

## Winning at the Polls: Millstone Township (NJ) Fire District Uses Public Relations to Gain Voter Approval on New Fire Truck

BY LEZA RAFFEL

The Millstone Township (NJ) Fire District and its volunteer and career firefighters needed a new fire truck. Mirroring the circumstances of fire departments across the country, they needed voter approval to get it.

The central New Jersey fire department's leaders were determined to provide every township voter with accurate information. They were confident that township residents who knew the facts—that the proposed rescue-pumper would help reduce response times and was the most economical way to replace two aging vehicles—would support the \$878,000 purchase.

“We also wanted to be sure voters had all of the information to avoid criticism that other regional fire districts have received about budget and spending decisions being made without most voters being aware,” says Larry Cier, a Millstone Township volunteer firefighter and member of the Millstone Township Fire District Board of Fire Commissioners. “We wanted to take every step possible to get this information to our residents.” Cier also knew that it was critical that all the funds expended be used to educate the public, not to lobby for “yes” votes.

On February 17, 2018—after an awareness campaign that included story placement in the local press, a social media presence, a targeted residential newsletter, and word of mouth—voters approved the purchase of a new Pierce rescue-pumper as well as the fire district's 2018 budget.

The steps Millstone Fire took to achieve this goal follow.

### THE RIGHT COMMUNICATIONS PLAN AND PARTNER

With a purchase this important to fire response and community safety on the line, Millstone Fire leaders wanted an organized approach to educating voters. They needed a communications plan that would resonate without overburdening the district's financial resources or place another demand on firefighters' limited time. Most Millstone firefighters are volunteers, and the amount of time today's volunteers spend trying to raise money is thought to be a significant factor in the nationwide volunteer shortage.

The Communication Solutions Group, a public relations firm that specializes in community engagement campaigns for fire and emergency medical service departments, was already working

with Millstone Fire on its volunteer recruitment campaign, which was launched in fall 2017. Millstone also turned to the firm for guidance and support on the referendum effort. The Communication Solutions team conducted interviews with key fire personnel to fully understand why the truck was needed, what having it would mean for the fire department and Millstone residents, the research that had been done to decide on the right vehicle, and more. Then a multipronged, targeted approach was designed to reach as many Millstone voters as possible, however they preferred to receive information.

### THE DIRECT (MAIL) APPROACH: A NEWSLETTER

The only way to be absolutely certain that the precise information Millstone wanted to reach voters got to them was to print it themselves, and so a newsletter was written, printed, and sent to 3,134 households. “Safeguard Millstone: A Voter's Guide” contained articles, photos, and charts that highlighted the proposed truck's capabilities and features and showed readers how they precisely met the township's emergency needs. A graphic illustrated that a growing majority of fire calls in Millstone Township involve traffic accidents, for example. Articles emphasized that this vehicle has features and holds equipment that allow responders to assist those trapped in a vehicle and fight vehicle fires, yet also has what it needs to assist during structure fires.

Other stories outlined how the decision to buy this particular truck was reached, how careful budgeting in the past meant no tax increase would be needed, and that this time of low interest rates was a good time to buy. An electronic version was posted to the Millstone Web site, which had the additional bonus of allowing Facebook posts to link back to the Web site, where readers could learn about the referendum and volunteer opportunities. The newsletter has a similar look and feel to Web pages and other items designed as part of the recruitment campaign. This allowed Millstone to build on what is becoming a recognizable brand. The “Safeguard

Your Fire Department Needs Your Help!



Support Millstone Township Fire's Proposed Rescue Pumper Truck Purchase! Vote Sat., Feb. 17!

The proposed firetruck would:

- Be built to meet the specific emergency needs of Millstone Township.
- Support both rescue and fire suppression, creating efficiencies that improve response time.
- Replace two vehicles that are more than 20 years old.

Millstone Township Fire District #1 needs **NO TAX INCREASE** to buy this truck.

