

Answering phones at KUOW for their Fall 2006 pledge drive

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Raymond Chen

I spent Saturday evening as a volunteer answering the phone for one of our local public radio stations, [KUOW](#). This was the first time I had worked a pledge drive, and it was a fun experience. I was there sort of as an honorary member of a group of friends who get together every week for drinks; they decided to volunteer for the pledge drive as a fun change of pace. Here's sort of how the evening goes: You'll be sitting there at the table chatting with your friends, and then a phone rings and the conversation instantly stops while somebody took a call. By the time the call is over, everybody had forgotten what they had been talking about and a new conversation starts up. There were a lot of conversations that just ended abruptly and were never resumed. Great for people with short attention spans. When the volunteer coordinator announces, "Pledge break in two minutes," it means things are going to get exciting soon. The calls arrive in waves. The moment the pledge telephone number is announced, the phones start ringing. A few minutes after the pledge break ends, the phones quiet down. (That's the best time to go for a bathroom break.) At one point, the person next to me started taking a pledge and then went into a coughing fit. She handed me the receiver, and I finished the call for her. But while I was on the phone with her pledge, *my* phone rang, and another volunteer had to answer my phone. The second volunteer had the presence of mind to take her phone out of the rotation before answering mine, so the chain wouldn't continue! (During one of those short conversations, the volunteer that went into the coughing fit explained that she started volunteering because her then-boyfriend did it. "I wanted to make sure he wasn't coming just to meet cute girls.") The second volunteer (the one who answered my phone) later took a pledge from the host of one of KUOW's news programs! She answered the phone and recognized the caller's name but played it safe because, hey, it might just be a coincidence. When she asked for the caller's e-mail address, he said, "They've got it already. I work there." Now sure of her caller's identity, she decided to have a little fun and tried to upsell him to the next pledge level. I'm told that in the old days, the phone system didn't randomize the assignment of incoming calls to telephones. Instead, it operated as a hunt group: There was a "hot seat" that always got the first call, then the second seat always got the call if the hot seat was busy, and so on. Eventually, they realized that this wasn't fair to the person in the hot seat and they installed a system that spread the calls out more evenly. When you're in the car or at home listening to the pledge drive, it

sounds like the hosts are right there in the pledge room, but that's just an illusion produced through the magic of radio. (Special effects in radio are a lot cheaper than they are on television.) The hosts are upstairs in the main control studio, and the pledge drive volunteers are downstairs in the performance studio. There is a microphone in the pledge room so the hosts can hear if, say, a cheer goes up. The entire operation is low-tech. We take pledges with the tried-and-true "pen and paper" technique. Some of the people who call in think we're all in front of computers with the entire membership database available at the touch of a button. No such luck. It's great that you've been a member for ten years and have your membership number handy, but I can't call up your address; you'll have to give it to me again. On the other hand, the low-tech way of recording pledges means that when somebody makes a pledge, say, ten minutes after their favorite show ends, you can backdate their pledge form so their pledge counts towards the show they wanted to support. The current tally is recorded on a whiteboard that is updated by hand. The highest-tech part of the whole operation is a webcam that sends a picture of the whiteboard upstairs so the hosts can see how things are going. If everybody is quiet in the pledge room, you can hear the on-air audio feed, which is piped in at low volume. When the calls are coming in, the room gets quite noisy, and some people use an earplug to block the non-telephone ear. It basically means that down in the pledge room, we have no idea what's happening on-air. I'm told that during an earlier pledge drive, the host said something like "At some point during the evening, I'm going to repeat a song. When this happens, call the pledge line and tell us the name of the song." Of course, nobody told the volunteers about this. Somebody would call up and say the title of a song and the volunteers would have no idea why. When the volunteer coordinator asked us for the name of our group so we could be acknowledged on the air, we had to do a bit of brainstorming. The group doesn't have a name (it's just a bunch of friends who get together for drinks), so we made up a funny name on the spot. I'm told that one year, the group gave its name as *The Bill Radke Fan Club*. (This was back in the heyday of Radke's show Rewind.) