



The Dreaded “I Disease” Strikes Michele Tafoya

CASE STUDY: A Direct-Response Fundraising Autopsy of a U.S. Senate Campaign Email That Should Have Known Better

I’m writing this in May 2026.

Michele Tafoya is a former NFL sideline reporter and conservative political commentator who became known for her work on NBC Sunday Night Football.

She’s running for the U.S. Senate in **Minnesota**, seeking the open seat being vacated by retiring Democratic Sen. Tina Smith.

I support her 100%.

Love watching her on FOX News’ “Gutfeld” program. She’s a bona fide “celebrity” in her own right.

But the fundraising email I received from her/her campaign is a case study in what NOT to do.

So let's get to it...

There are a lot of ways to wreck a political fundraising email.

You can bury the lead. You can write like a committee.

You can talk about "stakeholders," "coalitions," and "moving forward" until the reader starts praying for a power outage.

But one of the most common - and most deadly - mistakes is what I call the dreaded "**I Disease.**"

You know the symptoms.

- "I'm running because..."
- "I believe..."
- "I have learned..."
- "I am fighting..."
- "I need..."
- "I, I, I, I, I."

The problem is simple: voters and donors do not wake up in the morning thinking about your campaign.

- They wake up thinking about their own lives.
- Their grocery bill.
- Their gas tank.
- Their kid's school.
- Their taxes.
- Their neighborhood.
- Their paycheck.
- Their retirement.

Their frustration with politicians who always seem to get richer while regular people get squeezed harder than a lemon at a church fish fry.

That is why direct-response copy has to start with the reader - not the candidate.

As I wrote in my book, *Best of Campaign Hot Tips: Volume 1*, do the simple red pen/blue pen test.

Print out every message and circle every "I," "me," and "my" in red. Then every "you" and "your" in blue.

If you see a sea of red, rewrite the thing before it hurts somebody.

And here's what makes this particular case study so useful for about 99% of you...

This was not some school board candidate writing a campaign email at midnight after knocking doors all day.

This was not a county commission hopeful trying to figure out Mailchimp between work and dinner.

This was a **U.S. Senate campaign!**

A top-tier race.

A campaign talking about millions of dollars.

A campaign that should have professional fundraising help, professional copy help, professional strategy help, and enough paid consultants to fill a hotel conference room with khaki pants and bad advice.

And they still got this basic thing wrong.

That should scare the daylight out of every candidate.

Because if a U.S. Senate campaign with millions floating around can whiff on Direct Response 101, your campaign can, too.

So let's put this email on the table, grab the scalpel, and do the autopsy.

No anesthesia.

The Original Email

Hi, Michele here.

I'm NOT in this for the fame.

I'm NOT in this for fortune.

I'm NOT in this to spend the rest of my life in politics.

I left behind my sports career and announced my campaign for Senate because I was sick and tired of watching my state become a laughing stock. The fraud. The taxes. The scandals. The corruption. The political system that covers for itself.

Something had to be done. Someone had to step up. And I wasn't going to wait for someone else to get into the game – so I threw my name into the mix.

It's been an adjustment being in the belly of the beast.

I'm away from home a lot (like back in the day), I've honed my stump speech, and I've learned how critical money is to campaigns.

Running against an entire political system is expensive.

I'm spreading my message on the airwaves. I'm driving across the state to talk with voters. And I'm printing yard signs to boost my name ID.

All that costs money – and the far-Left has a LOT of it.

My radical opponent raised 2+ million bucks to destroy my campaign and lock this seat down for the far-Left.

Unfortunately, that's exactly what will happen if this email fails.

The truth is – I need your help to keep fighting. Is there ANYTHING I can say to convince you to invest in this campaign? Whether it's \$15 or \$150, the amount doesn't matter nearly as much as the number of folks who give.

PLEASE ADD \$10

PLEASE ADD \$50

PLEASE ADD \$250

PLEASE ADD \$25

PLEASE ADD \$100

ANOTHER AMOUNT

Look:

I know these emails can get repetitive but I promise you I won't forget the good folks out there who gave what they could – whether it was a big check, a few bucks, or even just prayers.

