

Private and confidential



Great reasons to join. No reasons not to.

Operation Vanguard

A strategy to transform membership

West Oxfordshire Conservative Association

Christopher Shale

May 2011

Preface

Vanguard is a new membership strategy from which comes a different proposition and approach. We – WOCA – developed it in partnership with CCHQ.

It is more than WOCA's future. It is also a pilot for CCHQ. If it succeeds, others will build on it.

I'd like to thank everyone at WOCA, CCHQ and No.10 who has given their time, support and ideas. It's been a perfect model of intra-party co-operation. Everybody wants Vanguard to be successful.

Overall party policy on membership is obviously not our remit. Where this document differs from others on this subject it does so with CCHQ's support, in the spirit of contributing to collective thinking and trying new things for the benefit of all.

Christopher Shale
Chairman, WOCA
May 2011

Postscript

Until Vanguard has been formally adopted by WOCA's Executive Council it is a personal proposal from me, as chairman. That's why you will find many uses of the first person singular in this document.

If it's adopted it will become agreed collective strategy; and in every appropriate context, I will become we.

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Objective

To achieve a transformational increase in membership of the West Oxfordshire Conservative Association; to do this in ways others can apply to similar effect nationally.

“A transformational increase...” No specific target?

The absence of a quantifiable target is not cautious management of expectations. It's actually the opposite.

Over the years there have been countless membership initiatives, countless targets set. Some may have succeeded I suppose, but most have failed. And then another one comes along. And it's the same all over again.

What's the right number this time? Last year WOCA added 22 members (net), so maybe 50 or 100? Or let's think a lot bigger: 5% of our vote? Or maybe 10%, because 5% would be ok for a normal constituency but we have DC as our MP...

It doesn't really seem to matter all that much, because whatever happens we know that a year or two down the line it will have been forgotten; and then someone else will set a new target and we'll start all over again. It is Orwellian.

We are where we are because, to the extent that we have really thought about members at all, we've tended to think about them as a number. We think quantitatively, because that's what membership is: a numbers game. It's what it's always been.

'Transformational increase' is indeed a specific target. But it's more about the first word than the second.

The problem

If one asks Tory voters, as I have done many times over the years, to complete the sentence “I should join the Conservative Party because...” there is no compelling response. If there was I’d have heard it by now. There isn’t.

The claimed benefits – the right to attend the party conference, take part in selecting our MP and so on – are of zero interest to most current, let alone potential, members. (And our emotive appeals – typically along the lines of ‘help us save Britain’ or ‘don’t let them – the Labour party – do it again’ – even at best are reasons for voting for us, not joining us.)

It’s actually worse than that: the perception is that not only are there no benefits, there are all sorts of penalties of membership.

No reason to join. Lots of reasons not to.

To take the second of these obstacles first, I think there are 5 main reasons not to join us.

They think we’re not like them

Although WOCA has many good people as members, collectively we are not always an appealing proposition. As a group, we don’t look that much different to how we looked 10 or 20 years ago. Everybody else does. The people who vote for us are now much more representative of the general population than they used to be (DC did this); but the people who join us still aren’t. The perception is that we are too fond of looking inwards rather than outwards; too prone to exclude rather than include; too interested in process rather than outcome; too concerned with rank rather than responsibility.

When we are together we are not always a group of people to whom many of our potential members are going to be magnetically drawn.

They think our social activity isn’t fun

One of the current so-called benefits of membership is our social activity. To many potential members the idea of Tory party social activity is at best rather more threat than promise, at worst a perfect oxymoron.

And they’re generally right: most of what we do under the banner of social activity has a pretty narrow appeal. If we struggle, as we often do, to get our existing members to come to things, why on earth would we think they’ll appeal to potential members?

I’m not saying everything we do socially is unattractive; simply that the nearer it is to the stereotype the less appealing it is to potential members.

They think we'll beg and steal from them

And they're right.

