailored psychological process . . . and it needs to be customized. You really need to know what gets the candidate to work . . . because when they talk about those things [about which they are most passionate], their eyes light up.

Kohut related KNP's business model to acting:

There's the Laurence Olivier/Cary Grant school (trained actors) . . . or the Al Pacino school (method acting). We call this the outside-in and inside-out, where you tell Cary Grant to raise an eyebrow and the eyebrow goes up. But Al Pacino, he thinks about when someone set him off when he was an 11-year-old kid, and his whole face explodes. Most people who are not trained actors can't do outside-in on command very well. They look wooden and fake. What

you have to do instead is to find ways for them to tap into authentic emotions and express those the way they do naturally with friends, while still staying appropriate for the setting.

KNP made the case that these issues were critical to professional and political success. In 2005, KNP cosponsored formal research that quantified the influence of nonverbal communication on election outcomes and found that a candidate's nonverbal cues were comparable to campaign spending in their effect on election outcomes.

## **Election 2006: A Race to Watch**

Despite Representative Wyatt Tyler's personal appeal and long relationship with the district, there had been growing national animosity toward incumbents leading up to the 2006 election. Florida's 19th Congressional District also had an extremely high number of registered Independents, whose votes would be a key deciding factor in the race. Thus, the Democratic Party had a great opportunity to take the seat if it could offer an appealing alternative to Tyler. From the start, the race was deemed one of the most competitive of the election cycle, and as a result a number of key Democratic leaders—including Bill and Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and Senator Barack Obama—traveled to Florida's 19th to personally campaign for Dan Silver. The DCCC, the official congressional fund-raising arm of the Democratic Party, also contributed significantly to the campaign. All of these factors combined to make this a race to watch in 2006.

While Silver had earned a reputation among his colleagues as exceptionally smart and hardworking, with a firm grasp of policy, he was less well-known by the constituents of the 19th Congressional District. His state senate district covered only a small part of the congressional district as a whole, and even within his state senate district, he was not overwhelmingly well-known. Voters in the remainder of the congressional district not only knew less about Silver but also generally voted less Democratic than those within the state senate district.

Silver worked hard to get out and meet new people and was generally engaging in person. However, he occasionally hit off-notes, projecting awkwardness or pride. He was always articulate on policy issues, but voters often got little sense of his character beyond his intellect and toughness. Silver did not project the kind of common touch that made Tyler seem so likable even to relative strangers.

## **Introducing KNP to Dan Silver**

Early in the campaign, Dan Silver recognized the need to improve his abilities to exude warmth and to connect with people on a personal level. Early poll data showed that Wyatt Tyler was leading, with 52% of surveyed voters saying they would vote for Tyler versus 44% saying they would vote for Silver (4% were undecided).<sup>iii</sup> According to Brian Smoot, Silver's campaign manager, "Dan was 110% interested in being the best candidate. . . . As opposed to many other candidates, he was cognizant and willing to discuss what he thought were not his strong points." After consultations with Smoot, Silver agreed that he needed to work on connecting with his constituents, or Tyler's personal appeal could prove a decisive advantage.

In the summer of 2006, Smoot called Seth Pendleton, whom he had met during the 2004 campaign in Pennsylvania. Pendleton suggested bringing the KNP team to work with Silver.

At this point, Smoot knew that "warmth and connectivity were of critical importance [for Silver] because he was going up against Wyatt Tyler," and felt it was necessary to get some assessment of

Silver's communication skills, particularly his ability to connect with audiences. For the initial assessment, Smoot decided to have Silver participate in a debate without any preparation. This untelevised debate was held at the Tower Club in West Palm Beach, Florida, in front of a decidedly Republican audience. As Silver recalled:

This was not a friendly group of people. We decided to accept the challenge to go to the debate. . . . I didn't do a lot of preparation on an open or a close, which is very important when you're doing a debate. So I went in and tried it the best I could . . . but I walked out knowing that Wyatt Tyler was a lot more comfortable with that group, as you would expect, and he had experience with the open and close . . . and we walked out and I said, "Wow, this was not a good situation." . . . The follow-up to this whole thing was a blog by one of the local ABC news reporters [who had been] the moderator [of this debate], and his comment was "If Silver thinks he's going to win the race based on that performance, forget it!" . . . [I knew] we had work to do.

## The Sessions with KNP

Brian Smoot cleared two days on Dan Silver's schedule for the KNP team's initial visit. The team's first task was to impress upon Silver the importance of personal presentation on election outcomes. This was accomplished in two ways. First, the KNP team staged a mock debate that engaged the whole campaign team and allowed KNP both to affirm Silver's strengths and to point out areas where Silver could improve his verbal and nonverbal responses. The KNP team also appealed to Silver's logical side by sharing the research results that demonstrated how influential nonverbal cues were on the decisions of swing voters.

Silver was extremely responsive to KNP's feedback and quickly made adjustments. As Silver explained, "You have to go into this process as an open slate because if you've got any barriers up, you're either going to get defensive or you're not going to be responsive to the changes. I had a goal—I had a mission here, and that was to win the election and that was a long process. Every piece of the campaign was a part of that process. You really have to go into it with an open mind."

First, Silver learned to address an audience's feelings about an issue before descending into policy specifics. Faced with a question about then-record-high gas prices, Silver was taught to begin by talking about how much more it now cost people to fill up their gas tanks—the same kind of conversations his voters were having with one another—before discussing specific policy prescriptions. Similarly, in discussing terrorism, Silver practiced telling the story of when he was in Israel and had to take cover in a bomb shelter during a rocket attack. Only after telling that engaging story would he go on to talk about U.S. policy.

