

How to Run a Great Door to Door Campaign

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In local campaigns, often one of the most cost-effective and beneficial activities is door-to-door campaigning. While national and even statewide campaigns tend to shun door-to-door as a way to reach voters and will use it only sparingly as a way to generate media attention, candidates for local and county office can set up effective door-to-door programs that reach most, if not all of the campaign's targeted voting base.

Where to go Door-To-Door

The first task for a successful door-to-door program is to determine the precincts in which the candidate or staff should use door-to-door campaigning. This is essentially a question of time. While door-to-door campaigning is one of the most effective ways to get voters to support a candidate, it is also one of the most time consuming campaign activities. Campaigns should start going door-to-door in swing districts: those districts the candidate has a possibility of winning, but which are undecided. These should be followed by districts that are most likely to vote for the candidate. Finally, if there is time, the candidate may go door-to-door in precincts he is probably not going to win. Campaigns must be careful, however, about going door-to-door in hostile precincts. While the candidate may pick up a few votes, such campaigning has the potential to incite hostile voters to be more involved in the opponent's campaign. Often, it's best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Who Should go Door-To-Door

The most effective way for a campaign to generate votes with door-to-door campaigning is for the candidate to go himself. The success of the appeal flows from the candidate. The candidate can generate more votes and goodwill than his spouse, who in turn, can generate more support than the candidate's friends, and they, in turn, can generate more than his staff, and so forth. Some campaigns who need to cover a lot of ground can't have the candidate visit all of the precincts they would like to cover, and thus must use staff and volunteers to go door-to-door. While this is less effective, it can still be very successful if the right procedures are followed.

Before You Go

Before knocking on doors, the campaign should locate a copy of the "street lists" for the precincts that are going to be walked. These lists contain the names of all registered voters, with party affiliation (if applicable), arranged by street. Such lists are available at the local election office, county clerk's office, or other election board for the campaign area. Occasionally, a small

fee is charged for this information. The campaign should decide in advance who will be visited... Is the candidate going to target just voters of his own party? Or is he going to visit independents, or perhaps even members of opposing parties? Non-voters, however, should not be visited. The street list will not contain the names of people who are not registered to vote — thus, if no one is listed as an eligible voter at a particular address, the candidate should not waste time knocking there — there is too much to do and too little time to do it. In strong precincts, these people can be targeted with a voter registration campaign by the campaign's staff, but the candidate should pass these houses by.

The campaign may also want to think about sending out postcards the week before the candidate will be going door-to-door, with a short message like "I'll be in your area on (give the specific day) and hope to be able to talk to you regarding the upcoming election." The postcard can also contain a picture of the candidate. This way, voters will know who the candidate is and why he is there before he knocks on the door. If postcards are sent, the candidate must show up to campaign on the day listed — rain or shine. Nothing damages credibility like telling people you will be somewhere and then failing to show up.

The Big Day

On the day that the candidate goes door-to-door, he should not go alone. At least one aide should visit each home with him. This aide can cut off talkative visitees, take names and hand out literature. If the candidate is held up at any one door, the aide should step in and explain, "I'm sorry, we must move along." Thus, the candidate is spared from having to cut the voter off.

When the candidate knocks, he should have a piece of literature (palm card) handy to give to each voter. The aide who is with him will take notes and write down what, if any, issues the voter is interested in. If the voter is particularly supportive of the candidate, the aide can take down the voter's name and number to be a volunteer or put up a yard sign. The candidate must never argue with the voter— if the voter does not support the candidate, the candidate can simply move along (the aide can facilitate this). The candidate should never, ever argue.

If the person being visited is not home, the candidate or his staff should place a door hanger or other note on the house's door with a short note, something to the effect of "I stopped by but you weren't home. I hope that I can meet you sometime soon to discuss the issues that are important to you." The staff should already have added a short, handwritten note to the

card, with a “personal” message for the voter, something like “I hope to see you soon — John Smith”

Afterward

After going door-to-door, the aide who went with the candidate should write down all of the notes he took during the trip (enter into the computer, if applicable). He should also make sure that any yard signs or literature the voters asked for is mailed out or delivered. Every voter who was actually home when the candidate knocked should get a note the following week thanking them for their time. This way the single door-to-door campaign has produced at least three contacts per voter — One note saying “I’m coming,” one visit from the candidate (or staff) and one note saying “Thanks for having me.” The door-to-door experience is also sure to gain a few extra yard signs, and maybe even some volunteers.

Door-to-door campaigning, especially in small districts, is one of the most cost-effective methods for garnering votes. With a dedicated candidate and staff, and a plan in place, the campaign can be sure to make the experience enjoyable and successful.