



A DOORKNOCKER'S GUIDE TO CANVASSING*

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You say you answered an ad for an “activist,” went to the interview and got hired as a canvasser for a local organization? Your job, you were told, would be to go door-to-door soliciting donations and support for the organization. Now you’re having second thoughts—feeling a bit anxious, wondering what’s going to happen. Maybe you’re already thinking about some of the questions for first-day canvassers: Do I really want this kind of job, even if I believe in the issue? How long will it take to learn the ropes? Will I be able to make the “quota”? And so on.

Well, if it is your first day, it may be some relief to know that most new canvassers get hooked by the job’s excitement and the camaraderie, and by the chance to learn new skills. And many are successful with virtually no prior training or experience.

Your questions will begin to be answered as you spend your first day on the job as an observer, going into the field with a regular crew and observing the field manager or other trainer.

For the first three hours of the shift, from about four until seven o’clock, you’ll walk with, watch, and listen to a veteran canvasser. With the two of you role-playing, you’ll practice the organization’s regular pitch several times to warm up. Then for about a half-hour you’ll alternate doors, doing your first canvassing under supervision. Between doors the trainer will give feedback and answer your questions. For the last hour of the evening, from eight to nine, you’ll have a small piece of territory to work on your own.

For most people, personal contact with door-to-door solicitors is all from the other side, that is, we’ve been opening doors rather than knocking on them. We typically have a number of popular biases about canvassing and canvassers. We tend to think that being canvassed means being interrupted,

annoyed or ripped off, and that door-to-door solicitors are the dregs of the work force. The reality is quite different. Most social change canvassers are well educated and deeply committed to what they’re doing, and canvassers play an important role in building strong organizations and movements.

Two Key Actors

An important early canvassing lesson is that two key actors are involved—you and the contributor. The contributor must decide if you are worthy of a gift. Your personality is often more important than the issue or cause. Your sincerity and sensitivity to a contributor’s feelings and beliefs therefore have significant influence on what happens.

Even when major differences in neighborhoods and issues exist, the same dynamic is at work. The potential contributor’s emotional and intellectual openness to you will be decisive. Rigidity, often apparent in body posture and hostile questioning, is the hallmark of a non-contributor. On your part there must be self-awareness, ability to build trust quickly, and skill as an agitator and visionary. Before you despair, these are skills that can be developed in a two- to four-week apprenticeship.

Most novice canvassers mistakenly think that “success” is getting a contribution at every door. But that’s not possible, and the idea sets up a morale-busting process in which unavoidable failures deflate your self-confidence. Every neighborhood has a ratio of contributors to non-contributors, which at best might be one-to-one.

Since it’s not possible to get a contribution at every door, experienced canvassers define success in two ways. First, success means getting contributions from those who are sympathetic. Second, success means efficiently determining that someone is *not* going to make a contribution and ending the

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contact with minimum investment, say within 20 or 30 seconds. The conservation of energy is crucial, because your vitality and self-confidence are then saved for “qualified” contributors.

Knowledge and Skill Basics

Beyond knowing how to define success, productive canvassing requires knowledge and skill in three basic areas: pacing energy output, quick and accurate decisions on the qualifications of potential contributors, and keeping up morale.

Resentment-rush canvassing is symptomatic of pacing problems. When people at the door are patronizing and condescending—looking down their collective noses—and your energy is low, abuse and rejection can lead to resentment. This, in turn, can lead to mistakes and frantic attempts to catch up and make quota.

Pacing yourself means regulating the use of your energy over time, to be up for unexpected pressures and demands. Seasoned canvassers consciously conserve physical and emotional energy, not only on the job but generally. Not surprisingly, this takes self-discipline. Initially, you may have to consciously pace yourself, but good habits can be developed, and they’ll pay off in the long run.

At the door you’ll face decisions about the qualifications of potential contributors. You have to judge, according to how your pitch is received, whether to continue investing your time and energy, given your perception of the likelihood for success. It’s best to cut losses when an exorbitant investment offers only an uncertain probability for success.

Decisions about the qualifications of contributors, however, are not only about whether to proceed but *how*. You have to decide which issues to emphasize and which organizational actions to use as illustrations of victories or accomplishments.

