# Real Stories Win: Lessons from a Persuasion Experiment

*by* Gwen McGarry

**M + R**

# TL;DR:

People's expectations of advertising — political or otherwise — have changed, but our political and advocacy content hasn't. Voters are tuning out what feels generic, scripted, or out of touch.

As part of a massive coalition effort between The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA), and Service Employees International Union (SEIU), we ran an experimental persuasion campaign targeted at Independents and Republicans in key districts.

This approach — real people, real stories, real language — handily outperformed traditional political creative, especially with the voters we need to reach the most.

# Every election cycle, we panic about the wrong thing.

We slice voters into buckets — young men, Latino voters, suburban moms — then try to reverse-engineer what will move them. We poll test the safest line, polish it into talking points, cut a video, and call it a strategy.

But that's not how persuasion works anymore (if it ever was). People don't experience messages as tidy demographic subgroups. They experience them as people — people who scroll, swipe, or tune out anything that feels fake or formulaic. What cuts through is content that feels real, personal, and relevant. Commercial brands know this. Advocacy and political communications haven't kept up. Too often, we default to a top down approach that sounds fine in a focus group, but feels generic in the real world — a message designed for everyone that truly connects with… no one.

We've seen what actually works. This summer, we ran 2,200 pieces of creative for a coalition led by AFSCME, AFT, NEA, and SEIU. The strongest performers had one thing in common: they felt real. They looked and sounded like they came from someone you know. They spoke to what people actually care about. And compared to traditional political ads, they did a much better job of breaking through and moving people to act.

**If we want to turn things around, we have to double down on what actually works. That starts with listening, then delivering content and creative that sounds like real people, speaks to their daily lives, and reflects what they actually care about.** And that creative has to show up the way everything else does: personalized, relevant, and right on time.

## What does that look like?

We're already seeing what the new playbook looks like.

This spring, AFSCME, AFT, NEA, and SEIU came to us with a challenge: pressure 18 Republican lawmakers to vote "no" on Trump's so-called "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" — a bill that gutted Medicaid and public education funding.

We knew the only voices those lawmakers might actually listen to were their own voters. So under the campaign banner of "Put Families First," we moved fast, raising awareness about the real impact of these cuts and putting those facts in front of the people who needed to hear them most.

### What we heard

Voters in these districts were already being pummeled with ads about the bill. We knew from past election cycles that there was a high risk they'd tune out more of the same.
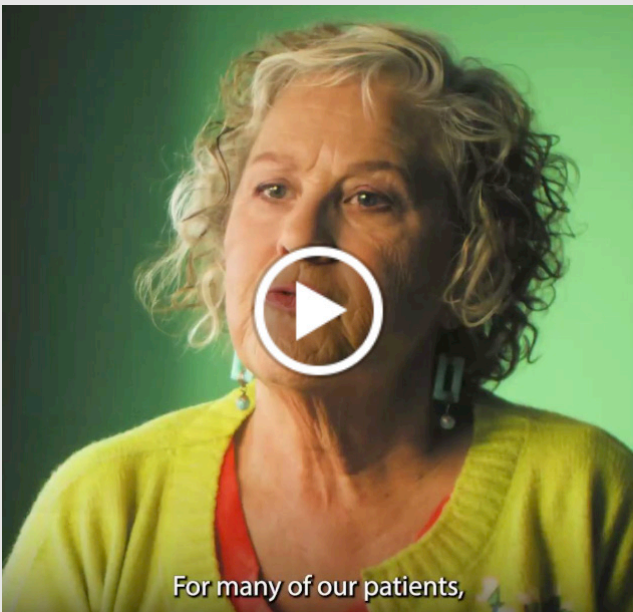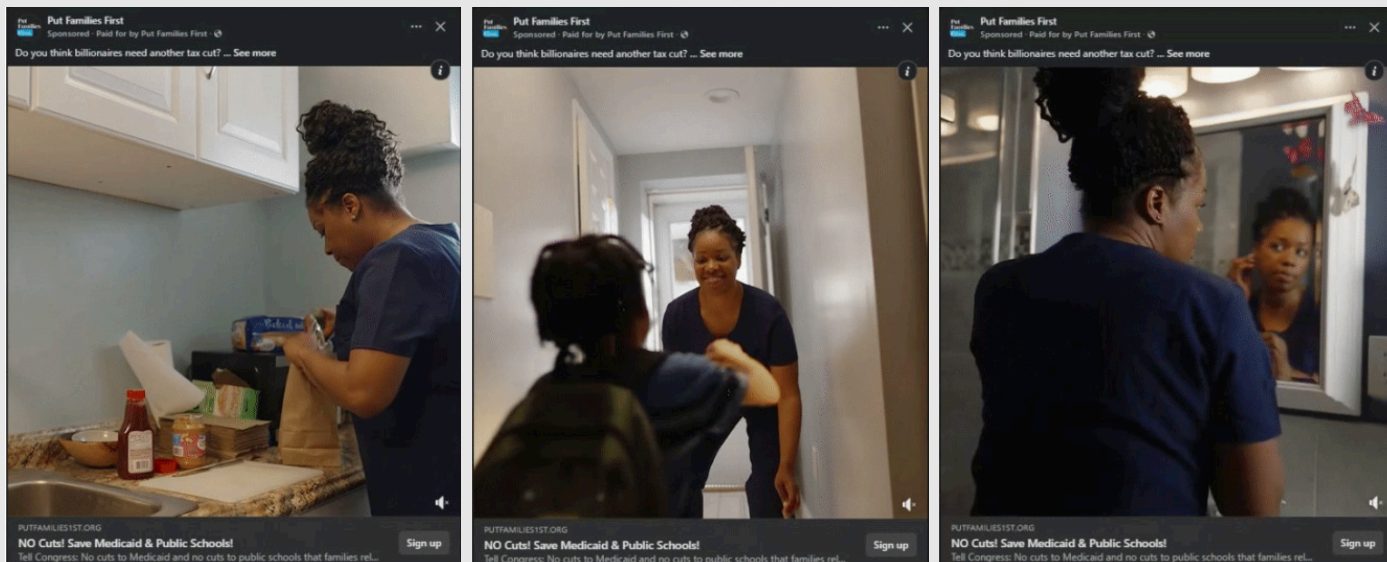
### What we did