Silver and KNP also addressed several disadvantageous nonverbal habits on day one. For instance, Silver had a habit of keeping his eyebrows raised during public appearances. Raised eyebrows communicated shock, surprise, or fear and could reflect a sense of uncertainty about one's situation and ability to cope. Raising one's eyebrows was also a common way of emphasizing or expressing urgency about a particular point, and indeed Silver was often trying to convey the importance of his message—but he was doing it *too* often. "When he'd get going," said Seth Pendleton, "his eyebrows would be up the whole time. This is a great nonverbal signal for emphasis, but if you overuse it, it loses its impact and makes you look upset and alarmist. It's like TYPING AN ENTIRE E-MAIL IN ALL CAPS." Interacting with or watching someone whose eyebrows were raised for an extended period could elicit anxiety and discomfort. The team coached Silver to relax his eyebrows and to raise them only to emphasize a particularly important point.

Silver also raised his eyebrows when he was meeting someone for the first time; his default expression involved raised eyebrows and a smile. In this context, raised eyebrows were an appropriate signal of warmth, but they also conveyed an eagerness to please. "This was the surrender smile," John Neffinger explained. "It said: Please like me! I'm no threat to you!" The team coached Silver to project more confidence and warmth by smiling without the raised eyebrows.

On day two, the KNP team focused on creating authenticity in Silver's self-presentation style. To begin, KNP cued up video of Silver's recent public appearances so that he could see how he looked from a voter's point of view. Most people found watching themselves on videotape even more painful than listening to themselves on an answering machine; even politicians avoided it. Nevertheless, Silver was open to the kind of critical self-observation the exercise required.

The KNP team played a video of a recent TV interview, and Silver watched it intently. When the clip ended, the team asked Silver how he thought it went. Silver mentioned some things he wished he had remembered to say, but for the most part he said it seemed okay. However, as the KNP team explained, "When voters see your name on the ballot, they'll recall the images and feelings they associate with you. By definition, swing voters are less likely to strongly support or oppose your policies. But if they remember you smiling and feel good about you, you're likely to get their vote."

They played the clip again and said, "This time, notice when you smile."

Silver watched himself on the screen, thought for a moment, and then spoke. "I never smile."

Silver saw the problem clearly, but it was not just a matter of getting him to remember to choose the right facial expression. "People wear fake smiles all the time, but they rarely fool anyone into thinking they are actually happy when they're not," explained Neffinger. "The great thing about smiling genuinely is that you can actually make other people feel happy when they look at you. But you have to be feeling happy yourself for it to work." The KNP team posed a question: What made the candidate smile? Before Silver could answer himself, Smoot interjected: "Well, he always smiles when he talks about his son, how proud he is of him. He just lights up." According to Neffinger, the ideal way to get clients to project more warmth was to "find a setting where the client is naturally warm, like a backyard barbeque, and then import that behavior into the relevant context." Armed with that insight, the team asked Silver to stand and deliver his standard stump speech. Midway through, they asked Silver to pause a second and talk about his son. He was momentarily confused, but it didn't matter—as soon as the thought of his son entered his head, he couldn't keep the smile off of his face. "Brian? Well, he's just about to graduate from college . . . which is really something. . . . I mean, it seems like not long ago he was just waist-high and running around with his baseball glove everywhere." Silver's whole demeanor changed: his shoulders relaxed, his vocal tone softened, and he smiled warmly, with a twinkle in his eye.

From this experience a new strategy was born. In front of every audience Silver spoke to, he would make sure that at some point they saw him projecting that same kind of genuine warmth. At first, he would take a moment during each speech to say: "You know my son, Brian, is about to graduate from college." And for the next minute or so he forgot about politics and just talked about the son he was so proud of. Eventually, he would pivot back to politics, speculating about the world his son's children would inherit—the state of the environment, Social Security, or the terrorist threat—and he would be right back into his stump speech. But for that one minute, the voters would see not a candidate, but a father—not a politician, but a regular guy, with the same kinds of hopes and worries they had. The idea was not that Silver had to talk about his son at every engagement; he could talk about other positive, hopeful topics just as well. But that experience got Silver used to the feeling of smiling "from the inside out" and noticing the effect that had on the audience.

Finally, KNP helped Silver identify times when he should be careful *not* to smile. Silver sometimes showed a tendency to flash a quick smile when criticizing his political opponents. For example, as he was describing how and why a particular Bush administration policy was appalling, explained Kohut, “he would smile at the political irony of what he’d just explained, but his audience was just feeling bad, because he’d just described how bad this policy was for them.” This incongruity between the emotion he was expressing and the emotion he was eliciting in his audience could arouse discomfort and make him seem less empathetic to the audience.

After two days of working through these issues, Silver returned to the campaign trail with a new perspective on how to connect emotionally with his audiences. He and Smoot kept up an ongoing discussion about how he was presenting himself and what he could improve. The KNP team also returned two more times for single-day sessions to reinforce Silver’s new approach and practice with him for specific high-profile events as the campaign entered the home stretch.

## Conclusion

Just days before the election, poll data indicated that Dan Silver had gained an edge, with 50% of voters now saying they would choose Silver, compared with 48% for Wyatt Tyler.<sup>iv</sup> This was a great improvement from the initial polls that had put Silver eight points behind Tyler, but the numbers were still too close to call. It was anybody’s race. As Silver watched the election results come in, he wondered: “Did I manage to connect enough with voters on a personal level?” Moreover, he still wondered: “Is being warm really what counts? How much do these self-presentation strategies actually affect election results? My positions haven’t changed, and what I am saying hasn’t changed—isn’t that what really matters to voters?”

## Endnotes

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- i U.S. Census Bureau, retrieved July 2010.
- ii Ibid.
- iii Majority Watch: RT Strategies and Constituent Dynamics, August 27–29, 2006.
- iv Ibid., October 24–26, 2006.