Arguments are unproductive, particularly with people who raise endless and mindless objections instead of openly showing their distrust, disagreement, or general lack of interest in social change. The idea is not to convince people but to give them a chance to agree by answering their genuine questions and concerns.

Your self-awareness and ability to stay sensitive to verbal and visual cues form a channel for perceiving contributors’ positions and feelings on issues. The objective is to measure the potential for a contribution against your past experience: you want to qualify people and get a contribution or, if they are not good prospects, to quickly cut losses and move on.

Once you decide to end a contact, act immediately by making a courteous but direct request for a contribution. When it’s refused, excuse yourself and be on your way.

The failure to consciously qualify contributors has led many novice canvassers (and some veterans) to mistakenly accept an invitation to enter a home. Once a contributor is qualified in your mind, taking more time to talk in the home is okay. But entering a home without first qualifying a contributor usually ends in lost time and energy—spending five to 15 minutes inside only to find the contribution fizzled.

Another common qualifying error is the unwarranted interpretation of “no” answers as final. An acknowledged master of persuasion once pointed out that “every ‘no’ is a silent plea to be shown how or why to say ‘yes’.”

For instance, when people in middle- or upper-income brackets claim financial hardship in refusing to contribute, it’s senseless to argue that they can really afford the expense. A better approach is to momentarily ignore the turndown and instead talk about how the organization won a recent victory or is starting a new service; or to reinforce the idea that small contributions—one dollar or even pocket change—are appreciated.

Relevant reasons and means for desired actions are more helpful than arguments. But when all is said and done, firm refusals—repeated one or more times—justify cutting losses.

Because of the potential for personal abuse and rejection, anxiety is probably at its highest when you knock on the door. Self-confidence is also put to the test when you decide to cut losses with a non-contributor after making a big investment, particularly if you’ve had a run of back-to-back rejections.

There is no formula for recovering your self-confidence. Individuals work out personal techniques, although it’s critical to find a way to ventilate feelings. Some canvassers simply take time out, forget about making quota, and allow themselves to relax and let feelings dissipate; others get relief by swearing at their tormentors, unfortunately (for the organization) sometimes within earshot; some pray or meditate for a few minutes; and for some, physical activity (one canvasser actually runs around the block) does the trick.

Morale can also be managed through ideology. In practice we redefine the meanings of punishing events with ideologies that are grounded in profession, organization, social movement, class, etc. Bad experiences when canvassing—being insulted, patronized, or harassed—need not be viewed as “curses,” nor good ones as “blessings.” Both may be accepted as inescapable challenges implicit in working for your own brand of social justice. Taking rejection as a curse stimulates resentment and breaks down morale, and treating contributors as blessings can create a euphoria of over-confidence

that also compounds morale problems. But by ideologically defining these events as part of the day-to-day *challenge*, a sense of achievement follows every encounter.

Parts of the Pitch

The pitch is your stock in trade. It excites people by telling the organization's success story and by conveying a vision of a better future. When pitching people you aim to create a sense of a new reality—a world in which powerlessness and alienation are replaced by a potent democratic organization, a weapon to fight for political, economic, and social justice. Your doorknocking pitch is usually the citizen's first face-to-face contact in the process.

Your pitch should have seven parts: identification, credentialing, diversion, agitation, vision-making, closure, and escalation.

Identification involves introducing yourself by name, hopefully with friendliness and sincerity, and is essential at the beginning of the pitch to establish a personal interaction, to avoid being perceived as "flat" or two-dimensional, somehow not human.

Credentialing begins with a statement that identifies your organization, such as "I'm working with the Citizens Action League—we're fighting to lower utility rates and property taxes." This may be enough legitimization for some contributors. Others may doubt your integrity of the organization's and say things like, "I've never heard of your organization before," or "Where is your organization located?" Or they may ignore the pitch altogether and scrutinize your I.D. card, police permit, or other papers on your clipboard. They want more to know more about your credentials.

Diversion gambits are found throughout political, commercial, and religious canvassing. Their purpose is to gain time and interest and to avoid being turned down without a hearing. Encyclopedia and vacuum cleaner salespeople are notorious for getting into homes with the ruse of surveying advertising effectiveness or by giving away free samples. Religious canvassers hand out free literature as a diversion. Nonpartisan political action organizations use petitions, which, when targeted to influence legislators and bureaucrats, can also be a genuine political tool. The procedure is to present the petition and then, while it's being examined, launch into the pitch.