We launched highly personalized creative in each district, relying heavily on personal storytellers and microinfluencers to carry our message.

### What happened

All told, we launched almost 2,200 ad variants highlighting the impact of Trump's bill on districts' public schools and healthcare. Among movable Republican audiences, the personal storytellers and influencers were the strongest performers, generating the highest click through rates out of all the creative we launched.

For many of our patients,

**Put Families First.** Cuts to Apple Health = Cuts to healthcare for 1,776,116 people in Washington
Paid for by Put Families First

**Put Families First.** Tell Rep. Newhouse Don't cut healthcare. Protect Apple Health. TAKE ACTION
Paid for by Put Families First

Were these ads stronger than the backroom deals and strong arming in Congress? No. We lost this fight. But we found a way to reach and engage conservative voters. The next step should be to take that strategy and expand it — to connect with Independents and Republicans in 2026 and 2028, with messages that meet them where they are and move them to act.

It's not just that one test — take Zohran Mamdani's campaign. It didn't come out of nowhere. His team had real conversations with voters about what wasn't working. They kept hearing the same things: rent is too high, buses are too expensive, childcare costs are crushing families.

So that became the platform: freeze the rent, free the buses, no-cost childcare. Simple. Clear. Repeated everywhere — from TikTok to campaign lit to stump speeches. No spin. No hedging. Just the actual words voters used, said back to them, again and again.

Yeah, it's that simple.



Photo credit: Jonah Rosenberg/The New York Times

It's also how we approach inspiring votes, actions, and donations at M+R: we start with what people already believe and feel, then build creative *with* them in mind, not at them.

## Feeding America

Maybe it's no surprise that "let your incredibly charismatic candidate be himself while high-fiving eight million New Yorkers one by one" is an effective approach. The real question is how organizations that are not built around a single individual can still listen, connect authentically, and break through with audiences.

When Feeding America wanted to improve the public's perceptions of SNAP, especially among persuadable conservative voters, we started with listening. Alongside our friends at PerryUndem, we conducted a holistic study of the political landscape around SNAP, which included a dozen focus groups with Hill staffers, local food bank staff, and voters,

as well as a nationwide survey of voters. This gave us insight into the broad strokes of who is most persuadable on the issue and the angles they were amenable to.

