10 Strategies to Increase SES Canvassing ROI by 130%

Proven canvassing strategies from a successful SES provider.

The following guide is written for approved providers of the Supplemental Educational Services, otherwise known as the SES Tutoring program.

For more information on how to become an approved SES Tutoring Provider please visit http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/choice/help/ses/index.html

Turbocharge Your Canvassing Efforts

Canvassing, or door-to-door outreach, can be a highly effective way to gain large numbers of signups for the Supplemental Educational Services (SES) program. During the 7 years that our tutoring company operated in the SES tutoring space, we signed up nearly 15,000 families through canvassing and learned how to operate a tightly controlled, financially efficient canvassing operation.

While many SES-eligible districts make canvassing difficult by not releasing the parent application to providers or by allowing only very short sign up windows for parents, a proper canvassing strategy when properly managed can win your SES company hundreds or even thousands of student signups each year. Qualifying, low income families appreciate the outreach, and are often thrilled by the opportunity to receive free tutoring for their child.

In this guide you will find a list of 10 strategies that we employed to run a highly effective canvassing operation. While this list is by no means exhaustive, it will give you a leg up on your competition and when properly executed will lead to higher numbers of student signups this SES school year.

1. Identify which States and Districts are "Canvassing-Friendly" and target densely populated urban areas.

There are currently 7 States that are still required to offer Supplemental Educational Services, SES Tutoring, to qualifying Title 1 students who attend underperforming schools.

While federal law allows SES providers to market their services, many States and Districts are not friendly to canvassing as a marketing strategy and will take efforts to outlaw it, curb it by not allowing provider access to the parent application, or create other disincentives to make canvassing more difficult.

When we were organizing our marketing efforts in canvassing friendly states, we would make calls to state and district staff and ask them if they would allow canvassers access to the parent application and whether community outreach efforts were permitted.

Some districts would inform us that parent applications were only sent out to parents and were never given to SES Providers, which made the district unattractive as a canvassing destination.

While this didn't mean that we wouldn't provide services in this district, it did mean that we did not set up our canvassing operations there, but instead relied on vendor fairs and other forms of marketing.

Other districts were very open to canvassing as long as applications were filled out by the parent (never the provider), and that they were turned in by a deadline. It is also important to discover district practices in the event that a parent fills out an application with two different SES Tutoring vendors.

In some cases, the application that arrives to the district first will be the first choice provider, while other districts will follow up with the parent by phone and require them to make a choice. In the event that it is first application arrived to district, providers need to develop a quick and efficient delivery operation where applications are turned into districts daily. This might also require you to rethink your strategy and get to desirable school areas early and move to other areas if they have been thoroughly canvassed by competing organizations.

It is imperative that you target areas that are densely populated or you will quickly learn that canvassing does not produce the ROI necessary for you to pay a team of canvassers. For information on how to perform outreach activities in rural areas, please email us at hello@tutorware.com

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2. Identify District Clusters and Order Districts by Tiers

It is essential to not spread your organization too thin, but instead to select districts and schools that meet your operational strengths. As the SES parent/student signup window has gotten shorter and shorter over the years, it is more and more difficult to hire, train, and manage canvassing teams in remote locations.

Our company would look at canvassing friendly districts that were in close proximity to one another and that preferably had staggered student signup windows. This way we were able to move our canvassing teams from district to district and not have to train new teams in remote areas.

Once you have identified schools and districts that are attractive, it is time to begin the process of mapping out each school territory and creating Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 territories. How you determine each Tier is up to you.

Our company found that we got the most signups and program completions from elementary schools with high percentages of Title 1 students. This also fit our program best as we felt that our K-8 program was our company's strongest.

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We would also look at our historical signup data and look at where we had the most canvassing success in the past. Together these would help us form our game plan. We generally canvassed Tier 1 schools first, then moved on to Tier 2, and ultimately to Tier 3.

3. Study District and School Data When Available

When organizing a canvassing campaign it is essential to understand which districts and schools have high percentages of Title 1, low income students. Most of this information is publicly available and can be found on state education websites or district websites.

While we served a variety of districts, some with high numbers and some with low, canvassing organizations run most smoothly when there are a large percentage of Title 1 students in an area.

In California, we gathered intelligence from websites like www.ed-data.k12.ca.us. By perusing this website we were able to perform anaylsis of district sizes, number of students, percentage of free or reduced lunch students and more.

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4. Map Territories

Most schools in most States have defined boundaries and children who live within a school's boundary generally attend that elementary school. When we mapped out canvassing schedules and canvasser routes, we always provided our canvassers with a map with color boundaries that showed clearly where the school boundaries were.

We generally recommend starting in the neighborhoods nearest to the schools themselves and then working your way outwards.

Many SES companies inform their canvassing staff to position themselves just off the underperforming school property and to catch parents as they walk to and from school in the early morning or late afternoon.

We found this to be a highly inefficient practice as vendors would miss out on huge sections of the population who either took the bus, were dropped off by car, and who rode bikes to school.

Providers who utilized this as their main canvassing strategy greatly underperformed those that executed a targeted approach in the surrounding neighborhoods.

