Planting Seeds: An Ethnographic Study of the Information Exchange Between Street Canvassers and People of Toronto

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Abstract

This study explores the information exchange between street canvassers and passers-by in the urban core of downtown Toronto. Using a series of ethnographic methods, the physical and vocal information delivered by the street canvasser was studied to uncover tactics they employ to attract the attention of passers-by, cause them to stop, and perhaps donate. Findings illustrate that the information exchange is a rich and complex process. Street canvassers use creative and personalized vocal greetings as well as body language to incite feelings of familiarity and friendship. During the information exchange, factual content about a charitable organization is often minimal, and instead, canvassers heavily employ emotional appeals. These findings suggest that the information exchange is a unique instance of what Karen Fischer (2005) refers to as “information grounds,” in which the exchange allows for the spontaneous sharing of information to further the overarching goals of inspiring passers-by to become information seekers and build a community around a charitable cause.

Introduction

Poised casually on the sidewalk with binders and clothing marked with the name of a charitable organization, street canvassers are a common sight in many North American cities. However, a lack of academic investigations into their work has left us unfamiliar with the science behind the goal driven interaction between canvassers and passers-by that succeeds in raising thousands of dollars in donations for charities annually. This study applies ethnographic methods to study this everyday interaction within the discipline of information science. Specifically, it investigates the information exchange between the canvasser and passer-by.

The intent of this study is to explore the anatomy of the information exchange in order to identify the goals of the canvassers during the exchange in addition to the nature of the information that is sought out and shared by the canvasser to achieve that goal.

Literature Review

Few academic studies have explored this type of charity work. Much of the work that has been done focuses strictly on dialogical elements of the phenomenon.
Particularly, Cialdini and Schroeder studied specific vocabulary and phrases used by charity workers requesting money in the context of a door-to-door charity drive and found that individuals are more likely to donate when requesters communicated that even small claims were welcome (1976).

Other academic works focus on social psychology and the nature of interaction in situations of persuasion and compliance. Dolinski, Nawrat and Rudak conducted a number of empirical experiments in order to understand which variables are more likely to achieve a donation from participants who were asked to contribute to a charity. Their results suggest that the participant’s mood, or characteristics of the requestor such as age or gender do not affect the outcome of the request. However, participants were more likely to donate when the requestor engaged them in dialogue, rather than presenting the request in a monologue condition (Dolinski et al., 2001, 1401). These works do not comprise a conclusive study of this particular phenomenon. Both studies focus exclusively on verbal information, and neglect to investigate the role of non-verbal information communicated through body language. Furthermore, these projects study only the request for money itself, and not the wider information sharing of the situation which, as Dolinski et al. themselves discover, is vital to the phenomena.

Research Methods

Research for this study was completed within an urban environment, specifically, the downtown core of Toronto, from September to December of 2010. Numerous ethnographic methods were employed to complete this study. At the end of the project, six hour-long sessions of unobtrusive observation had been completed. During four sessions, I became a participant observer. In pretending to be a passer-by, I stopped to speak to the canvassers who were unaware of my status as a researcher. In addition, I used photography to capture some aspects of interaction, though this was a difficult method to employ in this study as I did not want to interrupt, distract or make uncomfortable either the canvassers or passers-by. Because of this, diagrams were produced to capture certain visual aspects that are important to this study but which were not possible to photograph. Additionally, three different canvassers participated in a semi-structured interview.

To preserve the anonymity of all five canvassers whose words were recorded throughout the research process, they will be referred to by a single letter only (A, B, C, D, and E). The group of participating canvassers includes both males and females with a diversity of ethnic backgrounds. Not all the participating canvassers were representing the same cause: two were working for an environmental cause, two were working for a women’s rights campaign, and one was working for a children’s charity.
Preliminary Findings

Catching

While on the street, the canvassers must find a way to grab the attention of passers-by long before they can engage them in casual conversation and, eventually, their rap. Canvasser D confessed that “the hard part of the job is stopping people. They see us a lot and they don’t want to stop.” The very first task of canvassers is to be acknowledged by potential donors, which is virtually everyone who walks by. Initial information is visual, communicated by clip boards and clothing bearing the name and logo of a charitable organization; it is also communicated vocally, in the form of greetings or witty catch lines as well as physically through body language that aids in heightening the canvasser’s visibility, individualizing vocal greetings and, in some cases, inducing feelings of familiarity and friendship.

