

Dialing for Dollars

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By Alfie Kohn

It was a nice spread of cold cuts and potato salad, and it was meant as a celebration. In a single week, members of the Audubon Society had been persuaded over the telephone to cough up almost \$300,000. Now, on a Sunday afternoon, some of the people who had made the calls stood around their Cambridge basement office and chewed their roast beef sandwiches before returning to the phones.

These callers had identified themselves as so-and-so "from the Audubon Society" and talked enthusiastically about "the work we've been doing." And the members, persuaded by these dedicated young environmentalists, agreed to dig deep into their pockets.

What most of the Audubon members had no way of knowing was that the voice at the other end of the line belonged not to a member of the Society but to a professional telemarketing representative, carefully trained in sales techniques and briefed for an hour or two about the organization. Moreover, a good chunk of their contribution – about a third, in this case – would never make it to the Audubon Society.

Telemarketing firms are anything but endangered species. In 1980, 1500 companies made sales over the phone; in 1984, it was 30,000. Everything from cereal to condos is fair game for long-distance salespeople. But the Cambridge-based New Boston Group, with a second office in Washington, D.C., may be the only telemarketer working exclusively for non-profit groups. The Sierra Club, Audubon Society, and Environmental Task Force; Planned Parenthood and the American Civil Liberties Union; Mondale's presidential campaign; hospitals, colleges, ballets, and museums – all have contracted with NBG for fundraising.

"Business is going fine," smiles Clark Egeler, sitting in his fake wood-paneled Cambridge office. Egeler, 38, started NBG in 1981 with Bryn Evensen after perfecting telemarketing techniques in the development offices of Yale and Tufts. A mild, balding man with a forgettable face, Egeler will not reveal just how fine business is, but one unconfirmed report has it that he and his partner each take home a cool million a year – thanks to the generosity of animal lovers and patrons of the arts. The client groups are charged something like \$45 per caller-hour, which works out to between 30 and 50% of what NBG raises for them.

After a letter goes out, over the signature of the client group's president (or, in the case of the American Film Institute, Jack Lemmon), the calls begin. "Hello, [prospect's name], this is [caller's name], calling from the Sierra Club," one script reads. "Michelle Perrault, President of the Sierra Club...wanted me to thank you for your support." Then a pitch is made for another \$1,000. When the prospect recoils, the caller laughs sympathetically and agrees this is extravagant. How about \$500, then? No? \$250? Maybe \$100? And so on, each pitch exquisitely timed and phrased. Callers are trained in pacing, in displaying enthusiasm, in describing the organization's financial situation in urgent tones, in manipulating donors into increasing their gifts even further. The callers, whose base pay is \$5.25 an hour, are spurred on by signs posted around the phone banks. One reminds them to "TALK ABOUT \$100 AS THOUGH IT IS \$10." Another says: "Everyone wants to give Money! The Question is *how much!*"

Is NBG's choice of non-profit clients motivated by any political vision? "Not really," says Egeler. "We don't necessarily feel we have to agree with them 100%." He says he would be happy to sign up the National Rifle Association since its appeal would likely be "freedom of choice," which is consistent with that of Planned Parenthood and other clients. The Republican National Committee is as welcome as the Mondale campaign, and NBG has already done consulting for the arch-conservative American Enterprise Institute.

Some people who have worked for NBG are bitter about the way callers represent themselves as being "from" the client groups. "People don't know you're a paid solicitor and you're encouraged to keep up the illusion," says Dave Kummer, a former NBG trainer. He now calls the operation a "sham," recalling several occasions when a caller was overheard admitting he was with a telemarketing group and "was told no, you're not supposed to do that." Phil Korman, a caller for two months, says he was supposed to convey the impression to Massachusetts Bar Association prospects that he, too, was a lawyer. Callers assumed a collegial tone during that campaign, using first names and urging attorneys to come "on board."

"I think you're talking about a marketing point," responds Kelly Mahoney, director of telemarketing operations, when she is asked about this. "Sometimes clients aren't sure what their members will say if they know it's a professional group" calling them. Yet she maintains her staff members are supposed to identify themselves as calling "for" the client. Even as she speaks, a caller sitting five feet from her is identifying himself as being "at the American Film Institute." Mahoney says she will speak to him about it. A script instructing callers to say they are "from" a client group is shown to her. Mahoney says it is a mistake.

Meanwhile, the last of the cold cuts is being finished off in the training room. One caller pops the rest of a sandwich in his mouth. "Well," he sighs, "time to go push buttons for the birds."

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