

## ***Moving young voters to participate in elections in the Netherlands***

*How young voters can be approached differently in message and media.*

*Presentation from Mark de Boer of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (Netherlands)*

*For the annual ACEEEO conference in Tirana on 9/9/2004*

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Mr Chairman, Members of the ACEEO, Ladies and Gentlemen,

### **Opening**

I'd like to begin by saying that I regard it as an honour and privilege to be speaking to you here today about what the Netherlands did to communicate with young voters during the election periods from 2002 till 2004.

I'd like to answer the following question to you today: How to move voters, young voters especially, to participate in elections. Wait, let me ask you the real question:

Youngsters, what do they care about politics and voting? Do they care at all?

I hope to answer the question by working out the most recent case in the Netherlands. When I look back on the last elections - the past European Elections - I find months in which everything seemed to happen at once. For that matter 2004 was – and still is an extraordinary year in the history of the European Union: we had the expansion, we now have the presidency, and we may be on the verge of a new European Constitution. But above all, I will remember 2004 as the Year we held European elections.

### **A changing environment brings new chances**

I am certain that a year as this will help to bring politics, in this case European politics closer to the public. It's not only communicating from a Government point of view for that matter, but above all we need the media and the upcoming tide, of a society that recognises everyday choices in every day politics. In the Netherlands we have been fortunate with a changing political background, upcoming parties, and political unrest in a relatively easygoing society. The rise and fall of Pim Fortuyn in 2002 – for those who follow our politics – is what I mean.

I like to point out today, that a changing political environment leads to a different way of tackling the problems. Although the problem may stay the same: increasingly less people go to the polling stations. ...

During our campaign we made progression by thinking different. So when the strategy staid the same in the 3-year period after 2002, concepts changed, alliances changed and we looked for the boundaries of government communications. These boundaries are a very sensitive issue in the Netherlands, concepts as spinning and propaganda are taboo.

Dutch elections campaigning is strictly objective and started in the present form in 2002. Since then, 5 elections were held. For the European Elections our expectations where at an absolute low.

We thought that the people would drag themselves to the polling stations. I particularly say 'drag themselves' because especially with the European parliamentary elections the Dutch are known for the low voter turnout. 29,9 percent in 1999.

### **Youngsters and reasons not to vote**

Youngsters take a relatively big part in group non-voters. And it is not only the big part of young non voters, it is also the reasons they don't vote.

The three most eminent factors of the general low turnout are first:

**People are unknown with the importance of the EU and European Parliament.** (The Knowledge Factor) There is an insufficient visible and convincing communicative relation between the public and the European Institutions.

**Second, people tend to call on individual mostly practical reasons not to vote.** (This can be titled as the Attitude Factor) People blame not showing up on the weather, work and being busy with other things, etcetera. It shows that voting is now a part of every-day choices. Not



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only about whom to vote but also **if** to vote. Some people simply see it as a possibility to do it – all in a day's work - just like bringing your trousers to the cleaners.

**Third reason for the low turnout is that, European Politics are not well covered by the media in the Netherlands.** Even when Politics as a whole are covered well by the media, only a small group gets presented the full complexity. The local decisions by the Government are easy to communicate,.. to relate to every day life. Tuning in to Brussels is a whole different ball game.

Particularly now around 60% of all legislation is coming from Brussels, people should be informed. Newspapers and the representatives of the lower house of parliament (De Tweede-Kamer) tend to ignore it. This lack of media coverage is convenient, because, in the end the EU legislation will come through to the Lower House of Parliament. New legislation originally coming from the EU is communicated by the members of the lower house of parliament instead of the MEP's. It's a media battle that –also in the coming years, unfortunately – will not be won by the MEP's.

### **And Youngsters, what do they care?**

Politics is not a very hot item under youngsters either, we think in a lot of groups it is even less than the general public. Youngsters have a different political agenda for instance, but they also tend to be more rights orientated, they know how to get things done for themselves. Self-sufficient and above all they like to be addressed individually. Young sub-cultures can be of great influence for these. Upcoming question is then, is it an option to make politics 'Cool'?

It will help, of course, but for how long? Hypes are not controllable communication instruments. During our campaign and the numerous evaluations we found out that youngsters want to be taken serious, even though they don't have the knowledge we like to see as suitable to make a serious choice. Youngsters wanted to be taken serious in their choice on a political party, but also in the way the Government tries to inform them about procedures of voting.

**So let me note: youngsters do care about politics, they perceive them differently though.**

### **Strategy**

Because the knowledge is low, the need for knowledge is latent and the information about Europe is complex, a low-interest strategy is chosen. The low-interest strategy is chosen not only for the youngsters, but for the average Dutch citizen as well. This means that we try to change the attitude first in order to get the knowledge across.

### **More specifically, in changing attitude we try to:**

- Point out the importance of democratic elections on European level.
- Let people hold a well chosen opinion on whether it's important to vote and third:
- let people have an open attitude towards information from Europe and the coming expansion of the EU.

### **With the knowledge factor we try to let people:**

- Know that there are elections and when,
- Let them know why, and third,
- Let them know how the EU works in general.

