

The Introvert's Guide to Phonebanking

by Lee Greenhouse

The Speed Read

I am an introvert, but I like to phonebank. It's impactful work and I've learned a few "secrets" that make me more effective and make the work more fun. If I can do it, so can you.

Phonebanking moves the needle. Research shows that direct, personal conversations with voters -- even with a stranger over the phone -- are one of the most effective ways to inform and motivate people to vote.

It's not about arm twisting. Phonebanking is not about arguing with strangers over the phone. It mostly involves informing voters about upcoming elections and introducing them to candidates and issues they may know little about. Sadly, many citizens don't pay attention to elections because their lives are too busy and stressful. Your conversation can be the nudge they need to go to the polls.

It's a game of small numbers. Yes, phonebanking does require a lot of calls to speak with a relatively small number of voters. But multiplied by thousands of volunteers, the number of conversations with voters adds up. And it really matters because our elections are often decided by just a handful of votes.

Be personal and authentic. To be effective you need to talk with voters as a concerned citizen, not a telemarketer. Don't be afraid to adapt the script that your phonebanking operation provides into your own words. That's usually fine with the phonebanking captains, provided you cover the key ideas in the script.

Be a freight train. Deliver your intro message succinctly before someone can hang up: Your full name, that you are a volunteer working for Organization X, why you are calling (e.g., because there is an important election coming up) and then follow immediately with a simple, engaging question (e.g., are you planning to vote? or "Are you planning to support Candidate X in the election?"). Then pause for their response and you're off to a conversation. All of this can be done in 10-15 seconds.

Connect with your personal story. Once you are talking with a voter, you can engage them through your personal story: "This election is really personal for me because.... How about you.... What concerns you?"

Hang-ups are just part of the game. Despite your best efforts, a lot of people will still hang up. It's not personal, so just go on to the next call. At the end of the day, you won't remember the hang-ups, but you will remember the great calls that you had with voters.

Rinse and repeat. The more you phonebank, the more you'll enjoy it, so don't quit after a session or two.

Introduction

When I was a kid in the 1960s, there was a cookbook called *The I Hate to Cook Book*. The author, Peg Bracken, had assembled simple recipes, tips, and shortcuts. “If I can do it, so can you” was the message. More than 50 years later, I am writing this guide with a similar message about something that few people like to do, but which is arguably more important right now than cooking: phonebanking.

I’m an introvert so I don’t really like talking to people. Normally, I prefer playing with my grandkids, reading a good book, or making dinner for my lovely wife. But I like phonebanking because it’s so impactful and I’ve learned some tips and tricks that make me a more effective phonebanker and make phonebanking fun. And the urgency of protecting our democracy and electing the right people to public office, I can’t think of any other activity that is a more urgent use of my time.

If you are already knocking on doors, writing postcards, texting voters, writing letters to the editor, or writing checks (if you’re lucky enough to be able to do so), don’t let me stop you. All of these are important activities that add to the gathering wave of influence that moves voters in the right direction. But phonebanking is often shunned like those over-boiled Brussels sprouts your mom used to serve you¹. Push them to the side of the plate and hope no one notices that you haven’t eaten them. “Oh, I don’t like calling people,” is the usual response when the subject comes up. I don’t like calling people either, but I do it willingly because it is just too important to neglect. I like chocolate chip cookies, but I have to eat my vegetables to stay healthy. So please consider adding phonebanking to your diet.

Why Phonebanking Moves the Needle

Research² shows that among the various ways of influencing voters, direct, personal contact has the most impact. Doorknocking is arguably the most effective form, but phonebanking is high up on the pyramid. I am very happy to knock on doors, but in the rural area where I live it can take two hours to knock on 15 doors. Traveling hours to knock on doors for an afternoon doesn’t make sense for me when I can reach many more voters by phone. Phonebanking gives me the flexibility to make calls on my own schedule, so it’s easy to slot it into my day.

Phonebanking’s direct, personal conversations can be instantly tailored for the audience or even the individual. While I stick to the basic intent of the phonebanking script, I can change my words and tone for the person on the other end of the line when I sense their age, hot buttons, or other characteristics. This flexibility lets me be more effective in connecting with each voter.

It’s curious that voters would listen to a stranger on the phone, but they do. Many forms of phonebanking are information-rich and many voters lack information, so they welcome

¹ Today I know how to cook Brussels sprouts and they are delicious.

