

Bird - Dog Trainer's Cookbook

2014 Edition



Purpose

Bird-dogging can be a useful component of a political education/action campaign. The purpose of this guide is to assist trainers running workshops that help participants improve their skills/ability to:

- Let candidates (and office-holders) know what are the issues that matter to the community;
- Find out where candidates stand on the issues;
- Inform other members of the public who are present; and
- Insert messages into media coverage of campaign.

This is accomplished through a progression of interactive exercises during which participants learn how to better articulate their message in a variety of campaign contexts.

The training can also help activists be more effective as lobbyists, union members, interviewees, and in other citizenship roles.

Preparation

- Talk to organizers of event so that you have an idea of what kind of group it is and how many people to expect.
- Bring flipcharts, power tie/scarf, other props, handouts on issues, “tips for bird-dogs” handouts, sign-in sheets
- Each workshop should have two facilitators. In the exercises, they can rotate who is the “candidate” and who is in other roles. The non-candidate should be the discussion leader.
- If you don't have a co-trainer, you can do this by yourself with help of volunteers. Be sure to ask them before the workshop starts.



Exercise – Sound Bites – 10 minutes

Purpose

To get participants to loosen their tongues early in the workshop, beginning the progression of improving the way they express their views/questions.

Although the exercise helps with media work, this is mostly an ice-breaker, *not* a media skills exercise.

Scenario

An important candidate debate is happening this evening. A reporter stops people on the street to find out what is on their minds.

Get people into 2 lines, facing each other like in a contra dance, so that everyone is facing a partner. One line is the reporters, each of whom asks “What are you hoping to hear from the candidates this evening?” The interviewee has 1 minute to reply.

Reverse roles, and repeat.

Suggested Discussion Questions

Was it easy or hard to come up with a “sound bite?”

When you were a reporter, who had a particularly good sound bite? What was it? What was good about it?

What makes a good “sound bite?”

Learning Objectives

The best sound bites convey sincerity and concern about a specific issue, delivered without a lot of words. Try to bring those points out of the discussion.

Remember that from the reporter’s standpoint, the big question of election coverage is always “who is going to win?” Real reporters usually want to know whom people are going to vote for and why. If you can, help people think about how to pivot from “who are you for?” and “what do you think about candidate X?” questions to re-focus attention on the issue.

Tips

- ✓ The reporter’s role in the exercise is just to get people talking. They should not be asking challenging or probing questions.
- ✓ “Reporters” can hold up a marker or pen to represent a microphone for the “interviewee” to speak into. Model this from the front of the room, e.g. say “Reporters, get out your microphones” and hold up your marker clenched in your hand.
- ✓ Keep it quick; remember this is just to get people started.



Exercise – “Town Hall Meeting” – 15-20 minutes

Purpose

To give experience in a realistic situation so that participants learn the elements of effective and ineffective questions.

Scenario

A candidate gives a standard stump speech at a Community Center and opens up for questions.

Characters

- a candidate with a moderate position
- bird-dogs

The candidate gives a short stump speech full of vague ideas passionately delivered, and finishes up her/his bland speech with a line like, “Thank you for your warm attention today. It is people like you who make our democracy so strong and inspire me to serve our great country. Does anyone have any questions?”



Candidate fields a few questions, then says, “I really must be going.”

Suggested Discussion Questions

- If a reporter were covering this event, what would be the lead sentence in a story on the candidate’s views?
- What did other people in the room learn about the issues? About the candidate’s views?
- What would be a better way to frame the questions? (or “what were the best questions? Why?”)
- What makes a good bird-dog question?

Learning Objectives

The objective of this exercise is to help participants learn how to craft the most effective questions. From the discussion try to draw out the key elements, especially:

1. Focused on a particular issue
2. Concise
3. Puts candidate on the spot
4. Informs whoever is listening, including reporters

(See “Tips for Bird-Dogs” for additional details on elements of a good question.)

Tips

- ✓ Give the candidate a silly name to lighten mood;
- ✓ Give the candidate a power tie, power scarf, a blazer, or some other insignia especially if the person playing this role is one of the trainers.
- ✓ It's better to have someone other than the "candidate" facilitate the discussion. If you do this with one person, take off the tie/scarf at the end of the roleplay to make it clear you are getting out of the role. Second trainer can also introduce the "candidate" and help usher her off the stage.
- ✓ Don't try to impersonate an actual candidate unless you are preparing for a particular event and you know enough about the candidate's positions and style to really pull it off.
- ✓ Participants will learn more through experience than from what you say or what is in a handout. Try to resist the temptation to answer the question, "what makes a good bird-dog question," but instead draw out the elements of good questions from the discussion.
- ✓ Write elements of good questions on flipchart or whiteboard.

Exercise - The Radio Talk Show – 15 minutes

Purpose

Continues progression of skill development

Helps participants think about how to adjust their questions for different scenarios.

Scenario

The candidate is on a radio talk show with a call-in segment.

Participants raise their hands to make a "call."

Characters

- the host
 - a candidate
 - callers
1. The talk-show host and the candidate engage in some political banter about polls, or fundraising. Then the host says, "let's go to the phones. Our first caller is caller 1. You're on the line with Senator Keyhole. What's on your mind?"
 2. Caller 1 asks a question.
 3. Candidate responds.



4. Host says something and “let’s take another call. You’re live with Senator Keyhole.”
5. Caller 2 asks a question.
6. Candidate responds.
7. Caller 3 and response.
8. Host says, “We’re out of time.”