The widespread perception is that our party plunders its members at every turn. We rarely miss an opportunity to pick a member's pocket. Their money disappears into a bottomless pit. And then we ask for more. Ad nauseam. Ad infinitum as well. If ever we say thank you, there's always another please not far behind. We treat our members like an addict treats his dealer. Over the years we have come across as graceless, voracious, crass, always on the take.

This problem goes beyond our approach to money, but money is a big part of it. Of course we have an endless need to raise it. But sometimes we have gone about it in a not very intelligent way.

They think it's a big step

The prospect of joining our party is perceived as a bigger step than joining almost any other type of organisation.

This is partly because it's seen as a slippery slope: they fear they'll be dragged into political activism: leafleting on a wet Wednesday evening; worse still – terrifying in fact: canvassing.

It's also partly because they perceive that if they were to join us they would lose their intellectual independence; and they'd be required instead to defend some things – policies, statements, decisions – they don't believe in, or say we're right when actually they think we're wrong.

They don't want to go public

Some (many?) people are deterred by any idea they might be publicly identified as a member of the party. Lots of people greatly prefer to keep their political views to themselves, especially if they are at odds with family, friends, work colleagues or neighbours.

As an aside, even the party's creative director (Tom Edmonds) fits this bill: when I asked him if he's a member he said he wasn't because, and I quote, "it'd be on my record."

Summary

Please join us. It costs £25. There are no real benefits. Individually we're ok – some of us are your friends even – but collectively we're sometimes not a very attractive group of people. Our parties aren't fun. It's a slippery

slope to political activism. You'll always have to support us, even when you know we're wrong. You'll have to go public about being a Tory and face the consequences with your non-Tory friends. Oh and by the way, we're after as much of your money as we can get; and we'll never stop asking for it.

The solution

No reason to join. Lots of reasons not to.

We have to solve both these problems: we have to remove the reasons not to join – or, if that just can't be done, at the very least we have to minimise them; and we have to give people great reasons to join.

Think of membership as a product. It's our product. We can't sell it. Sure, around 1,250 people in West Oxfordshire buy it every year, but that's failure not success. 33,973 people voted for us last year, so we know they're well disposed towards us. But we can't even get 5% of them to buy it.

It has to be said: we're not great at selling it. We have to become cleverer at that. And we will. But actually we're already better than almost every other constituency, so that's not the problem.

The plain fact is that people don't want to buy it. We therefore have to change it. If we can change it into something they do want to buy, then buy it they will.

If one is trying to sell something, the first thing to do is to identify the potential customer. We can't just leave it at 'everyone's a potential customer' because our product isn't a commodity. Aiming a non-commodity product at everybody is the same as aiming it at nobody.

So the first step is nothing much to do with the product. It is to narrow the target: to define a group of people whom we think might buy from us, have lots in common with each other, think similarly, like the same things.

The audience

We are going to focus on people who have voted for (and/or otherwise supported) us over many years, but never joined us. In the first instance at least, we are not going to try to win a single convert: not people into Tories, Tories into members.

In the nadir of 1997 we – the party nationally – polled 30.7% of the vote. In 2010 it was 36.5%. While clearly one can't draw this conclusion solely from those two poll numbers with 13 years between them, perhaps 75% of our electoral support is constant: long term, loyal, steadfast, dyed-in-the-wool, serial Tory voters, most of whom are middle aged or older.

We will focus on them because they don't need to be convinced of our merits. Theirs is the support we are least likely to lose as, nationally, we do difficult things and become less popular.

What more can we say about them?

I'd like to divide the whole adult population, over the age of say 40, into two

groups. One we'll call *politics heavy*. The other: *politics light*.

Politics heavy people are really interested in politics.

Except at general elections – and sometimes on single issues – *politics light* people aren't.

Most British people are not greatly motivated by politics. To quote Andrew Cooper (founder of Populus, Director of Strategy at No. 10, Chipping Norton resident) "they're not that bothered."

98% of Tory voters are *politics light*. Literally 98%.

The other 2% are not all activists, but they are members. As far as *politics light* people are concerned, the fact of membership – and what we do as members – defines those 2% as *politics heavy*. The Policy Forum, Conservative Women's Organisation, Conservative Future and so on: it doesn't get much *politics heavier*.