² Just so you know that I’m not making this up, take a look at the research of Donald P. Green, Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, and Alan Gerber, Professor of Political Science at Yale University. They have literally written [the book](#) on this.

conversations that help them participate in our democracy. In my experience, voters may actually thank you for calling when you remind them that there is an upcoming election, tell them where and when they can vote, and introduce them to a candidate with whom they are unfamiliar. In our election system, informing a voter IS persuading a voter.

The sad reality is that most Americans don't put voting at the top of their to-do lists. They lead busy, stressful lives trying to get through school, taking care of their kids and aging parents, and making ends meet. And some people think that their single vote doesn't matter. A personal phone call can actually make the difference in whether they vote and what they vote for.

A Few Votes Don't Matter?

Elections are often won or lost by agonizingly small margins. If you think your own efforts persuading even one person to vote don't matter, consider this:

Joe Biden's 2020 victory was sealed by close wins in several key states: Pennsylvania by just 1.2 percentage points, Wisconsin by six-tenths of a percentage point, Arizona by about a third of a percentage point, and Georgia by a quarter of a percentage point. In those four states combined, Biden beat Donald Trump by fewer than 125,000 votes out of 18.5 million total votes cast. Biden won in Wisconsin by a mere 20,000 votes – **the equivalent of just 3 votes per precinct.**

The margins in state and local races can be even slimmer, but very consequential.

- In the 2008 US Senate race, Democrat Al Franken defeated Republican Norm Coleman by just 312 votes out of almost 2.9 million votes cast. Franken's win gave Democrats a 60-vote supermajority in the Senate.
- In 2020, in the Iowa's 2nd Congressional District election, Democrat Rita Hart lost by only 6 votes to Republican Mariannette Miller-Meeks.
- A Virginia House of Delegates race in 2017 ended in a tie out of more than 23,000 votes cast. When the tie was broken by pulling a name out of a bowl, David Yancey was declared the winner – a result that gave the Republicans control of the state House by a single seat.
- A Vermont state House seat in 2016 was determined by one vote out of 2,000 -- a rematch of an earlier race that was also decided by one vote — in the other direction.
- A Democratic primary for an Alaska state House seat in 2006 that ended in a tie was decided by a coin toss. The winner, Bryce Edgmon, is still in office and went on to serve as Speaker of the House.

What You Don't Know About Phonebanking

You probably have the wrong idea of phonebanking. Most phonebanking is not about trying to change someone's mind about which candidate to vote for. Most calls don't involve arguing with a stranger on the other end of the line. And most of the people you call don't yell at you, even when they disagree or aren't interested in engaging. It's true that some people will hang up on you. But so what? As the Godfather would say, "It's just business. It's not personal." It's not nearly as bad as having your boss yell at you, your spouse or partner look at you crosswise, or

your dog shun you. Just take a breath and go on to your next call. At the end of a phonebanking session, you won't remember the people who hung up, but you will remember those people you engaged with.

Phonebanking serves different goals at different stages of the election cycle. As a result, the calling lists and the scripts evolve. At early stages, phone outreach may be used to recruit other volunteers to work on a campaign. These calls are often made to lists of people who have volunteered before, or at least expressed interest. Pretty easy calls!

Early on, calls are also made to broad lists of voters to begin to winnow down the lists by identifying who is likely to be “friendly” and who is not – and this makes the calling more efficient as the campaign progresses. This is not unlike a salesperson who makes calls to qualify names as potential customers and discards those who aren't worth much effort. For this purpose, phonebanking typically entails asking voters about the issues that matter to them and feeling them out on their intention to vote for specific candidates or parties and then scoring their answers. Think of this type of call as more like conducting a survey than trying to persuade.

At the latter stages of the election cycle, calling focuses on getting out the vote (“GOTV”). Calls typically target voters who are likely to be on our side (thanks in part to those earlier calls to identify the “friendlies”), but who need a nudge to make voting a priority. These calls will remind each voter that there is an upcoming election and that their vote really matters given how close elections can be. Ultimately, these calls aim to get each voter to make a plan to vote by confirming where and when they will vote and making sure that they know what types of voter identification are required. As with many things in our busy lives, when voters make a plan, they are more likely to actually show up to vote.