The phrase that all canvassers of this species seem to use, at least periodically, is a variation of the phrase: “do you have a minute for (Sick Kids, Save the Children, Plan, etc.)?” However, few of the canvassers observed rely on this phrase exclusively. Often, canvassers get creative and use wit and humour to stop people. The canvassers refer to these vocal greetings as “catch lines.” Of her catch line strategy, Canvasser C told me that she will ‘switch it up’ from time to time: “People see us all the time, and they won’t be interested in stopping if they hear the same things all the time.” Some canvassers are extremely creative. Canvasser E serenades the people who pass by. When questioned about this technique, he explained that those songs which he sings while at work usually relate to the cause for which he is working. At the time, this canvasser was collecting donations for a campaign working to improve the quality of life for female children in developing countries, and so he was singing a song about a “very important woman” in his life, his mother: “Sometimes people stop [because of the song]. Sometimes it puts a smile on their face. That’s also important.”

In addition to vocal greetings, the majority of canvassers also use body language to attract passers-by. Most commonly, canvassers simply wave. However, canvassers exhibit creativity in their body language as well. Another canvasser observed would point at individuals who passed by, singling them out of the crowded street. Canvasser B referred to her favourite movement as ‘the scoop,’ named no doubt for the scoop-like gesture she made with her arm as she reached out towards the street and then in again towards her body.

Scholars of psychology and social behaviours have long been studying the information communicated through body language, but sadly it is a realm thus far neglected by information scientists. Of body language, Ellen Goldman argues that it can “help us sequence our verbal communication and layer it with messages. We record this information at a glance and automatically adjust to it” (Goldman, 7). The research of this study found that body language is most frequently used by canvassers during times when sidewalk traffic is heavy and many people are walking past. This is because waving or pointing has the effect of isolating specific individuals, directing the vocal greeting at one person rather than addressing the crowd in general. This is
important because it has the effect of personalizing the greeting. Passers-by were more likely to acknowledge and respond if they believed that the greeting was specifically directed at them. The body language that a canvasser uses can also communicate a message of familiarity and intimacy. Canvasser B, who employed ‘the scoop,’ commented that “it’s like an air hug: it makes people feel like they’ve just run into a friend.”

The Rap

The canvasser’s informational goal is to provide a passer-by with critical information that will affect the passer-by, interest them in the cause and, either in the moment or in the future, offer a donation. The delivery of this integral information, and the request to donate, is referred to by the canvassers as ‘the rap.’ During an interview, Canvasser C stated that “the rap is where we say some of the hard-hitting facts about the cause. The idea is to get people informed and interested before we ask them to become involved.” The canvassers obtain this critical information during intensive training during one full workday. Canvassers partake in training sessions each time they begin working for a new cause. The vast majority of the training undertaken by a canvasser is intended to improve their ability to deliver a strong rap. To ensure this, canvassers are provided with a script to follow. According to the participant canvassers, the first line of the script is a query of what information the passer-by currently has about the cause. This has the effect of engaging the passer-by and providing the opportunity for the canvasser to draw from the information that the passer-by already has about the cause.

Factual Information and the Rap

While the canvassers are trained to plant seeds by delivering information about the cause, in practice very little of the information exchange between passers-by and the canvassers concerns factual information about the cause. Additionally, much of this information tends to be vague and, in some cases, questionable instances of misinformation. Such is the case in this rap from Canvasser E:

What it’s about is empowering girls around the world. In third world countries, girls don’t have rights. Girls don’t have human rights. That’s not cool because girls are very important... so we’re trying to show that to the world. What we do is we go and make sure that’s happening. How do we do that? A lot of sustainability and community development. We go into communities and we build wells, we build schools... that’s a really cool thing we do, and how we do that? With a lens, with a filter on girls.

Rather than concise, factual statements about a cause, most pitches analyzed for this project consisted of similar, vague overviews of a cause. During interviews, I sought out reasons for why information about the cause is delivered in this way.
Canvasser E implicated that the gravity of this cause made it inappropriate to be discussed in depth on the street: “All these charities are pretty serious things. We are given a lot of information that is pretty shocking. In some cases it could provoke a negative response, which is not what we want.” Canvasser D, who was representing an environmental charity, suggested that canvassers avoid sharing dense information about a charity to avoid information overload:

All the people that stop, they’re on their way somewhere, they might be in a bit of a hurry. They have other things on their mind. Our job is to plant seeds. Give them something to think about, and inspire them to find out more on their own when they have the time.

Canvasser C unabashedly suggested that such a delivery was due to human fallibility: “I can only be as much of a website as I can! We do our best to get people interested, to find out more for themselves.”

