

# Face to Face Communication

Whether you are doing a street stall, are handing out leaflets on an action or giving a talk – a big part of campaigning is talking to people about the issues. It can be a nerve wrecking experience - nothing is worse than to be caught on the hop and appearing confused and ill-informed. But with a bit of preparation it's easy to come across well and it's a great way of getting people on board.

## Focus on key messages

People are bombarded with lots of information every day. To maximise your effect you need to keep your message simple and clear. What are the three most important things to get across? These are your key messages – stick to them. Don't get sidetracked. The only way to get your point home is to keep it clear, simple and to reinforce it. It's much better to repeat 3 points 3 times than make 9 separate points – your 'audience' won't remember them all anyway!

### Whoever you're talking to will forget:

- 25% of what you say within **24 hours**
- 50% of what you say within **48 hours**
- 80% of what you say within **4 days**

Make sure that one of your messages is about what people can do to help. Your aim is to get people to act not just talk!

- On a stall against air travel, your three messages could be: 1) climate chaos is a massive threat 2) air travel is a major contributor 3) taking action is easy - reduce your flights.

## Body language and tone of voice

Getting the message across is more than just knowing your stuff and saying the right words. To get people to listen and believe you, you need to sound and look persuasive. It's **how you say** the words and **how you look** when you're saying them that count most.

### Psychologists tell us that:

- The words you use account for just 7% of what people believe.
- Tone of voice accounts for 38% and
- **55% is down to body language!**

**Smile!** It doesn't take a genius to figure out that smiling makes you more approachable. It's not always easy to smile at people who may represent everything that you work for an end to, but it may help to make them more receptive to your message.

**Eye contact:** If you want people to talk to you, you need just the right amount of eye contact. As you see someone approaching, make eye contact and smile, but don't let it become a staring contest. Let the contact go – you've acknowledged they're there and told them you're willing to talk to them. As they get nearer re-establish the contact and hit them with your opening line.

**Friendly tone of voice:** Simple comments or questions, if said in the wrong way can cause offence and close off all useful communication in an instant. Worse, it's contagious – if you're in a tense discussion, the tension can spread to those around you.

**Open stance:** To appear open to communication, you need to look open. So uncross your arms, come out from behind your stall, stop hiding behind your mates, and turn to face people. Keep your

hands in full view and have your palms facing the person you're talking to. Keep hand gestures out of their personal space and out of their face. The more you relax the better - be aware of your breathing and keep your shoulders down (tension often collects in our shoulders).

**Speed of movement:** Rushing eagerly towards someone to hand them your leaflet can startle and even frighten them. Remember they may have a stereotype of you as a dangerous hippy terrorist. You know you're lovely, but do they? If you've already made eye contact they know you want to talk to them - walk over in a friendly manner. Too slow, on the other hand, may send the message that you don't have faith in your message, lack confidence and are reluctant to engage.

**Respect personal space:** Ever been trapped by over-enthusiastic street collectors and resentfully handed over your small change? If you want people to be receptive give them a choice whether to talk to you. Force someone to talk to you and they'll resent you even before you start your opening line. Don't block people's way and beware of herding people into a funnel of leafleting campaigners, and watch for signals that they don't want to engage with you.

## Talking to your audience

Many of our actions and encounters are strategically targeted at specific groups – whether the public, the media, employees of a particular industry or company or decision makers. People also adopt different roles at different times during their week. The same person will be receptive to different messages at different time. Think about who you need to talk to at what time to achieve your aims. Put yourself in people's shoes. What is it they will care about? Try and make your message relevant to the person you are talking to.

The way you look can have a powerful effect on the interaction. Whether to change your appearance to suit your audience is controversial, but well worth thinking about. Is wearing that favourite “Car Drivers are Scum” t-shirt really going to encourage car drivers to listen to your argument?

## Opening lines

Work on a line that works for you! Some tactics that have been used successfully include:

- Introducing yourself “Hi, I'm Matthew...” This invites a response (“Oh, hello, I'm...”) and instantly you're in conversation; it's polite, non-threatening and doesn't immediately bombard someone with campaign info!
- Ask an open question for example “What do you think about climate change?”. Open questions can't be answered with a 'yes' or 'no' answer and are a good way into conversation. Asking “Can I talk to you about climate change?” is a closed question and invites the answer “No!” - game over!
- Ask a question unrelated to the campaign to start with. Engage people in conversation and then shift the conversation round to the campaign.

