

Tips for petitioning

by Todd Richert

1. Don't ask permission from the location where you petition
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1. DON'T ASK PERMISSION FROM THE LOCATION WHERE YOU PETITION

For 10,000 or less signatures, asking for permission definitely costs you more time than it saves.

Your rate-per-hour depends on various factors, especially market saturation. If you are working a particular store and/or city which has had lots of recent petition drives, even people who might normally sign will be frustrated by the constant request every time they visit a store. In a harsh market, you might be lucky to get 6 or 8 signatures per hour. In a favorable market, placing yourself in a steady-traffic area should easily get at least 10 per hour, usually 15.

For the most effective use of time, don't ask permission before working in front of a store (unless you have an existing relationship with the store and/or manager which will aid in getting permission). Many will say 'no' by default, if asked, but if nobody asks and no customers complain, then the same manager will let you work all day long, unhindered.

Some stores may have policies against petitioners using their property, and if so, you can be sure they will tell you so after you start. No need to inquire first, because merely by asking puts them on the spot. If a manager gives approval and his boss comes by later and says "who said they could do this here?" then it makes him look bad. Therefore, he wants to be sure he's not doing anything 'wrong' by saying yes. Alternately, if he sees you petitioning and doesn't mind, then if his boss says "who said they could do this here?", now he has plausible denial; he can pretend to be just as enraged as his boss is, as he's telling you to leave.

The worst-case scenario, when asking for permission, is they will refer you to corporate HQ and/or some other bureaucratic process where you won't have an answer for weeks.

Practically speaking, asking for permission to petition is only useful for large-scale projects, such as gathering 100,000 plus signatures where you plan ahead for months, and it is known you will need to 'set up camp' at some location(s) for a long stretch of weeks or months.

2. BE FORWARD, BUT NOT INVASIVE

Stand where the traffic has to walk past you, but never position yourself to block traffic, either generally, or a specific individual. Be respectful of the store, and it's clientele. They did not come to see you; they came to make purchases from the store. If they stop to speak with you, they are doing you a favor, which is a secondary purpose to their visit.

Annoying or angering customers is a sure way to get one of them to complain to management. Keep in mind that the store owners invested a lot of time and money to create this foot-traffic (investing in real estate, or rent, inventory, advertising, etc), not for the purpose of signing petitions, but for the purpose of buying from their store. If they see you petitioning, and are gracious enough not to kick you off the property, in essence they are letting you piggyback on their efforts. Don't abuse that grace.

Never speak to a customer entering the store, unless the customer speaks to you first and clearly wants to inquire about the petition. By speaking to customers as they leave the store, after they have already spent their money, it decreases the chance that you might have a negative impact on the business.

My opening line was always, always, always "Would you please sign a petition today?", with a friendly tone, and a smile on my face.

My lead line "Would you please sign a petition today?" can be changed, if there's something which suits your personality better... however for best effectiveness I think it **MUST** contain a few key elements, as follows:

a the difference between "Would you please sign a petition today?" and any other question you might ask, is that I'm deliberately making it sound like I'm asking for a favor. This is **VERY VERY** intentional on my part.

To open with "Are you a registered voter?" is strictly a request for information, to which the psychological reaction might be "none of your business", even if they don't say it. However, asking a stranger for a favor, in a pleasant tone, with a smile, puts the other person psychologically in a superior position. It makes them feel like you respect the fact that they **DON'T HAVE TO HELP YOU** (which they don't) and that you are in need of something from them (which you are).

Some people resent petitioners because they *appear* to have the absolute presumption that people ought to be taking time out of their day to stop and speak with them... as if they owe it to us... as if we presume upon their grace, so to speak. But no matter how much they might dislike petitioners, when they come across a new petitioner who *appears* to be submissive and respectful and humble, then the prospective signer gets a chance to feel 'superior' by condescending to speak with us.

So the first element of my opening question is that it overtly asks for a favor.

b It **MUST** contain the word 'please'. This one word conveys so much, and represents much more than good manners. It also seems to indicate humility, as if you are acknowledging that they don't owe you anything, not even the time of day.

c It **MUST** be spoken in an upbeat voice, with a smile on your face... **EVERY** time, no exceptions.

When considering where I would stand, to ask this question, it was important to consider not only how to keep my own body from blocking the pathway, but what if the person says "yes?"

I would stand far enough to the side, that if they said "yes", or if they asked "what's the petition for?" or anything else, it was far enough away from their path that they had to make a turn and take a few steps towards me. This accomplishes two things: First, by them stepping over to me, they didn't

feel that I was getting in their face, and being physically invasive into their 'space', because they are the ones who chose to come closer for a conversation. Secondly, and probably more important from a practical sense, when they stepped a few paces off to the side, that took them OUT of the traffic pattern. It might take them 60 seconds to fill out the petition, or longer if they are asking a bunch of questions, and if that person has stopped in a doorway or primary traffic path, now you are causing a tangible interference with the other customers who are trying to squeeze past.

And a follow-up to that thought, even standing far enough off to the side, there are a few people who will come grab a petition and leave their full shopping cart blocking traffic. Always keep an eye on the traffic flow, and don't hesitate to interrupt the conversation with a "by the way, let's move away from the door..." or whatever it takes to keep the traffic flow unhampered.

3. STEADY-TRAFFIC IS YOUR BEST LOCATION

Some people try to think of 'high traffic' areas for petitioning. These are good, but steady volume is better.

Imagine the best catcher in major league baseball. If 10 pitchers threw a ball to him, all at the same time, how many of those balls could he realistically catch? If he gets more than one, he's lucky.