It is clear, then, that the information exchange is intended to be one component of a larger information system. In the system, the charity shares information with the fundraising agency, which shares information with canvassers during training sessions. On the street, canvassers seek information about their cause from passers-by. They then share information that, ideally, will motivate the passer-by to seek further information from the charity’s resources, such as their website. As such, whether or not passers-by agree to donate on the street, the rap works to inspire further interest and involvement on the part of the passer-by.

Has to Come From the Heart: The Emotive Delivery of Information

It is important to note that information about the cause represents a disproportionate amount of the information exchange, which lasts twenty minutes on average. A varying percentage of the exchange revolves around money; most canvassers follow the rap with a statement of how small claims can make a difference, such as Canvasser A: “We’re just talking about pocket change here. It’s nothing you can’t live without... what can you do in this city with $1.00? You can’t even take the subway.” However, a much more significant proportion of the information exchange consists of emotive appeals to become involved. Canvasser E, for instance, concluded his rap with the following:

You can help an amazing human being in the world, help an amazing community in the world, get involved with an amazing organization that’s doing great work. And feel good, most

Figure 2: Information Flow Diagram. Red arrows represent information sharing, while blue arrows represent information seeking.
importantly. Giving feels good. It’s not about feeling obliged to do it, it’s about feeling good and being like ‘this is awesome’!

This is comparable to Canvasser A, who in her rap argued that:

“We all need to get involved in causes that pledge to help the environment. We all benefit from a healthy planet, and so we should all participate in making it a better place in the future. It’s the best thing you can do for future generations, it’s the best thing you can do for your children.”

The canvassers are aware that these emotive claims are particularly affective:

*Interviewer:* Did anyone sign up with you today?

*C:* Yes! I totally got this guy to sign up with me. I was talking to this guy, and he looked like he was going to walk away, so I said “look, it’s about caring. It doesn’t have to come from your wallet, but it has to come from your heart!”

Canvasser C’s statement is interesting because her response gives the impression that achieving a donation had not been the result of a delivery of factual information which she had obtained during training, but rather from the emotive claim invented by herself, a product of her own enthusiasm and concern for the cause.

Rather than disseminating shocking factual information to induce a negative emotion, such as guilt or deep concern, canvassers dedicate more time and energy during the information exchange to sharing personal emotional appeals which are intended to encourage and empower individuals, and link involvement with the cause to a positive feeling. This research, then, suggests that the canvassers operate under the premise that instilling positive, rather than negative emotions in those who engage with them will more likely inspire further involvement on the part of the passer-by. Thus, while a small proportion of the information exchange regards an exchange of factual information, the more important aspect of the exchange lies in these emotional appeals, which intend to leave the passer-by with positive feelings which may inspire them to become further involved in the cause. This study, then, is perhaps a platform into further research concerning emotions and information seeking, leaving us with a question of which emotions are more likely to motivate information seeking.

**Conclusion**

This study has illustrated that the information exchange between street canvassers and passers-by is a rich and complex process. The most difficult task for the canvassers is attracting the attention of those who pass them by and convincing them to stop. Vocal greetings, along with body language, can individualize a greeting on a crowded street, and entice feelings of familiarity and even friendship.

Canvasser E reported that, on average, in one full day only fifteen people will stop to interact with the canvasser. Of those fifteen, it is likely that only one will donate: “We spend all day waiting for those fifteen people. Our ability to do our job is based on how well informed we are, and how well we are able to relate to the people that stop.” While exchanging factual information about the cause is an integral component of the rap, this investigation has found that canvassers tend to keep conversation here vague and casual, encouraging the passer-by to seek further
information following the exchange on the street. Additionally, canvassers use emotional appeals to motivate those they interact with to become information seekers after the exchange is over.

A large body of academic work within the field of information concerns information seeking and sharing practices involving the use of information and communication technologies, or within institutions such as libraries or schools. However, less attention has been given to casual, everyday exchanges. Karen Fisher refers to these as “information grounds,” which are temporary environments of “proxy information seeking” which arises from casual interaction or friendly conversation (2005): “information is shared serendipitously without anyone expressing (or necessarily having) a need for that information” (Fisher, 2005, 186). The information exchange between street canvassers and passers-by may be included in information grounds theory, as they are unexpected and informal instances of social interaction for the passers-by in which the information flow is multi-directional. However, this exchange is a unique example of an information grounds in that the canvasser has a specific goal to be met through information sharing. Additionally, this is a unique instance in that the passers-by who engage with the canvassers become active and purposeful information seekers following the information exchange.

References