Just Do It (Again)

Many people who say they did phonebanking and didn't like it, probably only did it once or twice. Like many of the best things in life, phonebanking has a learning curve and you probably won't like it until you have had enough experience to feel competent. You'll also enjoy it more if you adopt some important voter engagement “secrets” (keep reading).

Adopt a Cause

I like to concentrate my phonebanking with a limited number of organizations, so that I can become familiar with their technology and approaches and pick up a little background knowledge of the local issues, races, and candidates and even the basic election laws of the state that I'm calling into. No formal education is required, but you'll have more fun and be more effective as you gain more local knowledge.

I also enjoy getting to know the organizations' staff who run the phonebanking operation. You'll feel more like a member of a community force rather than just someone who showed up to spend an hour or two on phone calls. You'll also be able to spend more time making calls since you won't need to go through the training every time you sit down to make calls.

Know the Inside Secrets

When you sign up to phonebank, you will be working under the aegis of an organization. There are many great organizations running phonebanking campaigns, including state and local Democratic Party groups as well as unaffiliated groups of activist citizens and non-partisan groups. In my experience, these groups do a good job of training you, typically at the start of each phonebanking session, and getting you up and running with the technology platform that they use.

In my experience, phonebanking operations are run by exceptional people who are committed to the work as well as to volunteers. Many of them are young enough to be my grandchildren, which makes me optimistic about the future. You are in good hands!

These organizations are busy getting a lot of new volunteers up and running, so they focus on providing the basics and don't take the time to impart some of the more advanced techniques. In fairness, they want to avoid overwhelming new volunteers with too much instructional information. However, the "advanced techniques" are really easy to adopt and will boost your effectiveness as a phonebanker, making your calling more fun and thus making it more likely you will want to continue phonebanking. These techniques aren't essential for newbies but will serve you well as soon as you can incorporate them into your calling.

Personalize the Script

Your phonebanking organization will give you a script. Treat it as a guide, not a holy document. Many scripts will make you feel and sound like a telemarketer, so you will probably need to adapt them for your personal style. Your organizers expect this and will probably invite you to do it. Feel free to change the order, the words, and the tone as long as you cover the key points of the script. You don't need to ask permission from the phonebanking captains. Here are a few tips for personalizing the script:

1. Tell them up front that you are a volunteer. People respect volunteers.
2. Identify yourself with your first and last name, so you sound like a real person, not a telemarketer.
3. Don't ask, "How are you?" It's a common politeness in many scripts, but everyone knows you really don't care and it just wastes time. Only telemarketers ask, "How are you," and everyone knows that telemarketers truly don't care.
4. Have a hook. Make it short and get it out there fast. Most voters are engaged or lost in the first 15 seconds. For example: "We are reaching out because there is an important election coming up in just 3 weeks."

5. Follow your hook with a simple question to engage them – and then pause for their response. For example: “Are you planning to vote?”
6. Now that you’ve engaged the voter, work your way through any of the key questions in the script that you are supposed to get answered.

I like to barrel through Steps 1 thru 5 like a freight train, without pausing. In about 15 seconds, I can establish that I’m a friendly caller; I’m not selling anything; and I’m calling about something important that affects them. By not pausing, I can let them know why I am calling before they can hang up. By ending with a question before I pause, it increases the odds that they will respond in a way that allows me to engage and reduces the likelihood of their hanging up.³

Sample Script Re-Write

I don’t want to disparage the hard-working people who write the scripts, but chances are you’ll need to adapt most scripts to the way you actually speak. Without knowing the content of an actual script, here is a hypothetical re-written script to illustrate the “secrets” explained elsewhere. Please take this as a just an example of what you might do with an actual script.

Hello, is Mary Jones there?

[Yes, this is Mary]

Hi, Ms. Jones, My name is Lee Greenhouse and I’m a volunteer with [organization name].

[Hook] *I’m reaching out because we have an important election coming up in just three weeks*

[Simple question] *Are you planning to vote?*

[Pause, listen, and respond with the key questions in the script]

Keep Your Personal Story Ready

One of the reasons that direct contact with voters is so effective is that it gives you an opportunity to express ideas in a personal way that voters will find more trustworthy than mass media messages. To be effective, you need to be comfortable succinctly expressing your own story in a way that is personally authentic: Why are you doing this work?

Your personal story is not part of the formal script, but it’s amazing how often you will have the opportunity to connect with a voter during a conversation when you share who you are and what matters to you.

