

CHAPTER 9

CONVERSATIONS WITH CONSULTANTS

Throughout the spring of 1994 the Mike Bird for Governor headquarters was besieged with telephone calls from political consultants wanting to handle the Bird campaign. More than ten different consultants, most of them based in the Washington, D.C., area, telephoned or sent a prospectus or mailed in a videotape filled with their best television advertisements from previous campaigns. Occasionally consultants would be passing through Denver or Colorado Springs and would set up appointments with Mike Bird and his top campaign staff to try and market their services.

Most of the consultants tried to sell themselves on two points: (1) they had run many successful campaigns in the past, and (2) they were the toughest and most aggressive consultants around. Another technique which was used, and which greatly benefitted the Bird for Governor campaign staff, was to give free advice on how to run the campaign during the period before the campaign organization selected a consultant.

Giving free advice obviously was a delicate task for political consultants working at selling their wares. They wanted to give enough advice that candidates and other campaign personnel could tell the consultant really knew his or her stuff. On the other hand, the consultant did not want to give so much advice that the candidate would begin to think he or she now knew everything the consultant had to offer. That would tempt the candidate into running his or her own campaign and saving the consultant fees.

A typical consultant's telephone call came into Bird for Governor headquarters on April 25, 1994. The call was from Jay Severin, senior partner of Severin/Aviles/Associates of New York city, a well-known Republican political consulting firm. Severin/Aviles handled the successful election campaign of Alabama Governor Guy Hunt, the first Republican elected governor in that overwhelmingly Democratic state in 116 years. The firm also managed the 1991 Republican effort in New

Jersey to win control of both houses of the state legislature from the Democrats. With the guidance of Severin/Aviles, the New Jersey GOP won veto-proof majorities in both the state senate and the state assembly for the first time in 36 years.¹

The first question a prospecting political consultant always asks is: "How is the campaign going?" When Jay Severin asked that question of the Mike Bird campaign staff, he received a briefing on Bruce Benson's entrance into the governor race in Colorado and the impact that Benson's money was having on the campaign.

"Son of Ross Perot" campaigns are happening throughout the country, Severin said, pointing out that millionaires all over America were trying to do at the state level in 1994 what Ross Perot tried to accomplish at the national level in 1992, i.e., turn a lot of money into a winning election campaign. There is hardly a state where there is not a Perot-style candidate running, Severin continued, implying that the problem faced by the Bird campaign staff - trying to defeat a millionaire opponent - was not all that unusual this particular election year.

Bruce Benson's great strength, Severin opined, was that he had never held an elected political office. The year 1994 was going to be a good year for an "outsider" like Benson to beat an "insider" like Mike Bird. But Benson had a problem that Bird could possibly exploit, Severin said. Voters want an outsider who has some experience, someone with the know-how to effect change, and Benson lacked that kind of political experience. Off the top of his head, Severin suggested that Bird draw attention to his extensive experience in Colorado government with campaign slogans such as "Ideas that Work!" and "Experience that Counts!"

When told that Mike Bird would have limited funds with which to buy television and radio advertisements, Jay Severin advised that Bird would have to make his campaign pitch in the free media, primarily Colorado's leading daily newspapers. This was a job, Severin said, he could really help with. As a nationally known political consultant who had been quoted widely in *USA Today*, *Time*, and the *Washington Post*,

Severin could get Colorado journalists to give extensive and favorable coverage to the Bird campaign.

"Journalists know me or they don't," Severin explained. "If they know me, they enjoy talking to someone who is an often quoted political analyst. They will take my spin or framing of issues when they won't take it from the candidate or campaign manager."

Severin also suggested a way of getting a great deal of television advertising for comparatively little money. He said to play the same television advertisement on the eight major television stations in Colorado all at the same time. That way everyone who was watching commercial, non-cable television in Colorado at that hour would see the ad. Severin characterized this as the "cheap way" to get the message out.²

The Bird for Governor campaign accepted all this free advice from Jay Severin but made no commitment to hire his firm's services. Severin/Aviles would have to wait - along with all the other political consultants trying to get the campaign's business - while Mike Bird took his time making up his mind.

Another political consultant who made frequent sales calls to Bird for Governor headquarters was Jamie S. Osborne, a vice president at Colonial Media Group in Washington, D.C. Similar to Severin, Osborne was ready to dispense free campaign advice in order to give a potential customer an idea of what his or her money could buy. Osborne was a strong advocate of using inexpensive cable television in order to have a presence on local television at a very low cost. He noted that cable TV ads could be negotiated down to a rate as low as \$1 per 30-second spot. He recommended saturating cable, where the cost was low, and buying only a few ads on broadcast TV, where the cost was high.³

Another technique Osborne recommended was to purchase advertisements on broadcast TV just before and just after prime time. Viewers will think the ads are running on prime time, he explained, but the TV stations will be charging much less than prime time rates. Osborne believed this was important because Bruce Benson, with

millions of dollars to spend, was going to be running ads all over prime time, and to be competitive Mike Bird would have to "seem" like he was running ads on prime time too.

Jamie Osborne was careful to point out the advantages of having a political consultant based in Washington, D.C. He noted that the Republican National Committee now had a "suite" of state-of-the-art video editing facilities in Washington that were available for use by "Republican consultants." Being a Republican oriented firm, Colonial Media thus had access, at very low cost, to this Republican equipment, the very best video editing equipment that money could buy. Colonial media also had satellite transmission facilities by which Mike Bird TV ads made in Washington could be instantaneously beamed to all the television stations in Colorado.