The District, Millstone Township Fire Department, and your Millstone neighbors do need your help to make this important, potentially life-saving purchase. Please **VOTE** on Saturday, Feb. 17!

The poll will be open from 2 p.m. until 9 p.m. at Millstone Township Firehouse, 461 Stage Coach Road, Millstone Township.

The truck question is part of the annual Millstone Township Fire District Election ballot, along with the District's operating budget and election of fire commissioners.

For more information visit [www.millstonefire.com](http://www.millstonefire.com) or [www.mtbofc.com](http://www.mtbofc.com)

1 A press release that the Communications Solutions Group sent to local media to ensure all voters had the information they needed to vote on funding for the fire company's new rescue-pumper. (Photo courtesy of the Communications Solutions Group.)

Millstone” title was chosen in part because it could be used again in future newsletters related to the recruitment campaign or other outreach.

### ENCOURAGING OTHERS TO TELL THE STORY

Despite what you may hear about print media dying, many people still get their news that way. In fact in some markets, local papers are going strong! Millstone enjoys the coverage of several local print and online publications. An informative and engaging press release about the truck was written and sent to a newspaper, a local news magazine and Web site, and a local online-only news site. The release included not only facts but quotes and a photo, making it easy for busy reporters and editors to publish it without much time investment.

Communication Solutions facilitated interviews for those outlets that wanted them. When running a campaign, it is important to look outside the obvious places to send a press release. In this case, Millstone Township's municipal government was contacted and agreed

to post materials on the Township's Web site, including an electronic version of the newsletter. These materials were sent to residents who subscribe to the Township's e-mail blast as well.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Posting on Facebook throughout the campaign created an easy way to repeat the facts about the truck and the vote. This was especially important in Millstone's case because the vote was not part of a primary or midterm election but a fire-district-only election that required voters to make a special trip to the polls. Posts featured links to the fire company's Web site, where additional information was posted, or to media coverage of the truck vote. The true beauty of social media, of course, is the “social” aspect—those who follow the fire company's Facebook page frequently shared Millstone's pages so that their own Facebook “friends” saw them. Two other key benefits of social media include the following: Comments left on posts gave Millstone a gauge by which to judge how well its message was being

- received and address questions when possible.
- Posts were made the day of the election, reminding people to get to the polls. And after the referendum passed, the Millstone Township Fire District was able to quickly break the news and thank all who supported it.

### ADVERTISING

Millstone Fire advertised in two of the same local publications it sent press releases to, a targeted approach that made sense both in terms of reach within the township and the relatively small price when compared to regional media companies. Millstone also took advantage of one of the most targeted means of advertising available: Facebook. Communication Solutions carefully selected the precise audience that needed to see the ads and boosted posts—to township residents of voting age. These ads linked to either articles in traditional media or back to the fire company's Web site, where a digital copy of the newsletter was posted. When targeted properly, such ads are very effective and very economical—the fire company only paid when someone clicked through and saw the relevant information.

### THE OLDEST—AND MOST POWERFUL—MEANS OF PERSUASION

Media—old school and social—are absolutely key to any awareness campaign and played an important role in this one. But no technology has quite the same impact as person-to-person communication. Communication Solutions Group designed a PowerPoint® template and created several slides on the fire truck and recruitment campaign that helped invigorate presentations to township officials and the public.

What cannot be overstated is the importance of the multitude of

conversations about the proposed truck purchase that individual firefighters had with their families, friends, neighbors, and others. While these men and women all live to serve their community, some were not as comfortable asking that community for its support at the polls. Communication Solutions wrote a series of talking points for firefighters to draw upon.

Communication Solutions “made sure we had a clear and concise message to demonstrate the need for our new truck,” says David Markunas, vice chairman of the Millstone Township Fire District #1 Board of Fire Commissioners. “As a result of our information campaign, we had

strong support from the voters and won approval for this very much needed vehicle.”

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