Attitude before knowledge is in our view the key to increase participation. Officially it's difficult to put your target down on paper, but on the other hand the legitimacy of elections is at stake when too many people won't show up at the polling stations. For us, 29,9% is not a nice foresight. Silently we made the voter turnout, a target in our campaign strategy. Strictly



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technical you can't rely on communication instruments to level or increase the voter turnout, but were sure we wanted to try it!

### **How to make the strategy work?**

In making the strategy we reached back to the reasons why people don't vote, why youngsters don't vote.

People now a day's are rights orientated. People are less orientated on moral duties and this is especially the case with youngsters. The first key element in the campaign became therefore:

#### **'Voting is a right, not an obligation'**

It is not more complicated than it sounds: See you there? People tend to listen more easily to a question especially when it reminds you about your attitude towards moral of civil duties.

**The second key element became a normative position** from the perspective of other citizens. We tried to let people share their positive and negative feelings about the elections. People need to build their own norm, make their own choice. The Government needs to know in this case that some groups don't persuade each other that easily, but with a little patience, it helps.

**The third key element is that we never communicate political standpoints** or even suggest a slight difference in preference as far the Government is concerned. For that matter it is impossible to use famous people to get the message across.

Although we were looking for the boundaries of Government communication, we – in this campaign - tried to communicate the choice people have to make to make use of their rights. New is the two way of making more use of two-way communication. We expected a dialogue with the government, but above all within cultural groups.

#### **Responsiveness became therefore the fourth and last key element in our campaign.**

And that's not only giving the right information but also hearing what people have to say about that right, their discontent with politics or the society as a whole. Not surprisingly especially youngsters took their chance to use this responsiveness that was put into practice on for instance a website and in events-communication.

Especially during the political crisis of 2002 we got a lot of e-mail and telephone calls from alarmed people. In the process of the campaign we gave these people a special place in our campaign. Their complaints were even heard in our radio-commercials and seen in our tv-commercials. In this we tried to make the difference of perception between the government and the people as small as possible. On the other hand we tried to counter these believes by informing people with facts and letting relatively more positive people speak. The tv-commercials of the campaign contain therefore real life quotes of people, supplied with factual information.

### **Media and alliances**

We used strategic alliances to communicate more directly with people. This resulted in a wide range of media.

#### ***We used:***

- ✓ *Internet*
- ✓ *Brochures at municipalities and libraries*
- ✓ *Posters in Bus Shelters*
- ✓ *TV an Radio commercials*
- ✓ *A call-centre for questions about how to vote if...*
- ✓ *Separate scholar elections*

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- ✓ Education programs
- ✓ Advertisements
- ✓ Free-Publicity
- ✓ Roadshow, events
- ✓ Direct mail
- ✓ Help for local governments organising the polls
- ✓ And much, much more.

And this is not what a ministry of the interior can do by itself. Making strategic alliances work was therefore a major part of the campaign. Working with alliances has a number of advantages:

**First or all, alliances have their own public**, they know their public and they need to translate the message in their way of thinking. Especially with youngsters the margins are very thin between what the Government wants and what they can do for the society. These organizations have to protect their independence to uphold their credibility to their readers, fans or listeners. They know their moral duties as well, but finding the 'thin line' in bringing the message across takes a lot of time and knowing what both sides want and are capable of.

**Second, Alliances can work very efficient.** They can work for instance on a large scale with volunteers. Using diverse people and means and reaching remote groups and areas. Alliances also find new creative ways to get the message across better, most of the time for less money.

**Third and last, people hear the message from different sources.** The Government is – in the people's opinion - only one source and most of the time people don't tend to listen only because the Government wants them to.

**There is one disadvantage; it takes a lot of time to control** these relations within a communication campaign. To tight won't work, because people see it as an information overload. To weak won't work either, because you lose grip of the message and the strategy to get it across.

A good example of the integration of our own media and strategic alliances was the success of the Voting Indicator on our website and on the streets of Holland. The voting indicator was built and hosted by an independent organization that promotes politics and all political parties on a day to day basis.

### **The Voting Indicator**

*The Voting Indicator (StemWijzer) tests your political preference by reference to propositions and statements taken from the election manifestos of the political parties. You can give your views on these propositions by clicking on 'agree', 'disagree', 'neutral' or 'don't know'.*

*In total 30 propositions contribute to a get a better understanding about some of the most important issues of the elections. You can indicate which subjects you consider extra important. The program will then calculate a voting recommendation and show your preference for the other parties in descending order. After the voting recommendation you can check to see to what extent your opinion corresponds with the positions of the political parties.*

[www.votingindicator.net](http://www.votingindicator.net)

*People could fill in the voting indicator on the website, but also on the streets. On the website and in the streets it led to discussions and questions. Discussions with family, fellow students or people around them, questions for us to answer to make voting more easy. Quick response and a good listening ear –never judging - was the key to our responsiveness.*



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In the years since 2002 we fine-tuned our campaign, some things we evaluated as not effective, but most of the time alliances and media were effective and appreciated. I hoped to have shown you some of our principles in making communication strategy in relation to young people work. For us the result was very rewarding.

This short presentation is really not enough to lead you through all of our ideas, success stories and most of all the pit falls I would have liked to warn you about. For now it must be enough. And when you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask them.

And before I forget, large groups of youngsters DO care for politics, especially when the issues can be shared. I think our case has shown that sometimes you 'll have to help them a little to share, but never do that on your own.

### Contact

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