Same with places which do a LOT of business at rush-hour. Not only are the patrons in a rush, they are coming past in large groups. You can ask a question to a group of 20 people but none of them will take the question personally and they can all dismiss it like a form letter. On top of that is the 'peer pressure' element where a couple of those people might have responded favorably to your question if you had asked them solo, but being in the middle of a group where nobody else is stopping to sign, then sociological factors usually prevail.

The best scenario is where people are walking past you in ones, twos, and threes, all day long. This happens commonly at grocery stores. It also allows you to use that same sociological factor (peer pressure) in your favor. Many times you will go 15 minutes or half an hour without a single signature. But then one couple stops to sign. 30 seconds later, someone else walks by, and as you are asking them if they will please sign a petition, they will see that somebody else is already doing the same. This turns into a little burst of "mo" and suddenly you get 6 signatures in 5 minutes.

It also works better for your average person, who is naturally more shy (like me). Some people love a crowd and have contagious levels of high energy. For those exceptions, I think they could figure out how to get people in a crowd of 20 to stop and sign a petition. But for most of us we are going to have better success dealing with people in smaller groups.

In addition, when I would ask my standard question "Would you please sign a petition today?", those smaller groups would take the question personally, and especially if the person was solo then it would be almost impossible for them to say nothing at all as they walked by.

The smaller groups make the question seem more intimate, and especially because I never ask it without making eye contact.

Depending upon my position, it might be natural for them to look at me as they exit the store, and if I get eye contact, then I ask the question.

If staying off to the side means they can easily walk past me without making eye contact, then I interject "Excuse me", and wait. If they ignore me, that's where I leave it. But usually they will look my way, and as soon as they see my smiling face, then I pop the question.

4. QUALITY CONTROL

This part sometimes conflicts with the previous paragraph, because you have to be attentive even as people are signing, while keeping an eye on the next person coming out the door. You won't always be able to maximize both volume and quality at the same time, but use your best judgment on the fly.

In the ideal, once a person has agreed to sign, I get the petition and pen in his/her hand (which gets them mentally committed) and then ask "are you registered to vote in Washington State"? If not, I take the petition and pen back. (There are some petitioners who take materials to register people on location, but I personally have never done this. My perception was that this would not increase my net signatures-per-hour. If I was working a city where my only option was a light-traffic location, then definitely I would consider registering people to vote on site, as a way to increase production.)

If they answer "yes" to being a registered voter, then I wait until the pen hits the paper (which gets them even more committed) and as they are filling in their name, I ask "is the address where you are registered to vote the same as your current residence?"

There are many ways to ask this question, but I haven't figured out a phraseology which doesn't confuse about half the people I ask, so usually I have to ask it a couple different times if they are looking confused.

Usually include something along the lines of "the state will verify these signatures one by one, and if the address you list does not match the address they have on file, they will throw it out and your signature won't count". Nobody wants their signature to "not count" so then they might pause if they are unsure, and after a minute, if they think their registration has not been updated since last time they moved, then they will put down the address of the previous residence.

5. EXTRA PENS, MULTIPLE CLIPBOARDS

Never have ONLY one petition ready to sign. Never have only the petition either, where they have to look around for a surface to write on; the petition should be temporarily affixed to a clipboard, a large piece of cardboard, or some type of solid backing so that the form can be filled out conveniently. It should also be easy to switch from one page to the next. Minimum two clipboards per person; three is better. Sometimes when the "mo" hits you will lose some of the people if they have to wait around for the last person to finish signing. You don't want to make them wait, at the risk of losing a signature.

Some people like to use a card table, but I never have. Keeping everything in my hand made me feel more portable, flexible, and able to appear less intrusive (and therefore not attract management's attention so easily).

Keep half a dozen pens on hand, in case some of them "walk off", run out of ink, dry out from heat, etc.

6. DO NOT DISCUSS POLITICS

If your goal is to get enough signatures to get on the ballot, then do NOT try to recruit anyone. If you tell me you are getting 3 signatures per hour, then I will tell you that you are probably engaging in conversations, and not doing proper petition work.

After my initial question, they often ask "what's the petition for?" or something to that effect. You want to answer questions so generically that they do NOT inspire another question. So preferably, before someone signs, they will have asked no more than 3 questions. If they are asking you 20 questions, this is bad... and if you are answering 20 questions, then it's gone from bad to worse!

When they ask what the petition is for, I always say "it's to get an independent candidate on the ballot".

Next question is usually "who is it?", and here's the important part, where you often can stop the questions and turn it into a signature.

"His name is Michael Peroutka, running for president on one of the 3rd party tickets. You aren't signing to agree to support him, just to agree that he can be on the ballot too. Because the two major parties get to be on the ballot automatically, but all the minor parties have to do this petition thing just to show up on the ballot. But you'll still be able to vote for whoever you want."

This little pitch appeals to their sense of "fairness" and for many people, suddenly it doesn't matter anymore who your candidate is or what he believes in. They will often say something like "well he's not going to get elected but everybody's got a right to run".

It's OK to be candid with people, but not condescending. If someone insists that they must know what he stands for before they can sign, tell them "it's OK, you can go check out the website and maybe you'll want to sign later, but I can't get into political issues here or else we won't have enough signatures to get on the ballot". Be respectful of people who don't want to sign, and don't try to make them feel bad or guilty about it.

7. TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH

Stay out of the sun. Especially if you are doing an all-day stint. This is actually an important criteria for which store I would choose to collect signatures at. Sometimes there would be an overhang, so that I could stand out of the way of traffic AND in the shade for most of the day. Other times, the only way to use the overhang is to potentially block traffic, and therefore the shade from the overhang was not an option.

Depending which direction a store is facing, the shade on the front might happen early in the day, but not later, or vice versa. Sometimes I would petition at one store in the morning, and some hours later move a few blocks down to a store which faced a different direction and offered afternoon shade.