Agitation is fundamental to successful canvassing. You try to imagine the other person's experience of injuries and injustices, and replay it in story-telling language. By telling short anecdotes that highlight key issues, you tap feelings—resentment is usually close to the surface—and uncover the motivation necessary for a contribution. More than passing along abstract data, effective agitation dis-

covers the personal meanings of issues, emphasizing the emotional content for each individual.

Vision-making is the foundation of a successful pitch, the underpinning of a contributor's conviction that things can actually change. Following agitation, when a prospective contributor asks "What can be done?" or says "You can't fight the people downtown," your job is to point out not only the past accomplishments of the organization but its vision for the future. The vision is not a vague hope for "democracy" or "economic justice"—these are of course our core ideals—but for specific goals, sometimes far in the future, that follow from feasible strategies and tactics for their attainment.

Closure is that part of the pitch designed to get an overt commitment, usually a contribution or a signed pledge. Your decisions about when to close and how much money to ask for are likely to cast the final outcome.

A desirable pre-closing step is to set up an expectation for the close very early in the pitch by mentioning "a small contribution" and then, without pause, moving on. Later, when the close is made, the contributor is not surprised to be asked for money, expects it in fact, and reacts positively.

The rule for amounts is to be specific and give an acceptable range—"from \$5 to \$15 [ca. 1976], whatever you can help with today." Remember, people frequently do what they think others are doing or what they think others expect of them, so keep your expectations relatively high and keep larger checks visible at the top of your clipboard.

Escalation is often the pivotal factor in how much income your canvassing produces. You must decide if and when to ask for a larger contribution—say to promote a \$15 subscription to your organization's newsletter. The decision to escalate usually comes late in the pitch, when you're more certain of the contribution. A common flub when escalating is to bring up first the financial burden, that is, the larger contribution required, rather than the benefit or incentive to make it. Using the newsletter example, it's best to first describe it as something practical or enjoyable, then to talk about its availability for a \$15 contribution.

While you'll undoubtedly start your pitch by identifying yourself, from then on there's no consistent order or fixed style of delivery suited to all settings and situations. Experience will teach you what to emphasize, when and how much, as well as what to play down or leave out entirely.

Myths and Facts

Like most beginners at canvassing, you may be tempted to undermine your own success by inventing myths that block understanding and your ability to correct your mistakes. Since every new canvasser is a potential mythmaker it's not possible to list

all the fantasies in this realm, but a few that repeat themselves should make the point.

Myth: It's difficult or impossible to make quota in territory that has recently been canvassed by another organization.

Fact: This isn't relevant. Canvassers learn to distinguish between their own organization and any other that has been working in the same area. Each has its own goals, methods, and successes, as well as its liabilities.

Myth: It's probably not a good idea to canvass where "no soliciting" signs posted.

Fact: The signs are meaningless and outcomes aren't related to them. Most of these notices are directed at commercial sales agents.

Myth: It's best to suppress personal style while canvassing and instead learn a successful set of techniques.

Fact: Every canvasser, after overcoming initial fears and uncertainties and learning the ropes, settles down to a personal style. That much is inevitable. When relaxed and natural, your individual approach—incorporating the basics of canvassing—is the most direct route to success.

New canvassers face many pitfalls, but three occur with unfailing regularity. First is the tendency

to deal with anxiety by orating, lecturing *at* rather than talking *with* people. If you use a pitch consecutively in an identical way, you're probably orating.

A second pitfall is to ask questions that predictably set up negative answers. Avoid asking questions like, "Do you want to contribute \$15 to help our campaign?" and "Have you heard of our organization?" These questions get "no" answers and put you in a one-down position. It's better to get into the habit of translating questions into statements, so that "Do you want to contribute \$15?" becomes "We want you to contribute \$15!"

Lastly, you can avoid the most prevalent pitfall by being psychologically prepared for children's interruptions, barking dogs, phone calls, and slamming doors.

It's no secret that it takes effort to master canvassing. Those who keep at it more than a few weeks acquire the confidence and capability that come from meeting the challenges. And for a few, what began as a temporary job becomes the first rung on a career ladder, followed by canvassing and full-time community organizing.

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