## Engaging in dialogue

So far we've talked in terms of your 'audience' but really the people you're speaking to are *participants* in the process. Engaging in a dialogue rather than talking at people helps to establish a human connection. This will make people more likely to be sympathetic to your cause. Listening to people will also help you to understand where people are coming from. Finding out what they are worried about or interested in can help you to make your message more relevant.

So ask questions, listen to the answers and show the kind of openness to their views that you want them to show to yours. The worst case scenario is that they walk away still disagreeing with your point of view but convinced that you're intelligent and approachable (which, in many cases, they probably didn't believe at first!).

## Disagreeing

Adults don't learn effectively if we challenge their self-perception. All that usually happens is that they get defensive. So when you're in a potentially confrontational situation don't challenge the person, challenge their ideas. It's a fine distinction, but one worth thinking about. In terms of the language you use, it can be as simple as saying "I disagree with what you're saying" rather than "I disagree with you".

Meet people where they are at. You won't change the mind of an oil company executive by assuming (s)he's a heartless bastard. Find some common ground and go from there (do they have a family – so for example start by talking about their kids and taking it through to other families who lose kids because of flooding).

## Answering Questions

Part of your conversations on the street will involve answering people's questions. Many of them will be interesting and relevant, some will be inappropriate or designed to side track you.

- Is the question relevant and worthwhile answering? If not politely decline to answer. But don't avoid a perfectly reasonable question just because the answer's tricky!
- Acknowledge the question – it shows the questioner that you are open to dialogue - "that's a good question...", "thanks for bringing that up..."
- Use examples to back up your response.

## If you don't have the answer...

Be honest if you can't answer the question. Offer to find out and get back to them. Signpost other sources of information, such as websites and briefings. Don't waffle or pretend you know the answer when you don't – you could discredit the entire campaign in the eyes of the questioner. Similarly don't present yourself as an expert (unless of course you are).

You can involve people by throwing questions back to them or to others around you: "That's a really good question – I'd be interested to hear what you think."

What people might want from you:

- have their side of the story listened to
- have their expertise recognised
- let off steam, and even receive an apology, over a real or perceived wrong.

## Dealing with Timewasters

Don't waste time with timewasters – target your efforts where you can actually make a difference. Stay focused and ask yourself “Is this conversation the most strategic use of my time?”

Getting caught up in a heated and protracted discussion not only stops you from talking to anyone else - it can look bad too and raise the level of tension around you. Someone waiting to talk to you may decide to forget it rather than risk getting embroiled in the conflict. So agree to disagree. Thank the person for expressing their opinion and ensure them that you respect their right to hold it. Be polite and firm and then move on.

It's not only those hostile to our cause that can waste our time. If you've ever been cornered by a fellow campaigner or fervent supporter, you'll know what we mean. So what do you do? Simply explain that whilst you've enjoyed meeting them, there are lots of other people you need to talk to today. Suggest that you continue your chat another time.



## Dealing with Hostility

Whilst you're out there you might meet with aggression, incomprehension or any number of negative responses. The important thing to remember is that these are not personal attacks. People may disagree with your beliefs but they aren't attacking you as a person (even if it may seem like it). Let's face it, in 99% of cases you've never seen them before, and they know nothing about you. They're responding to stereotypes. Avoid doing the same.

- ◆ Remind yourself why you're out there. Reaffirm the importance of your campaigning work.
- ◆ Avoid escalating the situation. Think before you respond and use calm, assertive, non-threatening body language.
- ◆ Buddy-up before you set off and stick with your buddy throughout the day. That way you're guaranteed some moral support and there's someone that can intervene if anyone 'loses it'.

### Remember:

- You don't have to offload the whole campaign message instantly. Concentrate on making contact and getting your key messages across.
- Meet people where they're at – change how you communicate to suit your 'audience'.
- Be aware of your body language and voice – relax and smile. If you're having fun the people you are talking to are much more likely to enjoy the encounter too!

For more briefings and to find out about training workshops look at our website:

**[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)**