M+R used this information to conduct a battery of creative tests in Swayable, a pre-market testing tool. Testing in Swayable allowed us to refine our messages and creative treatments and better understand how to connect and compel subsections of our target universe. We leveraged our learnings to support 10 local food banks in disseminating this message through social and paid media.



### What we heard

Messaging about the impacts on food insecurity on children was very persuasive.



### What we did

We tested a variety of messages and creative treatments around child hunger, ultimately landing on this concept (Figure A), which drove a 6.3% increase in support for SNAP. Localizing the message (Figure B) in future rounds of testing led to even greater impact, even in geographic regions outside the ones mentioned in the creative.



### What happened

We heard in our research over and over that one of the most trusted messengers for conservatives was their local food bank. So we provided 10 food banks with ad budget to launch ads to conservatives in their service area.

Without the right nutrition, children can struggle in school — and beyond. There's a lot of evidence that hunger can impact a child's physical and mental development. Fortunately, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, helps kids get the food they need to grow up healthy and strong.

Floridians know how important it is for every child to have enough food to eat so that they can grow up healthy and strong. Our whole community is brighter when children are thriving, not struggling in school because they're too hungry to focus. That's why we need to come together to support Florida's Food Assistance Program, which gets kids the food they need to grow, learn, and play – like every child deserves.



Figure A



Figure B

To measure their impact, we also ran a Nielsen Brand Lift Study to answer three questions:

- **Favorability:** How favorable is your view of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)?

- **Attribute Rating:** How would you rate the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in terms of its impact on your community?

- **Intent:** How likely are you to take action the next time you see an ad for Feeding America?

We saw a statistically directional increase in ad recall for an ad shown just once, and a 10% increase in people who reported SNAP's impact on their community as "positive."

# The secret to these campaigns' success isn't just testing. It's listening.

Most campaigns and nonprofits worth their salt are investing in research – good! But testing isn't the same as listening. You can't optimize your way into authentic connection if your starting inputs are off. Research and focus groups are the first step – the next and most important step is translating those insights into the tone, imagery, and emotional language your audience already uses.

At M+R, that means pairing research with real conversations on the ground. If we — or our clients — are knocking on doors, we listen closely to what people actually say and how they say it, then bring that language into our creative. If we're interviewing someone, we ask deliberate (sometimes obvious) questions to give them space to tell their story in their own words.

The result is content that resonates — because it's rooted in how people actually talk and what they care about. And it gives us a deeper understanding of the audiences we're trying to reach, so we can keep refining how we show up for them.

We think just as intentionally about how stories show up. We care a lot about craft — great design, thoughtful motion graphics, clean production. But that's not always what the moment calls for. Sometimes it's a rough reel, a selfie video, or something personal from a partner or influencer that cuts through.

## But does it work?

Yep.

Our ads for Put Families First looked different from the others out there. That was by design, but we wanted to see if it was a more effective angle. So we tested a more traditional political ad attacking Senator Thom Tillis — one of the most served ads during the budget fight — against one of our storytellers, Mary Jo, a mom fighting to protect Medicaid for her son with a disability.

The results weren't even close.

Mary Jo


Tillis

**Mary Jo beat out the traditional political ad on every meaningful metric — especially among the voters we needed most: persuadable Republicans and Independents.**

- **Mary Jo raised concern** about Medicaid cuts across all audiences. The Tillis video didn't.

- **Mary Jo increased likelihood to take action** — whether it was signing a petition to contacting lawmakers. The Tillis video didn't.

- **Mary Jo was rated more persuasive, relatable, and engaging** by wide margins. Across the board.

Even on the one metric where both ads performed equally — lowering support for Medicaid cuts — Mary Jo still held her own with persuadables and did better among Democratic activists.
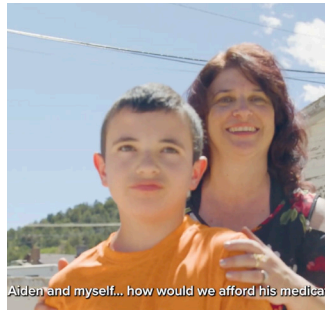
Clips from Mary Jo ad

**Concern:** How would you rate your level of concern about Medicaid funding cuts?

*Mary Jo raised concerns about cuts among all audiences, while Tillis performed no better than the neutral control. Note that the baseline indicates audiences already had elevated concerns before being exposed to one of the videos.*

|  | **Mary Jo** | **Tillis** | **Baseline (control)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Democratic activists | + 5.2 pts | — | 80.0 |
| General population | + 4.3 pts | — | 69.2 |
| Persuadable Reps & Independents | + 3.9 pts | — | 68.1 |

**Take action:** How likely are you to take some form of action to try to prevent funding cuts to Medicaid, such as talking to friends, signing a petition, or contacting elected representatives?