³ Official warning: This isn’t magic. You’ll still have lots of hang-ups, but I’m convinced that my approach results in fewer hang-ups and more conversations.

Shaping your story is easy, and it really needs to be only a few lines. Rather than parroting the same high-level ideas that people hear every day in the media, put those ideas into how our choices as voters affects you personally. Here's an example:⁴

For me, this election is really personal. One of my kids has a pre-existing condition. Before Obamacare, he would have had a very hard time getting affordable medical insurance. I trust the Democrats to protect us, but I'm truly afraid that Trump and the Republicans will roll the clock back in ways that will really hurt my family.

Avoid the Time Wasters

Because you will connect with what seems like a very small number of people during a typical phonebanking session, you will be tempted to chat with the people who are willing to talk with you, even if they disagree. Like a good salesperson, you need to know when your sale is completed (or never will be), close your briefcase, and move on to the next sales prospect.

- Don't waste time arguing with people you aren't going to convince. Thank them for talking with you and move on to the next call.
- Don't waste time commiserating with people who already agree with you. Thank them for their support and tell them you have to many more calls to make.

Don't Get Sucked into the Doom Loop

I phonebank because I sincerely believe that by working with others we can create positive change in our society. If I didn't feel that way, I would spend my days watching Netflix. When you phonebank, you will inevitably talk with voters who express pessimism and even hopelessness. Don't fall into the trap of joining with them because pessimism only feeds their helplessness. Instead, change the tone with informed optimism like this:

"I used to feel the way you do until I started volunteering. I feel much better now I'm doing something positive. And now I understand that we actually have the numbers to win. But we need to get everyone out to vote."

Deal With Objections Sympathetically

No one likes getting political phone calls, so be prepared to talk with people who are annoyed. Being understanding can help diffuse people's anger and even get them to talk with you. Here's how you can respond to some of the most common complaints:

Why do you people keep calling me?!

"I'm so sorry you are getting so many calls. I am getting those calls, too, and I don't like them either. And I don't like making these calls, but unfortunately, it's one of the best ways

⁴ Please craft your own personal story so you will sound authentic.

for us to reach voters – and this election is just so important. Once the election is over, the calls will stop.”

Where did you get my name!?

“We use the voter rolls, which by law, are publicly available to everyone. You can even view your own information if you go to the state’s online voter database.”

Take me off your list!

“I am very happy to mark you on our lists as “do not call.” However, a lot of other groups are using the same lists, so you will probably continue to get calls from them. Actually, one of the best ways to get the calls to stop is to vote early, either in person or by absentee ballot. Once you cast your vote, your voter records get updated and there will no reason for anyone to call you. That’s why I always vote as early as possible.”

Win Bonus Points!

Like a good salesman who looks for ways to upsell a customer with add-on products, take the opportunity to sell a few extras while you have a voter’s attention. And, why not? You’re selling a product you love. Before saying goodbye, try some of these:

Invite them to join up as fellow volunteers. This works especially well with people who want you to commiserate with them on the sorry state of the world.

“I used to feel the way you do, but I feel so much better since I started volunteering. You sound like someone who would like to help. The organization that I volunteer with is really terrific and there are various ways to help, not just making phone calls. I’d be happy to get you connected to the organization.”

Ask about other people in their household or family. Getting someone to talk to members of their family is a great way to spread your message.

“Thank you for being a committed voter. How about your family? Is everyone else registered and planning to vote?”

If someone needs help, connect them to the resources they need, such as their local municipal clerk’s office for voter registration questions. I even like to look up the phone number for the voter.

Promote the whole ticket. Especially in a presidential election year, remind the voter to vote for the whole ticket. Too many voters only for the “big races” and ignore the rest. Too many great candidates lose because this widespread ballot “drop off.” The same is true for ballot questions. Voters are often unaware of these important questions until they arrive at their polling place. And because these questions are often phrased in ways that are confusing, many voters simply abstain from voting on these questions.

“Please remember vote up and down the whole ballot. The local races are very important because many policies that really matter to us – such as our property taxes and the funding of our schools and police departments – are made by the local officials that we elect.

“Local races are also important because they are where our public officials get their start. Many of our governors, senators, and congresspeople entered politics running for school board, city council, and county commissioner. We need to make sure the good people get their start, and the bad guys never get a chance.”

