

How to Run the Perfect Supermarket Table

One of our most effective outreach activities is the supermarket table, where we contact people coming out of a Safeway or King Soopers to offer them literature and information. Similar events can be organized at festivals and other public events. A table is set up near the main supermarket entrance to hold flyers, sign-up sheets, giveaways, and other items. Thus, the activity is commonly called “tabling.”

Objectives

You can run tables for a variety of purposes; most common are promoting a candidate, registering voters, collecting petition signatures, and providing voting information. In most cases you have three levels of objectives: 1) Offer a single flyer to every person of voting age exiting the store. 2) Provide additional information (including a voter registration form) to those who stop or express interest. 3) Collect contact information (including petition signatures) from those who express support. One flyer should express the main purpose of the event and should be handed to as many people as possible. Other flyers are kept available on the table.



Process

Each table typically needs 2-5 volunteers depending on the number of entrances and the level of traffic. At each door, two or three people stand in the flow of traffic at the exit and hold out a flyer, asking a question such as, “May I offer you information on Joanna Conti for Congress?” It’s important to be friendly and to phrase the approach as a question. For our Douglas County Howard Dean tables, typically half of the people accept the flyer and half decline. Even in our conservative area the decliners are typically friendly or at worst neutral. On the rare occasion where an unfriendly person comes along, simply ignore them and move on to the next person. Never argue, as tempting as it may be.

Whenever a person expresses interest or curiosity, direct them to the table for more information. Anyone who expresses support should be asked to sign up, and offered a giveaway (e.g. button or bumper sticker) in exchange. If enough volunteers are available, one should stay at the table to assist with questions and signups. Signup sheets often have “volunteer” checkboxes; explain the purpose and ask them if they would be willing to volunteer. Before they leave, make sure the information is legible and don’t hesitate to re-write it yourself if you can’t read it. Often the success of the event is measured by the number of signups at the end of the day.



Planning

Two weeks in advance of your event, in the late morning, call the supermarket and ask for the store manager. Explain who you are and what you have planned. All major supermarkets have procedures in place for this and know what to do. Some will grant permission right away, while others will ask you to contact the corporate public relations department first. In a few cases you may be asked to submit your request in writing. It is unusual to be refused, though there are a couple of stores (e.g. Castle Pines Safeway) that never allow solicitation of any type.

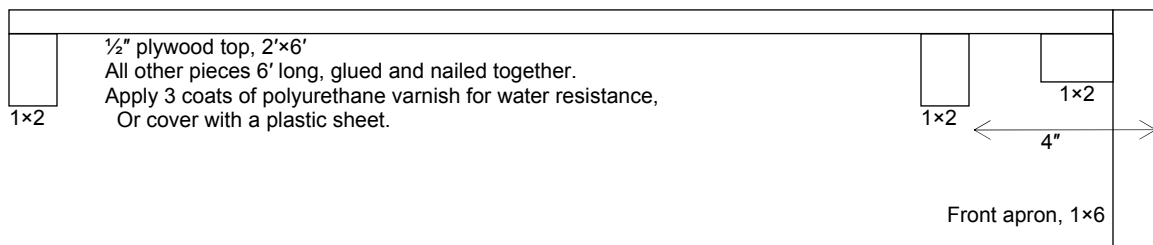
Once you are on the store's calendar, start lining up volunteers. You can e-mail people you know, or call them. One or two days before the event, you'll need to call them to confirm that they are coming, or to find more volunteers. Always get commitments from more people than you need, because it's inevitable that some won't show up.



Also in advance of the event, arrange for your signs, flyers, and giveaways. Signs usually have to be free-standing or attached to the table and not to any part of the building. If you plan to do a lot of tables on the same subject, consider purchasing a vinyl banner to hang from the table. You can get this made at any printing shop. For your main flyer, assume that you'll distribute 100 pieces per hour of event. So if you plan to stay at the store for 5 hours, print 500 flyers. To minimize paper fumbling, it's best to limit yourself to one two-sided sheet for your main flyer. You can provide other flyers on your table. If possible, have a dozen Spanish-language flyers on hand as well.

The Table

You can get by with any old table, even a regular card table. Be sure the table can tolerate getting wet, and is heavy enough, or weighted down enough, to avoid being picked up by the wind. Better than a card table is a set of boards or a plywood sheet on a sawhorse. This is heavier and better for writing, because it is higher and more stable. An ideal size is 6 feet long by 2 feet wide, but be sure it fits in your car. An ideal height is 38 inches. Here's a side view for a lightweight but strong tabletop that we use on top of 36" sawhorses:



To protect from the pervasive winds and sudden thunderstorms, we keep our literature encased in plastic boxes, as in the photo. You can buy these at The Container Store. Eight will fit comfortably on a 2'x6' table. To really defend against the wind and errant coat sleeves, consider holding the boxes down with Velcro. You can buy sticky-back Velcro strips in 6' packages at Michaels. You'll need four packages. Staple the hook strips to the table top lengthwise, 6 inches apart, starting 4 inches from the front. Stick the loop strips to the bottoms of the plastic boxes, perpendicular to the hook strips.

For signage, you can tape a banner to the front apron, or hang a grommeted vinyl banner from hooks. Signs can be displayed on top of the table in plexiglass sign holders you can buy at Office Depot, held down with clamps.

See the photos for more ideas. Most of all, have fun and enjoy talking with people. One of the great rewards of tabling is to see faces light up when they discover that there really are other Democrats in Douglas County!