*Mary Jo persuaded all audiences to take action against cuts, while Tillis had no significant impact.*

|  | **Mary Jo** | **Tillis** | **Baseline (control)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| General population | + 3.6 pts | — | 58.9 |
| Persuadable Reps & Independents | + 2.6 pts | — | 60.9 |
| Democratic activists | + 2.5 pts | — | 71.3 |

**Persuasive:** Would you say the video was persuasive?

*All audiences rated Mary Jo as significantly more persuasive than Tillis.*

|  | **Mary Jo** | **Tillis** |
|---|---|---|
| Democratic activists | **74.7** | 63.5 |
| General population | **67.2** | 57.1 |
| Persuadable Reps & Independents | **67.2** | 56.9 |

Clips from Tillis ad

**Support:** Do you support or oppose the federal government cutting funding for Medicaid?

*Mary Jo lowered support for cuts among Democratic activists, while both ads had the same level of impact among persuadable Republicans and Independents.*

|  | Mary Jo | Tillis | Baseline (control) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Democratic activists | - 3.2 pts* | — | 29.8 |
| Persuadable Reps & Independents | - 2.9 pts* | - 2.9 pts | 50.2 |
| General population | — | — | 40.5 |

* Statistically significant at 80% confidence level

**Relatable:** Would you say the video was relatable?

*All audiences rated Mary Jo as significantly more relatable than Tillis.*

|  | Mary Jo | Tillis |
|---|---|---|
| Democratic activists | **70.7** | 63.7 |
| Persuadable Reps & Independents | **64.3** | 57.8 |
| General population | **64.2** | 57.7 |

**Engaging:** Would you say the video was engaging?

*All audiences rated Mary Jo as significantly more engaging than Tillis.*

|  | Mary Jo | Tillis |
|---|---|---|
| Democratic activists | **74.6** | 63.7 |
| Persuadable Reps & Independents | **68.2** | 57.8 |
| General population | **67.9** | 57.8 |

But the numbers only tell part of the story. The why is just as important:

**Mary Jo spoke directly to real fears and real values, in plain language, with no political varnish.**

Voters noticed — and responded. And it wasn't just Mary Jo's video. Influencers and creators who bring their own credibility and authentic voices into the mix consistently break through in ways that feel both personal and powerful. This was just one test, but the results suggest that this kind of personal, unvarnished storytelling is a highly effective way to connect with the people we need to win.

**If you're still making political and advocacy ads the old way — generic b-roll, heavy use of black and white for your villains, ominous voiceovers telling people what to think — these results should make you uncomfortable.** Because what worked here wasn't scare tactics or a perfectly calibrated frame. It was listening first, then reflecting voters' own fears, frustrations, and priorities back to them clearly in a voice that felt (was!) human and grounded in reality.

There were no fancy cuts, no sharp animations (though those have their place). We didn't need to manufacture urgency through motion graphics tricks or dramatic music. People already feel it. Our job was to create content that honored that urgency and showed them they weren't alone.

That doesn't mean this is the only kind of creative you should be running. The best programs — including Put Families First's and Feeding America's — still balance proven tactics with plenty of experimentation. What's changed is the baseline: what counts as "tried and true" looks different now. The mix of creative we rely on to connect with voters needs to evolve to reflect that shift.

The medium can change, but the truth doesn't: **when we meet people where they are and speak to what they actually care about, they listen. They engage. And they act.**

So yes, the old playbook is broken. But we've got a new one. And we know how to run it.

# About Gwen McGarry

Gwen is a writer, content strategist, and the co-author of The Guide to Effective and Ethical Direct Response Creative. She creates innovative, powerful campaigns that get results for some of the most important causes of our time, including Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Feeding America, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Over 15 years at M+R, her copywriting, art direction, and strategic insights have inspired people to donate, raise awareness about important causes and brands, compelled people to take action, and turned people out to vote. She specializes in using data to help organizations understand their audiences and deliver tailored creative that connects and converts. Gwen founded and leads our audience research and messaging insights work and also leads our advertising creative team.

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