Our potential members are happy to vote for us – they support us, they share our values, some of them regard it as their duty to vote, and so on; and they may opine about politics – rage about it sometimes. But they don't consider themselves to be political in any sense that even approaches activism. It's just not their thing. It never will be.

Most of the time, *politics heavy* is a big turnoff for *politics light* people. Hold that thought. We'll return to it later.

The product

No reason to join. Lots of reasons not to.

We have to remove these reasons not to join – or, if that just can't be done, at the very least minimise them.

This is what should be done.

They think we're not like them

We can't change ourselves overnight. But we can start. We must look different – when we communicate, when we're together. We must sound different – in what we say, how we say it, the language we use, our tone of voice. We must behave differently – try to see ourselves as others see us.

We do have to change, but not as much as one might think. Our target audience is in fact full of people just like us – except in two ways.

- We're *politics heavy*; they're *politics light*.

- When we're with *politics light* people, doing *politics light* things, we're no more or less fun to be with than they are. But when we come together as a group we sometimes morph into something different, less attractive. Our WOCA environment alters us. We are not alone in this (just being behind the wheel of a car has the potential to change many of us).

So we must change the WOCA environment. In the meantime we must recognise that we need to make not just the message but also the messenger as attractive as possible.

They think our social activity isn't fun

And as often as not they're right. So instead of offering them things they don't find attractive, we'll offer them things they do.

They think we'll beg and steal from them

And again, sometimes they're right. So we'll set out to earn whatever we seek from them, not beg for it. We will earn it through the profit margin on events, sponsorship, auctions and other such activities where we are in effect either giving or selling something of perceived value.

We'll also be more careful about how and when we sell to them. If we were to view every activity, every event, every act of communication as a fund-raising opportunity we could never neutralise this negative.

So sometimes we'll just give, not take. Sometimes thanks will mean exactly and only that: not please; just thanks.

They think it's a big step

To overcome this negative we'll change what we ask, what we do and what we say.

When we ask them to join we'll ask them only to share our values, give us their vote and not support our opponents. We'll tell them – we'll spell it out – that this doesn't mean they have to agree, slavishly, with everything we say, support every policy, defend every decision, relinquish the right to think and speak for themselves, cease to hold their own opinions.

When we ask them to join we'll promise that membership isn't a slippery slope to political activism – and we'll make sure it isn't. They won't be pressured into doing things they don't want to; and it will be easy to opt out of anything.

We'll give them an undertaking that they can resign their membership at any time for any reason. (They can at the moment, but that's not the point.)

Imagine a spectrum with 'just voting for us' at one end and 'political activism' miles away at the other. I want to position joining us as not even a single step beyond just voting for us: the image is of one foot anchored safely where it is while just a toe of the other is dipped into the membership water.

They don't want to go public

We'll reassure them that their political affiliation, like their vote, will remain as private as they want it to be. We'll reinforce this with an undertaking. We'll give them a range of privacy options.

Summary

We will behave, look, sound and present ourselves differently. We'll raise money by earning it, not begging for it. They won't be asked to sign up to anything onerous, agree with all our policies or defend us when they think we're wrong. They won't be press-ganged into activism. They'll have the option to keep their membership as private as they want. They can leave at a moment's notice.

We will change all these things – perception, reality or both. And we'll find the best ways of getting the message across to potential members, so this new reality eradicates the current one as quickly and completely as possible.

If we do these things – and communicate them effectively – we will remove or minimise the reasons *not* to join.

But that of course is not enough. We have to give them great reasons *to* join.

Reasons to join

As a political party our membership product has to be political, appropriate and consistent with our values, or it won't be credible.

But – and here's the rub – it doesn't have to be *politics heavy*, which is what it is at the moment. It can be *politics light*.

We don't have to stop doing *politics heavy* things at WOCA, of course. But we do have to stop thinking there's the slightest chance of *politics light* people, in any significant number, being attracted to join by them. There just isn't.