All of it helps. I mean that from the bottom of my heart.

Thanks for hearing me out.

Be brave. Do good.

– Michele

*Michele Tafoya
Republican for Senate, Minnesota*

First Impression

This email is not hopeless.

- It has some guts. It has some emotion.
- It has a few good phrases.
- It has a real villain: the political system.
- It has stakes: a Senate seat.
- It has an ask: give money.

So this is not a total dumpster fire.

But it is also not a sharp direct-response fundraising appeal. It is a candidate-centered note with a donation ask bolted onto the end.

That is not the same thing.

A fundraising email should not read like the candidate is explaining her calendar, travel schedule, and media buy problems.

A good fundraising email should make the reader feel something. Anger. Hope. Urgency. Ownership. Duty.

Even a little fear of what happens if good people stay home, stay quiet, and keep their wallets closed.

This email starts in the right neighborhood, then wanders into campaign staff meeting territory.

That is where it loses power.

The Big Problem: Too Much Candidate, Not Enough Voter

Let's do the red pen/blue pen test.

The email starts like this:

- "Hi, Michele here."
- "I'm NOT in this..."
- "I'm NOT in this..."
- "I'm NOT in this..."
- "I left behind..."
- "I was sick and tired..."

- “I wasn't going to wait...”
- “I threw my name...”
- “I'm away from home...”
- “I've honed...”
- “I've learned...”
- “I'm spreading...”
- “I'm driving...”
- “I'm printing...”
- “My radical opponent...”
- “My campaign...”
- “I need your help...”
- “Is there ANYTHING I can say...”
- “I know...”
- “I promise...”
- “I won't forget...”

That is a lot of red circles!

Now ask yourself: where is the reader?

Where is the Minnesota family paying more every week?

Where is the small business owner buried under taxes and rules?

Where is the parent worried the schools care more about politics than reading and math?

Where is the senior on a fixed income watching costs climb while politicians act like everything is peachy?

Where is the voter who feels ignored, insulted, and squeezed?

Mostly missing. That is the disease.

The email tells us why Michele is running. Fine.

But it does not do enough to answer the only question the donor really cares about:

“What does this have to do with me?”

In politics, that question is everything. Ignore it and your copy becomes a campaign diary. Answer it and your copy starts raising money.

What the Email Gets Right

Before we grab the flamethrower, let's give credit where credit is due. This draft has some raw material worth keeping.

1. The opening has a pulse

"I'm NOT in this for the fame. I'm NOT in this for fortune."

That is not bad. It is short. It has rhythm.

It tries to separate the candidate from the usual political swamp creature.

It also positions Michele as someone who does not want to be a career politician.

That is useful.

Voters hate career politicians for the same reason they hate fruitcake at Christmas: everybody pretends it belongs there, but nobody really wants it.

2. The "laughing stock" line has heat

"I was sick and tired of watching my state become a laughing stock."

That is a strong emotional statement. It carries frustration. It sounds like something a normal person might say.

That is good.

Political copy should sound like a human being talking at a kitchen table, not a lawyer reading a zoning ordinance.

3. The list of problems is punchy

"The fraud. The taxes. The scandals. The corruption."

Good. Short sentences. Hard nouns. No mush.

This is the strongest part of the original email. It gives the reader clear villains and problems.

But then the email fails to connect those problems to daily life.

More on that in a minute.

4. The underdog frame works

"Running against an entire political system is expensive."

That is a solid frame. The candidate is not just running against one opponent. She is running against a machine.

Voters understand machines.

Donors understand machines. Conservatives especially understand machines.

- The media machine.
- The consultant machine.
- The union machine.
- The bureaucracy machine.
- The party machine.

The machine is a good villain. Use it.

5. There is a direct ask

A lot of campaign emails dance around the ask like a seventh grader at his first school dance. This one asks for money.

Good.

Campaigns cost money. Winning campaigns cost more.

So yes, ask. But ask better.

Where the Email Goes Wrong

Now let's stop being polite and get useful.