Discussion

- What did the listeners learn about the issues? About the candidate’s position?
- What would be a better way to ask the question?
- If you could ask a follow-up question, what would it be?
- How does a radio show format differ from a town meeting? How does that affect the way you frame your question?

Learning Objectives:

This exercise helps participants think about the audience.



Tips

- ✓ Two people are needed to present this. If you are training on your own, it’s probably better for you to be the radio host and get a volunteer to be the “candidate.”
- ✓ Get into your role as talk show host. Think about whether you are a boring NPR type, an obnoxious Howard Stern type, or what.
- ✓ Make sure trainees realize callers to a talk show are communicating with the whole radio audience, not just the candidate. Discuss the implications.

Exercise - Creating Questions – 5 – 10 minutes

Purpose

To give participants time to craft actual questions that apply lessons learned to issues of importance to them.

Best done in the middle of workshop, after one or two exercises but before the final bird-dog practice exercise.

Scenario

There are several ways to do this, but any approach should be done with pairs or small groups. For example, you can divide into small groups by area of interest, or just have people pair up with the person next to them.

1. Each person takes 2 minutes to craft a question.

2. After 2 minutes, pair up with another person to share your questions out loud, get comments, and make improvements. If partners are interested in the same topic, try to come up with one question.
3. If you have time, put two or three pairs together to share and discuss your questions.

Learning Objectives

This exercise helps people get very specific with their message and practice saying it out loud.

Tips

- ✓ Resist suggestions to do this in a large group setting. It is important for everyone to be able to come up with a question and discuss it.

Exercise - The Street Festival – 15 minutes

Purpose

One more way to get people to interact. If candidate moves quickly and your group is not too large, it is possible to give everyone a chance to bird-dog.

Scenario

The candidate is shaking hands in a local park during a street festival.

Roles

- Candidate
 - Candidate’s local campaign chair, a party activist
 - Citizens on the street.
1. The candidate is shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries with people on Main Street or in the park. She is approached by bird-dog 1. While they are shaking hands, the bird-dog asks a question.
 2. The candidate responds.
 3. The campaign aide hustles the candidate along to the next person.
 4. Bird-dog 2 approaches, shakes hands, and asks another question.
 5. The candidate responds.
 6. If there’s time, continue until everyone has had a chance.
 7. Exercise continues until the campaign aide says, “We have to be moving along.”





Suggested Discussion Questions

- How did the way the question was framed affect the way the candidate responded?
 - How would you adjust your approach based on the forum, e.g. talk show, town meeting, coffee shop, street, house meeting?
 - How would you adjust your approach based on your knowledge of the candidate's views?
- How do you anticipate bird-dogging would change over the course of the campaign?
 - Did you ask the question you crafted in the previous exercise? If not, why not?

Learning Objectives

This exercise helps participants really get the importance of being prepared.

In discussion, bring out point that a one-on-one conversation can have technical elements (e.g. technical jargon, acronyms, names of bills, etc) that would be counter-productive in a public setting. It also may be easier to ask follow-ups if you are one-on-one with the candidate.

Tips

- ✓ This works well after the “Creating Questions” exercise.
- ✓ Campaign aide needs to hustle the candidate along. This is both realistic, and also enables more people to bird-dog.
- ✓ If bird-dogs are too shy or too slow, it's OK to slow down and have the candidate say “what's your name and what's on your mind?”
- ✓ Candidates should generally continue trying to dodge the questions, but it can have a good effect for some questions to get direct answers.

Exercise – Take-Aways – 30 seconds per person

Purpose

To identify what participants learned

Scenario

Go around the circle of participants asking each one to name one “take away” from the workshop, i.e. something she/he learned.

Learning Objectives

To close workshop on a positive note that helps participants go forth and bird-dog.

Tips

- ✓ Go around the circle; make sure every person gets a chance to contribute a “take-away.”
- ✓ Scribe on a flipchart.
- ✓ Move along quickly.

Sample 60-minute Training Agenda

1. Trainers introduce themselves	2 min.
2. Sound Bites	10
3. Town Hall Meeting	15
4. Discussion of bird-dogging experiences and your campaign plan	10
5. Street Festival	18
6. Wrap-up/evaluation	5
	60 min.

Sample 90-minute Training Agenda

1. Trainers introduce themselves and the workshop. Introductions go-round (unless group is too large).	10
2. Sound Bites	10
3. Town Hall Meeting	20
4. Presentation of sponsoring group’s campaign plan	10
5. Crafting questions	5
6. Review “Tips for Bird-Dogs” handout	10
7. Street Festival	15
8. Wrap-up – Take-aways, how to make bird-dogging happen, and evaluation.	10
	90 min.

Additional Training Suggestions

- Remember that the best learning is experiential. Resist the temptation to give the “answers,” but instead set a context for participants to learn from their experience.
- *When de-briefing exercises, try to keep participants in the experience at first, in other words discussing what they did or observed in the exercise. After you’ve drawn insights from the immediate experience it’s okay for participants to generalize based on other experiences they have had and then talk about how to apply what they’ve learned.*
- When de-briefing exercises, try to ask open questions, e.g. “What was it about Susan’s question that made it effective?” “How could Carmen’s question be made more effective?”
- *When setting up role plays give participants enough context to understand the setting and the roles. But you are not writing a screenplay; you don’t have to detail everything. Let people be creative.*
- Some people will be quicker to speak, both in the exercises and in the discussions that follow. Try not to call on the same person more than once, but give everyone a chance to speak.
- *If any exercise goes fast, you can call on more bird-dogs in each one. Use your judgment.*



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