

Door-to-Door Campaigning: How To Get the Most Out of Your Pedometer

Lorene Hanley Duquin

Like getting up in the morning, door-to-door cold-calling is hard work. You have to really want to win to do it. But it is the most effective way for an unknown to get known. And for an incumbent in a tight race, where people believe he's forgotten them, it's a way to win them back and at the same time find out what the real issues are.

Angry constituents, barking dogs, tired feet, worn-out shoes, and blisters. Door-to-door campaigning can be hazardous to a candidate's emotional and physical well-being. But in many local races, it can also mean the difference between winning and losing.

Why? Because even in these days of sophisticated campaign techniques, voters are still impressed and complimented when a local candidate takes the time to deliver his or her message in person. That personal visit allows the voter to see you, to hear you, to ask questions, to shake your hand, and then tell all his or her friends and neighbors about it. One visit can create a positive ripple effect throughout the district.

But too many political newcomers and many incumbents don't use door-to-door effectively. Many start walking without a plan and waste valuable time trying to reach *every* voter when they should be concentrating on finding the *right* voters.

Others give up before they even begin because the thought of walking up to even several hundred homes is appalling—and it may mean several thousand.

And then there are always a few who assume door-to-door is a magic formula for success when they would be much better off using other campaign tactics.

Effective door-to-door campaigns are carefully planned and systematically executed. They are specially designed to best utilize a candidate's time in his or her district. Then the door-to-door contact is reinforced by other campaign tactics. While it may appear to be very informal, smart candidates know that their successful door-to-door program is just one small part of their overall campaign strategy.

The importance of strategy

"No matter what political level you're on, it's important to realize that in a campaign, time, money, materials, and workers are limited resources," says Jeff Spencer, now a Buffalo attorney. "The problem every candidate must face is how to maximize those resources so they have the greatest impact on the electorate."

Spencer was a Syracuse University graduate student in 1973 when he developed a successful door-to-door program for New York State Assemblyman Robin Schimminger. Although Spencer is no longer involved in professional politics, his theories on strategy and door-to-door as a campaign tactic can be applied to any political race because they are based on military principles.

"I've always been interested in military history," Spencer says. "When I was active in political consulting, I would take military strategy, decision theory, and organizational theory and apply them to political campaigns."

"For example, in the military, if you're in a defensive position, you'll need fewer men than if you're in an offensive position. It takes a whole company or four platoons on the offensive to overcome one platoon on the defensive. Now if you apply that to a political campaign, and you're the incumbent with a strong base, you can see that you don't need as many resources to hold your territory and win the election. But if you're the challenger, the greatest amount of your campaign resources

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must be spent attacking your opponents territory and capturing enough of it to win. But while you're attacking, you still have to keep a minimum amount of resources in a defensive position to protect your own base and whatever new territory you've captured."

In many cases, door-to-door campaigning can be an effective means of attacking an opponent's base. But a good overall campaign strategy makes the best possible use of all campaign resources. So in addition to door-to-door, it's essential to have a defensive strategy which will reinforce and protect your base.

While door-to-door is a good offensive tactic, it is not the only offensive tactic. And sometimes, it is the least efficient method of reaching the voters (Any good book on marketing will tell you exactly the same thing—don't get locked into one method of reaching the market.)

The pluses and pitfalls of door-to-door

Whether you should use door-to-door or not will depend on the size and character of your district, your personality, and the amount of time left in the election.

For example, in a race for school board in a large district where there is always a low voter turnout, door-to-door would be a less efficient way to use a candidate's time.

It would be better to locate the people who would be most likely to vote in the school-board race: teachers, parents of school-age children, members of taxpayer organizations, senior citizens. Since the chances of zeroing in on these people in a door-to-door campaign is slim, the candidate would be better off planning hand-shaking campaigns at PTA meetings, senior citizen centers, and other community events that attract these probable voters.

Similarly, in a higher level race, a candidate's time is often better spent meeting large numbers of people. For example, when Rep. John LaFalce of New York first ran for Congress in 1974, he already had good name and face recognition because of his previous elections to county and state legislative seats. Since the congressional district was large, LaFalce's time was better spent shaking hands at plazas, businesses, industries, and community centers in the area. People already knew him, so having the opportunity to shake his hand was impressive because he had political celebrity status. A door-to-door campaign would

have limited the number of people LaFalce could have reached.