Osborne counseled that the Bird campaign get lots of video footage of Mike Bird speaking and debating on the floor of the Colorado state Senate chamber. He also said there should be lots of shots taken of Bird talking with and relaxing with his family. If television ads have to be made in a hurry, he said, and they often do, it would be a big help to have those kinds of video scenes already done.

Most of all, Jamie Osborne urged the Bird campaign to begin reserving television advertising time in the Denver market for the period just prior to the August 9, 1994, primary election. He warned that lots of time was already being bought on Denver television during those critical weeks in late July and early August, and TV time in Denver also was disappearing fast in the period just prior to the general election in November. Better to buy the time and then cancel it, he said, than to not buy it and then not be able to get it when you need it.

Jamie Osborne said the Colonial Media management group had met for an hour to discuss prospects for the Bird for Governor campaign. It was decided that \$50,000 to \$100,000 would be enough money to make an effective TV buy in the Denver market in the late July and early August period prior to the primary election. Their suggestion was that, if \$100,000 was available, spend \$80,000 on TV ads during the last

three weeks before the primary. The remaining \$20,000 should be used to buy TV ads in June that would be designed to increase Mike Bird's "early recognition" by Republican voters.⁴

Every telephone call from Jamie Osborne ended with the Bird for Governor campaign staff being non-committal about when a campaign consultant might finally be chosen. As a result, Jamie Osborne continued to call the campaign headquarters periodically, and every time he called the campaign staff gladly listened to the latest "free" campaign advice that was offered.

A COLORADO POLITICAL CONSULTANT?

By early May of 1994 it was becoming obvious to the Bird campaign staff that the campaign lacked the money to really make full use of an out-of-state political consultant. All the prospective consultants talked in terms of television advertising campaigns costing many hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Bird campaign would be lucky to come up with just \$100,000 for television advertising, and possibly might have to make do with a significantly smaller amount of money.

Carol M. Hadl, an advertising salesperson for KOAA-TV, the NBC affiliate in Colorado Springs and Pueblo, attended a Bird for Governor "Thank you, volunteers!" party. She inquired about the Bird campaign's television ads, wanting to know whether they were going to be made in-state or out-of-state. She suggested strongly that Bird have his ads made in-state. "The advertising communities in Denver and Colorado Springs get offended," she said, "when these things leave the state."⁵

A subsequent telephone call to Carol Hadl turned up some interesting information about the problems of doing political advertising on TV. She noted that advertisements shot on film look much better than ads shot on videotape, but film production can be as much as four to six times more expensive than videotape production. At that moment, it was instantly decided that the Bird campaign would be using videotape rather than film.

Carol Hadl noted further that KOAA-TV or any other television station in Colorado could video tape a 30 second commercial for the Bird campaign. The problem was writing the ad. Neither KOAA-TV nor any other television station in the state would have an ad writer with expertise in writing *political* ads. An advertising agency would be needed for that, and off the top of her head Carol Hadl did not know of an ad agency in Colorado Springs or Denver that specialized in writing political ads.

Dispensing with an out-of-state political consultant and producing Mike Bird's political ads inside the state of Colorado was an idea with great appeal to the Bird campaigners. Bruce Benson was having all of his work done out-of-state, from his polling to his television advertising to his direct mail to even where his 800 number was answered. If Mike Bird did *not* hire an out-of-state political consultant, he could argue he was running an "all-Colorado" campaign. This could be contrasted with Benson, who was known to be running an "all-out-of-state" campaign.

For about a week, the Bird campaign staff hunted diligently for a Colorado based advertising agency or video production company to write and shoot the campaign's television ads. The search was not successful. The leading video production company in Colorado Springs specialized in nature films and had no desire to get into political work.⁶ Prominent advertising executives said there were plenty of ad agencies in Colorado that could do "used car" and "furniture" television ads but none that had real expertise and ability where political ads were concerned.⁷ The general sense was that, for a really good political ad, the Bird campaign would have no choice but to get a consultant from outside Colorado, preferably from Washington, D.C., or New York city.

Reluctantly, the Bird campaign staff abandoned the idea of getting a Colorado advertising agency to produce its TV ads and thus be able to tout itself as an "all-Colorado" operation. When all of this information was given to Mike Bird, he agreed the campaign would have to go out-of-state for its political consultant and television ad maker. He decided, however, that the final selection of a political consultant would not be

made until after the Republican State Assembly on June 4, 1994. Although there was a great deal of confidence in the Bird camp that Mike would get 30 percent of the delegate vote at the assembly and make the primary election ballot, that was not a "done deal" yet. Mike Bird said there was no point in naming a consultant until after he had "qualified" at the state assembly and knew for sure he would be running in the Republican primary.

Notes To Chapter 9:

1. Attachment to Severin/Aviles sales letter to Mike Bird for Governor campaign dated 26 April 94.
2. All quotes from Jay Severin from author's notes, telephone call from Jay Severin, Severin/Avilas/Associates, 25 April 1994.
3. Sometimes candidates receive conflicting advice from different would-be political consultants. Unlike Jamie Osborne, who favored cable TV for its cheapness, another consultant recommended not using cable TV at all because "cable viewers tend to have already made up their minds."
4. All quotes from Jamie Osborne from author's notes, telephone call from Jamie Osborne, vice president, Colonial Media Group, 11 April 1994.
5. Mike Bird for Governor office memo concerning comments by Carol M. Hadl, account executive, KOAA-TV (Colorado Springs/Pueblo), undated.
6. Author's notes, telephone interview with Ginger Kathrens, film producer, Taurus Productions, Colorado Springs, undated.
7. Author's notes, telephone interview with Nechie Hall, co-owner, Praco Advertising, Colorado Springs, undated.