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Fundraising king takes 80% slice

'Love, respect' led him to charities

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Meet George Parker.

By his own admission, he's king of the fundraisers. Started out in chocolate. Moved to charity.

"Love, respect, loyalty, common sense. That's my motto. I'm the public awareness man. I can take your charity and put it on the map," said Parker.

He's been at it for 30 years — started when he was 15. "I work in a field I believe in. Charity."

Now take a look at what he does.

Parker, and many like him, build client lists of fringe charities, six or seven at a time. They are charities that have high-sounding names. Canadian Association of the Blind. National Society for Abused Women and Children. Garden of Missing Children. Canadians Against Child Abuse.

They take those charities and create telemarketing and door-to-door campaigns designed to separate dollars from donors. Parker says everything he does is honest and legitimate.

He and other fundraising companies typically take the first 80 cents or more of your dollar and pass what's left over to the charity.

A judge called one of his 80 per cent contracts "shocking," and ordered the directors of the National Society for Abused Women and Children to pay back money to the public. The society, which raised \$904,987 but contributed just \$1,365 to good works, was stripped of its licence.

Parker, who did about half the fundraising for the society, wasn't punished.

That's because nothing Parker does is illegal. Canada has no laws against what the federal taxman calls "predatory fundraising." Alberta has a law requiring people like Parker to be licensed, but that's it.

Step inside his current headquarters on King Street E., in Oshawa. His company is Courtesy Call. It has offices in Hamilton and Ottawa. Telemarketers work out of a back room. People come and go quickly. Canvassers are dispatched in waves for the supper hour.

It's tough out there these days, Parker said in an interview. Lots of competition.

He started out selling chocolate door-to-door and says he's not rich; lives in a nice trailer. "I don't feel

that money is the only driving force in life."

What drives him is the excitement of running a successful campaign. The juice.

The phone rings.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Right. Get me the numbers. We'll see if we can make that campaign happen."

Parker slams the phone down and picks it up as quickly. It's his accountant in Windsor.

"Am I an honest man?" he asks the accountant, flipping to speakerphone.

"Yes," says the accountant.

"Do I do the best work I can for charity?"

"Yes!" she says. Down goes the phone. Up again. He calls his favourite client, Linda Davis, of the Garden of Missing Children.

In three years, the Garden has collected \$1.6 million in donations. About \$1 million went to fundraisers, including Parker, and \$263,667 went to Davis' administration costs. She claims to have spent \$289,620 on charitable works. Charities typically use several different fundraisers. Garden's documents do not indicate what portion of the fundraising Parker does.

Parker hits the speakerphone button again.

"Linda. Hi. Tell this reporter something. Do I do a good job for you?"

"Yes you do, George," says Davis.

"Do I get your name out there?"

"You sure do, George."

"Bye, Linda."

In statements he made under oath, in the case against the National Society for Abused Women and Children, Parker provided an insider's view of fundraising.

This was a charity that, the court found, did virtually no good work for abuse victims.

Parker explained the process starts with a script, and he provided a sample text:

"Good evening Sir/Madam ... (the charity) was founded ... to help women and children who have been abused. Women and children who are victims of abuse suffer from physical injuries such as bruises, broken bones and emotional scars which can affect them throughout their lives if not recognized or treated."

The script tells the canvasser to ask for a \$25 donation at the door. If the homeowner says no, the

canvasser should say: "Anything you can give would really assist at this time, even a loonie or a toonie."

According to Parker's statements, his 80 per cent cut is split with his team of canvassers and their crew bosses. The other 20 per cent goes to charity. He says some competitors take the full 100 per cent.

Parker says a good canvasser should take in at least \$25 an hour. If not, the canvasser usually quits.

"If a person is hired and he or she can't raise money within the first four or five doors that they knock on ... based on their inability to present themselves or their shyness, they will more likely say this job is not for me and leave."

Asked by the lawyer for the Ontario Public Guardian and Trustee (which took the National Society to court) if his canvassers readily admit they are paid, Parker replied: "To be very frank, no." If pressed by the donor, Parker said his people say they are unsure about the "cost factor."

Parker, whose company works for six or more charities at a given time, also told court that he sometimes "sells" charities to another fundraiser. In one case, he "sold" Child CyberSearch, which operates a Web site with missing children's pictures, to another fundraiser for \$5,000. In a recent three-year period, Child CyberSearch took in \$1.8 million, while only \$321,320 went toward helping find missing children.

When it comes to telemarketing, Parker said his people either "shoot the phone book" (cold call) or get "taps," which means they have a list of people who have given to other charities in the past and are more likely to give again.

The Association of Fundraising Professionals is against the George Parkers of the world. Responding to the current Toronto Star series on charity fundraising, the association renewed its call for all Canadian charities to prohibit commission-based fundraising. That means taking a percentage of each donation as opposed to a flat fee for a campaign.

The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, an umbrella organization of charities, also condemns commission-based fundraising.

George Parker is unrepentant. "We give them a guaranteed income in their bank account."

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