1. The reader is treated like an ATM

The email spends most of its time saying:

- I left my career.
- I am traveling.
- I am giving speeches.
- I am buying ads.
- I am printing signs.
- I need money.

That is not persuasion. That is a receipt.

The reader does not care that yard signs cost money.

The reader cares that taxes are too high.

The reader does not care that the candidate is driving across the state.

The reader cares that politicians in St. Paul or Washington keep making life harder.

The reader does not care that the candidate honed her stump speech.

The reader cares whether someone will fight for them.

Campaign logistics are boring. Voter consequences are powerful.

This email gives us too much of the first and not enough of the second.

2. The “I Disease” weakens the emotional bond

A fundraising email is not a biography. It is not a travel update. It is not a note from camp.

It is a persuasive argument. And the argument should make the reader feel like the hero.

The candidate is the vehicle. The donor is the fuel. The mission is the destination.

In the original, Michele is the hero.

She left her career. She stepped up. She got in the game. She is fighting.

That is backwards. The donor should feel:

- “Finally, someone is saying what I’ve been thinking.”
- “Finally, I can do something about this mess.”
- “Finally, my \$25 matters.”

That is how you turn frustration into action.

3. It names problems but does not dramatize consequences

“The fraud. The taxes. The scandals. The corruption.”

Good list. But what does that mean for the voter?

Does fraud mean taxpayer money disappears while roads, schools, and services get worse?

Do taxes mean families work harder and keep less?

Do scandals mean politicians play by different rules than everyone else?

Does corruption mean insiders get protected while regular people get punished?

Say it. Do not assume the reader will connect every dot.

In direct response, clarity beats cleverness. Every time.

4. “If this email fails” is the wrong focus

“Unfortunately, that’s exactly what will happen if this email fails.”

Nope. The campaign does not fail because an email fails.

The voter’s state gets worse if good people do nothing. That is the focus.

A better frame:

“If voters who are sick of this mess stay on the sidelines, the machine wins again.”

That puts the stakes where they belong.

Not on the email. On the voter’s action.

5. “Is there ANYTHING I can say...” sounds weak

“The truth is – I need your help to keep fighting. Is there ANYTHING I can say to convince you to invest in this campaign?”

This line is trying to be humble. But it sounds desperate. There is a difference.

A candidate should not beg like a guy trying to get his ex back outside an Applebee’s.

The candidate should make the case. State the stakes. Ask clearly. Then shut up.

Try this instead:

“If you are tired of watching the same political crowd wreck this state and call it progress, then I am asking you to chip in today.”

That is direct. That is tied to voter anger. That gives the donor a reason.

6. The donation buttons waste persuasion space

- *“PLEASE ADD \$10.”*
- *“PLEASE ADD \$50.”*
- *“PLEASE ADD \$250.”*

Boring. Generic. Forgettable.

Every button is a little billboard. Use it. Buttons can reinforce the emotional reason for giving.

Try:

- STOP THE CORRUPTION — \$10
- TAKE MINNESOTA BACK — \$25
- FIRE THE POLITICAL MACHINE — \$50
- STAND UP FOR WORKING FAMILIES — \$100
- SEND THE ELITES A MESSAGE — \$250
- CHIP IN ANY AMOUNT

That is not just a button. That is a battle cry with a dollar sign.

7. The ending apologizes for fundraising

“I know these emails can get repetitive...”

Do not do that. Never apologize for asking people to help stop something bad.

If the house is on fire, you do not say: *“I know these smoke alarm noises can get repetitive...”*

You say: *“Get out now!”*

If the stakes are real, ask with conviction.

If the stakes are not real, why are you running?

8. “Prayers” is fine, but not as a substitute for action

The original says: *“whether it was a big check, a few bucks, or even just prayers.”*

That is warm. It sounds sincere. But in a fundraising email, do not let the reader off the hook too easily.

Prayers are good. Votes are good. Volunteers are good.

But the purpose of a fundraising email is to raise money.

So keep the focus on the action needed now.

You can thank people later.

Right now, move them.