Chuck Swanick, on the other hand, was a political newcomer when he first ran for an upstate New York county legislative seat in 1979. Unlike LaFalce, no one knew Swanick. Since there was a good chance that a voter who met Swanick at a plaza would consider it more of an annoyance than a privilege, his campaign strategy emphasized door-to-door where voters would be impressed by an energetic young man who was taking the time to walk to their homes.

Determining whether door-to-door is right for you

Before you decide whether door-to-door should be part of your political strategy, ask some questions and do some investigating. Here are a few suggestions:

- Drive around the district. Examine the types of homes, the neighborhoods, the number of apartment complexes. Going door-to-door is difficult in rural areas and impossible in some apartment buildings, co-ops, and condominiums where soliciting is prohibited and tight security prevents anyone but residents from entering.

- Know your opponent. If he or she has a history of using door-to-door successfully, you may have to follow suit.

- Talk to people who have run for office before. Ask them why they did or did not use door-to-door and whether they think it would be effective.

- Ask your political party leaders for advice. Is door-to-door expected in your community? If not, would it give your campaign an edge?

- Take a look at the physical size of the district. Is door-to-door realistic? Or could your time be better spent in other ways?

- Study the voter enrollment in your district. Do you have the political advantage or are you the underdog? Would you use door-to-door as an offensive tactic to turn votes or as a defensive tactic to hold your base?

Setting up your plan

Once you've decided to use door-to-door, formulate a plan. Start by determining how much time you can spend on canvassing each day and how many days of the week you can walk. Some candidates might be able to walk every day, while

others might have only weekends available.

A good quality door-to-door contact that will make an impression on a voter usually lasts between three and five minutes. At that rate, you could make about 15 good contacts an hour. Multiply 15 by the number of hours you plan to work each day to find the average number of homes you can reach daily. Then multiply that by the number of days that you'll be walking between now and Election Day.

For example, let's suppose you planned to spend two hours a day on door-to-door campaigning. Multiply that by 15 contacts an hour and you've got an average of 30 homes you can reach each day. If you planned to walk every day and there are three months or 90 days left until the election, you'll be able to reach 2,700 homes at best.

Instead of walking to every home, you walk only to the homes of those voters who you decide must be contacted in order to win.

But remember, that means *walking every day for two hours no matter what the weather conditions are and no matter how you're feeling any particular day*. And it doesn't take into consideration the fact that at many of the houses no one will be home.

Doing this little calculation does have one advantage though. It will give you a basis for developing a door-to-door plan.

For instance, let's suppose there are fewer than 2,000 homes in your district. You now know that you have a pretty good chance of reaching every home if you spend two hours a day for the next three months. But if your district is larger than that, you'll either have to increase the amount of time you can spend on door-to-door or find some other way of getting the most out of the time you can afford to spend.

Targeting

Finding a more efficient way to reach the voters is called targeting. Instead of walking to every home, you walk only to the homes of those voters who you decide must be contacted in order to win. Targeting is usually based on three theories:

1. There are many homes in the district where residents are not registered to vote. Since they can't

vote in the election, it's a waste of the candidate's time to stop at their door. But if you want these homes contacted *someway*, you'd be better off sending a volunteer with registration forms who might be able to convince these people to register. If they do and they know the forms *came* from you, they'll probably *vote* for you. If they don't, you haven't lost any of your valuable time and you have nothing to worry about because they won't be able to vote for your opponent either.

2. In every district there are some homes where only one registered voter lives, homes where two voters live, and homes where three or more voters live. A smart candidate who doesn't have much time will focus his or her efforts on those homes where the most voters can be reached.

3. In every district there are people who do not vote along strict party lines. If you can identify them and convince them to vote for you, it may provide the extra votes you need to win.

Putting the theory to work

Dennis Ward, an Amherst, New York attorney, used these theories when he developed what he calls a "Swing District Targeting Program" for his brother Dan, who was elected to a county legislative seat in 1975.

"Our goal was to reach 80 percent of the voters," Ward says. "In order to do that we had to start in March and work right through to the November election. We also realized that it was more important to contact some voters than others. So we took a comparison of five previous elections to see how the Democrats and Republicans in each district voted. Since my brother was running on the Democratic line, we looked for districts where the Republicans had a history of swinging over to the Democratic lines. Then we rated each district.

"The districts where the Democrats and Republicans tended not to deviate from party line were classed as low priority. We figured the Democrats would vote for us anyway and the Republicans probably wouldn't. The swing districts had a high priority."