“We also have an important question on the ballot. Question #1 asks [summarize]. The question is written in a way that is confusing, but we are recommending that you vote “No.”

Heard on the Trail

No matter what happens during an hour or two of phonebanking, you will have at least a few gratifying, galling, and even bizarre conversations. Where else could you hear things like this:

“Say, what? Is there an election?”

“I wasn’t going to answer the phone, but I’m glad I did. I had totally forgotten about the election with all that’s going on in my life, but now I’m definitely going to vote.”

I usually only vote for the President, but I see how important everything is.”

“You don’t have to worry about us. We are Democrats.

[That’s great. Are you planning to vote on Tuesday?]

“No, but that’s OK. My husband always does the voting.”

Extra Credit!

Be a force multiplier by getting your friends to become phonebankers, too. Brag to your friends that you phonebank. You will fascinate people at cocktail parties. Everyone wants to know what phonebanking is really like. They will hang on your every word as if you are telling them about your recent trip to North Korea.

Share your amazing stories and offer to show them how easy it is. Remember: If you can do it, so can they.

APPENDIX: FREQUENTLY EXPRESSED COMPLAINTS (FECs)

“It never seems worthwhile when I make calls.”

You are part of an ecosystem with multiple prongs and strategies to get voters out. Don't assume that the specific phonebanking you are doing will be effective with everyone you call. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for winning elections. Phonebanking is like the weather – it changes from day to day. One day's calls may be very different from those of another day depending on that day's list, script, time and day of the week, and other factors. Don't judge the effectiveness of a phonebanking campaign on your personal results of a day or two. Take it one day at a time but remember that you are on a long march along with many other co-volunteers. Don't judge whether what you're doing is making an impact – It is. But the power is in the collection of all the little things that many people do.

“I spent an hour making calls and I hardly talked to anyone.”

It's true that phonebanking does involve a lot of calls to reach a relatively small number of people. And while you may wind up talking with just a few people per hour, your efforts are multiplied by the thousands of other volunteers who are also making calls. Together it really adds up.

Remember that the difference between victory or defeat can be just a few votes per precinct. Helping to persuade a few voters – or get reluctant voters to vote – can be decisive in the outcome of an election. You'll be amazed at how many voters don't even know that there are elections coming up or who is running.

“When I call, I get a lot of wrong numbers or disconnected phones.”

Getting wrong numbers is still productive work. Cleaning up phone lists is important work because it makes the phonebanking more targeted and more efficient over time. Removing a phone number from the list now means that someone else won't waste their time calling that number again.

“I don't want my personal phone number to show up on someone's caller ID.”

In my experience, no one you call is going to bother you if they have your personal phone number. If they are unhappy that you called, they will hang up and you'll never hear from them again. P.S. In some cases, phonebanking campaigns use calling platforms, so you won't be using your own phone anyway.

Won't people notice that I'm calling from out of state?

Don't worry that you're calling from out of state. Few voters will ever ask where you're calling from, and you don't need to tell them that you're calling from somewhere else.

So many people now have cell phones with area codes outside of the area in which they currently live that few people are likely to notice that you're calling from out of state. And if they do ask where you are calling from, be honest. It's actually a great opportunity to inject your personal story. For example, you might explain that you love their state and that you have "adopted" their state because what happens there is so important to the entire country and really matters to you. Of course, if you have an actual connection to the state, flaunt it: I went to college in Wisconsin... My grandparents lived there, and we used to visit them on vacations... I love beer!

Sorry, I'm still not convinced that I want my phone number showing up.

If you're really concerned, you can use Google Voice, a free service, to select an alternative number. You can choose the area code and even the local exchange you would like, so it looks like you are calling from, say, Racine, Wisconsin.

The Last Word

As an introvert, I'm rarely fast enough on my feet to get in the last word. But in this case, I want to thank a few people who were kind enough to read my drafts and offer their helpful comments and suggestions.

First and foremost is my wife, Flora Lazar, who has listened to me make thousands of calls over the years. She latched onto the idea of this guide, cheered me on, and offered her usual sharp-eyed reviews.

Several family members, friends, and fellow activists also provided their editorial and other suggestions. My sincere thanks go to Sally Andre, Nina Diamond, Jill Drew, Nancy Greenhouse, Wendy Greenhouse, Emily Lazar, and John Mesberg.

If you want the last word, please send me your thoughts and suggestions at Lrgreenhouse@gmail.com.