The Missing Emotional Hooks

The email should speak to voters' real frustrations. Here are the hooks hiding in plain sight.

Cost of living

People feel this every day. Groceries. Gas. Housing. Insurance. Taxes. Utilities.

Do not say "economic pressures." That sounds like a government memo.

Say: *"Your bills keep going up, and the politicians responsible keep acting like you are the problem."*

That lands.

Corruption and insider protection

The original mentions corruption. Good. Now make it personal.

"Politicians protect each other while working families get stuck paying the tab."

That is simple. That is emotional. That is believable.

State pride

"Minnesota has become a laughing stock" is a strong start. Use it better.

"Minnesota used to be a state people respected. Now the headlines make us look like a punchline."

That adds pride and shame. Both motivate.

Voter power

The donor should feel powerful, not pitied.

Do not say: *"I need your help because campaign signs cost money."*

Say: *"If enough ordinary Minnesotans stand together, the machine can lose."*

That gives the donor a role in the story.

Urgency

The original says the opponent raised \$2+ million. Fine.

But money alone is not urgency.

The urgency is what that money will be used to do. Define it:

“They are going to use that money to drown out your voice, bury this campaign, and keep this seat in the hands of the same crowd that created the mess.”

Now the money means something.

Better Headline Options

The original email begins with “Hi, Michele here.”

That is not a headline. That is a doorbell.

Direct-response emails need subject lines and opening hooks that make the reader want to keep reading.

Here are stronger options:

Anger-based

- Minnesota doesn't belong to the political machine
- They broke it. You're paying for it.
- The insiders think you'll stay quiet
- This is how the machine keeps winning
- Your bills go up. Their power grows.

Corruption-based

- The scandals are not the worst part
- They protect each other. You pay the bill.
- Corruption has a cost - and you're paying it
- The machine is counting on your silence
- Minnesota deserves better than this mess

Underdog-based

- They have millions. We have fed-up voters.
- This race is not for the comfortable crowd

- Help ordinary Minnesotans beat the machine
- The political class is already circling
- They know this campaign is a threat

Action-based

- Help send the machine a message
- Chip in before they drown us out
- Stand up before they lock this seat down
- Help take Minnesota back
- Don't let them buy this race

Best pick for this piece:

Minnesota doesn't belong to the political machine

Why?

Because it frames the fight as voters versus insiders. That is the right fight.

Better Calls to Action

Do not waste CTA buttons.

They should not sound like a cashier asking if you want to round up for charity. They should carry the message.

Use buttons like:

- STOP THE CORRUPTION — \$10
- TAKE MINNESOTA BACK — \$25
- FIRE THE POLITICAL MACHINE — \$50
- STAND UP FOR WORKING FAMILIES — \$100
- SEND THE ELITES A MESSAGE — \$250
- CHIP IN ANY AMOUNT

These are stronger because they answer the donor's emotional question:

"What am I doing when I give?"

You are not "adding \$25."

You are taking Minnesota back.

That is the difference between a transaction and a movement.

Strategic Notes Before the Rewrite

The revised version below keeps the strongest bones of the original:

- Michele is not a career politician.
- She got into the race because the state is in trouble.
- The opponent and far-left machine have big money.
- The campaign needs support now.

But it changes the focus.

The old version says:

"Here is what I am doing, and here is why I need money."

The new version says:

"Here is what is happening to you, here is why it matters, here is who is responsible, and here is what you can do right now."

That is the shift. That is how you cure the "I Disease."

The Rewritten Email

Subject Line: Minnesota doesn't belong to the political machine

Friend,

How much more are you supposed to tolerate before somebody finally says "enough"?

Higher taxes. More corruption. More scandals.

More politicians protecting each other while working families get ignored.

Meanwhile, regular people are paying more for groceries, more for gas, more for housing — and getting less in return.

Minnesota used to be a state people respected. Now national headlines make us look like a punchline.

That is why I got into this race.

Not for a title. Not for fame. Not to become some career politician who forgets who sent them there.

I got in because the people running this state have gotten way too comfortable — and way too arrogant.