In Ward's high-priority districts, the candidate walked to the home of every registered voter. He carried voter affiliation sheets so he knew where the registered voters lived, what political party they were enrolled in, and how many registered voters lived in the home. Each person the candidate spoke to received a telephone directory of important government services. The directory was designed so the candidate's name appeared in bold

type. After he left each home, the candidate put a plus mark next to the name of the person he had spoken with. Each week, a campaign worker would send a hand-written thank-you note to the people who had pluses next to their names. The thank-you note was designed to reinforce the visit in the mind of the voter.

Sometimes a candidate appears to be going door-to-door when in fact he or she is only going to very special doors.

"Since we started so early, we had to adjust our strategy because the voters we reached in March are not as attuned to the election as the voters in September or October. But we figured that the candidate makes the best possible contact and even if the early ones were not as effective, since we had touched the voters, they would remember it nonetheless. We always reinforced those early contacts later in the campaign with phone calls and other campaign tactics that built up our name recognition and momentum in the district."

Sometimes a candidate *appears* to be going door-to-door when in fact he or she is only going to very special doors. Len Lenihan waged that kind of campaign for a seat on the county legislature in Erie County, New York when reapportionment left him in a district where he was at a 5,000 vote disadvantage.

Lenihan's door-to-door campaign was so finely targeted that there were often streets where he would actually visit only a few homes on the entire block. So instead of walking through the neighborhoods of his district, Lenihan had a campaign volunteer drive him to his targeted homes. This idea of using a driver would also be advantageous in rural areas or in suburban communities where homes are spread far apart. And if there should be an unfriendly dog, you can always jump back into the car!

"Once you understand that time won't permit you to walk to everyone's home, you have to sit down and decide exactly where you *want* to go and where you *have* to go," Lenihan said. "At first, I was opposed to using a driver because I wanted to be seen walking down the streets informally. I didn't want it to look like I was picking and choosing the houses I went to. But in terms of productivity and effectiveness, a driver is the best way—especially in the fall when it starts to get dark early and you want to hit as many targeted homes as possible."

Lenihan also used thank-you notes to reinforce his visits at the door. His notes were pre-printed but he always took the time to jot down a personal message on the note with a blue FLAIR.

"To me, the most effective thing about the note is that personalized message," he says. "I might write *Thanks for the iced tea* or *Your dog was cute*. In some cases there wasn't anything particularly different about the visit so I'd just write, *Mrs. Smith—I enjoyed talking to you.*"

Getting Ready to Go

In addition to winning votes, walking door-to-door is great body exercise. When you walk you tone your feet, ankles, legs, thighs, hips, back, and arms.

Each day *before* walking do a few stretching exercises to limber up and improve your body alignment. Remember even the *best* of skiers do stretching exercises before hitting the slopes—it prevents injury. Repeat those stretching exercises *after* you walk to keep your muscles from tightening up. Here are a few simple exercises that are often used by joggers and long-distance walkers that will only take a few minutes of your time:

- Stand up on your toes, swing both arms overhead, and reach for the ceiling.
- Standing straight with arms overhead bend over and touch your toes. Don't worry about not bending your knees. Keeping them locked can give you lower back problems.
- With feet spread apart, stretch your arms overhead. Then bring both arms over to your left side and then back over to your right side concentrating on stretching the muscles in your side and waist.
- Holding onto the back of a chair, raise your leg and rotate it to improve flexibility in your hip joint. Repeat with the other leg.
- Raise your leg and rest it on a table or the back of a chair. Hold onto the ball of your foot and gently pull your foot toward you to stretch the muscles in the back of your legs. Repeat with the other foot.

Finally, remember that after walking, there's nothing like a hot bath to relax you. Together with a short nap you're ready for your evening campaign events. No one likes a tired-looking candidate of any age or party—don't overdo it!

Putting Your Best Foot Forward

Here are several tips for putting your best foot forward on the campaign trail:

- Make sure you're walking properly. With correct gait, each foot lands heel first on the ground. Keep both feet pointed straight ahead. If your feet point inward or outward as you walk, it's very likely that you'll tire more quickly and you may also develop backaches and other minor pains.
- Buy yourself a good pair of walking shoes. Leather shoes with a dark cushiony sole are the best. The leather allows your feet to breathe. The cushiony sole is more comfortable, absorbs bumps in the pavement, and provides better traction. Look for a wedge sole. It will give you greater support.
- Purchase your shoes late in the day after you've been on your feet for a while. Feet tend to swell as the day goes on. In warm weather you might also need a larger size shoe.
- Measure each foot. They may be different sizes. The larger foot should always determine the shoe size you purchase.
- Make sure that there is $\frac{1}{2}$ inch between your longest toe and the end of the shoe while you're standing up. The widest part of the shoe should fit the widest part of your foot. If it's off slightly, the shoe will be uncomfortable.
- The heel of the shoe should fit snugly. The shoe should have enough height so your toes don't rub against the top as you walk.
- Keep your shoes shined and don't let the heels wear down. In addition to a poor appearance, worn down heels will alter the way you walk.