5. Develop a Proper Chain of Command

Without a proper organizational structure your canvassing operation will likely fall into a state of disarray and be subject to inefficiency, inconsistent scheduling, and at the worst - time clock fraud.

Our organizational structure included Regional Coordinators, Lead Canvassers, and Outreach Canvassers. Regional coordinators oversaw Lead canvassers who in turn supervised Outreach Canvassers.

Canvassing success starts at the top. Regional Coordinators were extremely detail-oriented managers who oversaw canvassing and vendor fair operations, organized Lead Canvasser and Canvasser interviews/ training in Tutorware, created assignments, received daily reports from our Lead Canvassers, and reported overall daily signups to upper management.

Lead Canvassers oversaw daily canvassing operations, assigned routes and territories, made sure that Outreach Canvassers showed up on time, followed their routes, and collected parent applications.

6. Develop an Enticing Pay Structure That Rewards Success

In hiring and retaining canvassers, it is essential that you follow local, State and Federal rules and regulations regarding pay structure and pay frequency. Please check with an employment attorney in your State to make sure that you are compliant.

You may also hear conflicting information on whether to classify your canvassers as W-2 employees or Independent Contractors. To play it safe, we always classified our canvassing staff as W-2 employees which gave us more control over their activities and methods, but also required us to follow more employment rules and regulations.

Our company found that by offering minimum wage as a baseline and offering a incremental hourly rate that increased with the number of daily signups, we developed and retained a hard-working and productive canvassing team.

While even the best canvassers had bad days and earned minimum wage, we found that these bad days were infrequent and were largely due to canvassing in either a new or thoroughly canvassed area.

We also learned very quickly that canvassers who earned minimum wage for multiple days were either not working hard enough or were gaming the system.

We would refer these underperformers to our lead canvassers for a day of monitoring to identify the problem, and most of the time this corrected the issue.

7. Hire Well and Train Effectively

A highly effective field organization is in many respects like a military operation. Your organization will need to have a clear chain of command and complete "buy-in" from all rank and file.

Canvassing in a compliance heavy environment requires detail-oriented individuals at all levels.

We also looked for outgoing personalities, bilingual (English/Spanish/Hmong, Vietnamese, Mandarin Chinese, Somali) and hired canvassers who could communicate effectively to the target audience.

We always recommend devoting several hours to both online Skype training and in-the-field canvasser trainings with experienced staff.

8. Hold the Team Accountable With Frequent Check-ins

Developing a consistent reporting process is mission-critical in establishing an effective canvassing organization.

Our organization created a document called the "MacroVital" which estimated the number of applications we should submit in order to reach our goal for each school. We carefully tracked daily application goals against our canvassing budget and held the team accountable in meeting its goals.

Coordinators checked in with the Leads daily, the Leads checked in with canvassers hourly, and the entire team would meet at the end of the day to discuss their performance and to make suggestions about what to target tomorrow.

9. Use Reporting Intelligence and Develop "Postponed Target" Canvassing Procedures

Our company used elaborate maps for canvasser assignments as well as a sheet that we used to track canvasser parent visits.

Once canvassers located an ideal area (a low-income apartment complex within a qualifying school's boundary for example), we would casually ask parents if they had any friends that also attended the school who might also be interested in free tutoring.

Outreach canvassers would frequently encounter scenarios where a decision-maker was not home or available, and they would then document these locations as well as leave "Next Steps" instructions. We would then revisit these postponed targets either later in the afternoon or the next day.

Again and again, we found that our pinpointed thoroughness allowed us to maximize the number of signups in areas that may have even been previously canvassed by other less organized SES vendors.

In the areas that we canvassed we were always one of the top performing canvassing operations.

10. Comply With District Guidelines

We were careful to attend every district provider meeting and make sure that we thoroughly understood each district's rules and regulations regarding marketing, canvassing, and sign up windows.

Some districts have very specific rules regarding how often the applications could be turned in, as well as specific instructions regarding the inclusion of second and third choice options. We made sure to read all district provider instructions and contracts carefully, and made special note of any rules and regulations that impacted canvassing operations.

When in doubt, we emailed the district representative and make sure that we were in compliance. Over the years we noticed that many providers did not properly follow district guidelines and ended up losing their students, getting kicked out the district, and in some cases getting reported to the state department of education.

About David Dodge

David Dodge is an education entrepreneur who has founded four companies including Tutorware and SurePrep Learning. SurePrep Learning, an SES Tutoring company, was named one of fastest growing companies by the Inc 5000 for three years in a row, and provided tutoring and test prep services to over 20,000 students in Arizona, California, and Nevada. David's latest venture Tutorware is a mission critical SaaS business application for tutoring, test prep, and after-school service providers.

Everything your SES business needs, in one intelligent package.

Tutorware's comprehensive suite provides CRM, ecommerce, HR, operations management, billing and finance to allow your SES business to grow and scale.

Our flexible attendance and billing system deftly handles on- and off-site clock-ins and enables you to stay on top of critical metrics such as attendance, student progress and customer satisfaction.

Schedule no-obligation demo with David
www.Tutorware.com/Demo