They think nobody will fight back. They think they own this seat.

They think you will stay quiet while they push the same failed agenda that is driving up costs, lowering standards, and making life harder for normal families.

I do not believe that for one second. But here is the truth:

The political machine is going all-in to stop this campaign.

My opponent and her allies have already piled up millions of dollars because they know this race matters.

They know voters are fed up. They know people are angry.

And they know if enough ordinary Minnesotans stand together, the machine can lose.

That is why I am asking for your help today.

Not for me. For your family. For your paycheck. For your community.

For a state that works for citizens again instead of insiders.

If you are sick of watching politicians get rich while your bills go up...

If you are tired of being ignored...

If you are ready to send a message loud enough they cannot spin or silence...

Then chip in right now.

[STOP THE CORRUPTION — \$10]

[TAKE MINNESOTA BACK — \$25]

[FIRE THE POLITICAL MACHINE — \$50]

[STAND UP FOR WORKING FAMILIES — \$100]

[SEND THE ELITES A MESSAGE — \$250]

[CHIP IN ANY AMOUNT]

This race is bigger than one candidate.

It is about whether normal people still have a voice - or whether the same political crowd keeps running everything while your family pays the price.

If you are ready to fight back, I am ready to fight with you.

*– Michele Tafoya
Republican for Senate*

Why the Rewrite Works Better

It opens with the voter's frustration

The first line is not about Michele. It is about the reader:

“How much more are you supposed to tolerate before somebody finally says ‘enough’?”

That is a kitchen-table question.

It hits the donor's lived experience.

It invites agreement.

Good direct-response copy should have the reader nodding early.

It connects issues to daily life

The original says “taxes” and “corruption.”

The rewrite says people are paying more for groceries, gas, and housing while getting less in return.

That is better.

Because nobody experiences “policy failure” in the abstract.

They experience it at the checkout line.

It keeps Michele human without making her the whole show

The rewrite still explains why Michele is running.

But it does not park the whole email on her biography.

It uses her decision to run as a bridge back to the voter's problem.

That is how you do candidate introduction without catching "I Disease."

It gives the enemy a name

"The political machine."

That phrase does work. It gives the reader someone to oppose.

A good fundraising email needs a villain.

Not a cartoon villain. A believable one.

In this case, the machine is believable.

It makes the donor part of the fight

"If enough ordinary Minnesotans stand together, the machine can lose."

That line gives the reader agency. It tells them their action matters.

That is critical.

People do not give because a candidate has expenses.

They give because they believe their gift helps accomplish something.

It strengthens the ask

The old ask says: *"Is there ANYTHING I can say to convince you..."*

The new ask says: *"If you are sick of watching politicians get rich while your bills go up... then chip in right now."*

That is stronger. It ties the ask to anger, frustration, and action.

No begging. No wobbling. No soft consultant mush.

It ends with purpose

The original ends with: *"Thanks for hearing me out."*

That is polite. Too polite.

The rewrite ends with: *"If you are ready to fight back, I am ready to fight with you."*

That is better.

It gives the reader a role.

It leaves energy in the room.

It sounds like a campaign, not a thank-you note from a bake sale.

Final Lesson

This email's problem was not that it was too aggressive.

It was not aggressive enough in the right direction.

It talked about the candidate fighting.

It needed to talk about the voter hurting.

It talked about campaign costs.

It needed to talk about taxpayer costs.

It talked about yard signs.

It needed to talk about grocery bills.

It talked about the candidate's sacrifice.

It needed to talk about the donor's power.

That is the fix.

A campaign email should not make voters admire the candidate from a distance.

It should make them say:

- "She gets it."
- "She is saying what I have been thinking."
- "This fight matters."
- "I need to act."

That is persuasion.

That is marketing.

That is direct response.

And that is how you keep the dreaded "I Disease" from turning your fundraising email into a campaign obituary.

Cheers.



Dr. Chuck Muth, PsD
THE CAMPAIGN DOCTOR
*Professor of Psephology**
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** Psephology (see-follow-gee): The study of campaigns and elections*

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