- If your shoes get wet, don't dry them by a heater or they'll shrink. Instead, use shoe trees or stuff them with newspaper or tissue and allow them to dry slowly.

- If your feet get cold or sore, don't soak them in hot water. Always use warm water.

- Wash your feet daily with soap and water. Dry thoroughly and apply talcum powder.

- Avoid nylon socks or stockings if your feet tend to perspire excessively. Buy full-fashioned heavy socks. Watch for lumpy seams at the toes—they can be uncomfortable and can cause blisters.

- Blisters are caused by friction. Stop wearing problem shoes or socks. You can treat a blister yourself by soaking in warm salt water for 10 to 15 minutes two or three times during the day. The blister will disappear by itself. It's dangerous to break a blister unless you have sterile conditions. If the blister persists or becomes infected, see a doctor.

- Corns and callouses are also caused by friction from ill-fitting shoes. Never try to trim corns or callouses yourself. Apply olive oil, castor oil, or baby oil to callouses or dry patches of skin after bathing to help soften them.

- Go into training early and build up your walking strength and speed—especially if you're going to be working hilly country.

- Watch the weather. Ten dollars will buy you a pocket radio tuned to your local U.S. Weather Service Forecast Office. Use it to modify your clothing—both internal and external.

Perfecting your door-to-door technique

"I always fall back on my experiences as a part-time mailman when I was in college," says New York Assemblyman Robin Schimminger who has used door-to-door campaigning in every political race he's entered. "The first cardinal rule of door-to-door is: *Train your eye to spot the ominous chain or rope.* It's a sure sign that the home is also inhabited by a dog.

"Cardinal rule number two is: *No vote is ever worth a fight with an angry dog.* It's always better to skip the house than to run the risk of being bitten."

Schimminger also suggests that after you've rung the doorbell and you hear barking that you wedge your foot against the outside door so the dog can't come jumping out at you if the latch is not properly hooked.

Terry Wegler, a Legislative Aide to Assembly-

man Schimminger, suggests that candidates be alert to neighborhood happenings. "One day I started canvassing for Robin in a neighborhood where a murder had taken place earlier in the week," she recalls. "Residents were hesitant to open their doors and they acted irritated. It only took a few stops before I remembered the murder incident and I realized that it was not a good time to be canvassing this neighborhood."

Here are several other door-to-door tips from successful candidates:

- Introduce yourself and briefly tell the voter what office you're running for and why. For example, you might say, "I'm running for Town Supervisor because I think the office needs more attention than a part-time administrator can give it. I plan to work full-time at the job."

- It's a good idea to wear one of your campaign buttons or a name tag for identification and name recognition.

- Always apologize if it's apparent that you've interrupted a resident's nap, meal, or other activity.

- Don't ever get into an argument with a resident at the door. If the person doesn't agree with you, leave.

- Always give a piece of campaign literature or a campaign novelty to the voter. It's best if the item

has your name or photo displayed prominently. Sports schedules, phone directories, and library schedules have an added advantage because the voter tends to keep them longer than he would a brochure listing your qualifications.

- Never canvass after dark. People don't like opening their doors to strangers after sunset.

- Avoid canvassing during important televised football games. If you must canvass during a game, keep a small transistor radio in your pocket so you won't make the mistake of ringing a doorbell in the middle of an important play.

- Don't dress too formally. But don't dress too casually either. Never appear eccentric or sloppy.

- Don't take notes about your visit while the resident can see you.

- Keep your message short. Remember three to five minutes at the door is best.

- Never walk by a person who's working on the lawn or sitting on the porch. Even if you've not targeted to visit this home, it's a good idea to stop briefly and just say hello. Don't spend a lot of time there, however. The person might not even be registered to vote.

- Don't take it to heart if someone slams the door in your face. It's unreasonable to expect that everyone will vote for you. Just shrug it off and keep on walking. ★