There never has been. It's what, pre 2005, DC used to call double ham and eggs: we've offered them ham and eggs repeatedly. They don't want it. So how can the solution possibly be double ham and eggs?

It can't. It wasn't then. It isn't now.

But that's precisely what we've been doing with membership. It's what we're still doing: we're offering a *politics heavy* product to *politics light* potential customers. It's not what they want. It doesn't appeal to them. Of course they're not buying it.

The horse died decades ago. We should stop flogging it.

Instead, we are going to minimise the current reasons not to join, and offer our *politics light* potential members a range of *politics light* benefits, centred around a rolling programme of events they'll really want to attend.

And we're going to give them exceptional, compelling and clear value.

Great reasons to join. No reasons not to.

Characteristics of the programme

This paper is about membership strategy, not the details of what we propose to offer. Nevertheless, a little flesh on the bones.

What is a *politics light* event?

An example: A Day in HMP Wormwood Scrubs. Meet there at 11.00am. Tour of the prison. An hour with the governor: short introductory speech, questions and answers, discussion about crime and punishment. Lunch with the prisoners: we eat what they eat, with them, behind bars.

Way beyond curiosity: mutual fascination.

What did you do today?

Peter Chadlington has organised this many times (on behalf of the Howard League for Penal Reform). I have been – several times, to different prisons. It's a great experience. Almost everyone would agree. Almost everyone would like to do it.

Another example: An Evening With [non-politician celebrity], in conversation on stage at Chipping Norton Theatre (the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire did this recently there, to a packed house; so has Felix Dennis...).

A third example: The Great Debate: loosely modelled on the Oxford Union, topical but *politics light* subject, maybe a political speaker – maybe even 2 – but predominantly not typical politicians preaching party politics; the emphasis not on politics but entertainment – with a Tory political ingredient somewhere in it.

There will be a rolling programme of these events. Here is a flavour of their defining features.

1. They will have what is known as 'money-can't-buy' appeal: they will be events and activities not normally available from other sources. They will be bespoke.
2. They will be organised and staged to professional standards. WOCA is, in effect, going into the event management business. WOCA as impresario, almost. At present the mind-set is perceived as: spend as little as possible, charge as much as possible, thereby maximise profit. It will become: this is first and foremost a membership benefit and only secondly a fundraising opportunity; do everything really well; offer high quality at a reasonable price; do our utmost to give them a great time.
3. There will be a range of events at different price points: something for everyone, as it were. Most events will be mid-price so as to have broad appeal. But not all. For example, at one end of the scale we might have The PMQ DIY Lunch: bring your own sandwiches to watch PMQs in a

different fine country house in the constituency (by courtesy of a PPC member) every week; glass of wine, cup of coffee, informal discussion, yours for a fiver. At the other, we might have Just Another Ordinary Day: we'll organise it, but choose how you get there, stay where you like for as long as you like, and on one of the days: breakfast briefing with a senior staffer, tour of the White House, lunch with a Senator... yours for cost plus a £1,000 donation to WOCA...

4. Almost all events will also be open to non-members, but there will be differential pricing: say, for example, non-members £50, members £30. Three benefits of this: it establishes open market value at the higher price; it makes the financial case for membership clear; it thereby both rewards existing members and encourages new ones.
5. Each year there will be at least one thing – something attractive, of clear perceived value – for nothing. Free to all members (albeit maybe sponsored by one or some) as part of their subscription. No fundraising there. No auction, silent or otherwise. Nothing for sale there. No please. Just thanks.
6. There will be a counterbalancing social action element to the programme. It will be far removed from the stereotypical spectre – wonderfully enjoyable and worthwhile though it is – of marauding hordes of Tories armed with paintbrushes, loose in the vicinity, bursting with bonhomie, furiously painting for victory. With late 60s as the average member's age, this just doesn't work for WOCA.

And so on. As I say, only a flavour. But I hope enough to illustrate.

Really enjoyable, attractive events. Utterly atypical. Organised and presented to professional standards. Everything done well. Attention to every tiny detail. Great value.

Great reasons to join.

Summary

We aim to achieve a transformational increase in WOCA membership, in ways others can apply to similar effect nationally.

Currently there is no reason to join our party; and there are lots of reasons not to. We want to solve both these problems.

We start with the audience. We will aim at the 32,000 constituents who voted for us in 2010 but aren't members. Nationally, 98% of Tory voters are what I have called *politics light*: except at general elections (and sometimes over single issues) they're basically not that interested in politics; and they never will be. The other 2% – our members nationally – are *politics heavy*.

Most of the time, *politics heavy* is a big turn-off for *politics light* people. Our approach to membership has been unsuccessful for decades because it seeks to attract a *politics light* audience with an offer that is *politics heavy* and has no perceived value. This will never work.

Instead, we want to match the offer with the audience: to sell them something they want, not something they don't.

We will base the membership proposition on: neutralising, or at least minimising, the current reasons not to join; offering a rolling programme of atypical, attractive, *politics light* events; providing exceptional, compelling and clear value.

Great reasons to join. No reasons not to.

Conclusion

I talked at the outset about a transformational increase in membership; and about the first word being the principal target. I want to transform not just the membership proposition but the whole way we think about members and membership.

An association's two main tasks are to win elections and raise money. I contend that we will become much better at both if we change our mind-set about members.

I also contend that, if we get the proposition, the quality and the communications right, the quantity will look after itself. If we offer a great membership proposition to the people at whom we're aiming, they will want to buy it.

This isn't a plan, of course; just a membership strategy. The business and communications plan will follow. Just as important, we will have to implement it really well. Install it. Make change happen.

Finally, I propose that we launch the new membership proposition and programme on Thursday 6th October, the day after DC's conference speech.

Appendix

Initial implications

As I say, we will need a business plan and a communications plan. These are the next priorities. The full implications of this new approach to membership will be addressed in them. In the meantime we can safely predict the following.

1. Membership recruitment will become primarily a WOCA rather than a branch activity. It would be unfair as well as unrealistic to try to implement change on the scale envisaged across 23 branches. This is not, of course, to propose that branches should have no membership recruitment role; but it is a recognition that WOCA must itself take the major responsibility.
2. Without changes in the way we currently operate in the office, the administrative and organisational workload would grow to the point where it was unsustainable at sensible cost. We will therefore change our approach to, for example, membership communications and administration, so that more time is available to support a new programme of events.
3. Even with such changes, we will need to bring more – and in some cases different – resources and skills to bear. Several new senior (voluntary) roles will be created. For example, we will need people to lead whatever social action initiatives and major events we decide upon.
4. We need a new website with features and functionality not available to us from the current one. It will become the engine of membership recruitment, communication and administration. Many things we currently do manually – or not at all – can and should be automated so as to increase capacity and improve efficiency. We must begin work on this without delay: it's likely to be the programme element with the longest lead time.
5. We will need to raise money in order to fund the website and membership recruitment programme. Although net revenue will be earned in due course, in the meantime programme costs will exceed new income generated.

There is an important point about the cost of this programme. We will want to experiment, constantly try new things, find out what works and what doesn't, relentlessly improve. In the early days, some events may succeed by qualitative and other terms of reference, but raise less than they cost. Other things will just fail. It's inevitable. Some of the failures will be expensive. We will need this budgetary margin for error.

6. In the light of this strategy, and in particular the conclusions I have reached about *politics heavy* and *politics light*, we should take a fresh look at our existing activities – the Supper Club, CPF, CF, CWO for example –

and make a plan for each one.

7. We need a timetable – a critical path analysis, in fact – to make sure we know what needs to be done, by whom and by when, so we're ready to launch on Thursday 6th October.
8. If we are to achieve this deadline I will need to have delegated authority from the Executive Council to incur expenditure, appoint people to lead new initiatives and implement change arising from this membership strategy, the business and the communications plans. I will seek this authority at the Executive Council meeting on Wednesday 15th June. I will report on how I have used it at the next meeting, on Wednesday 28th September.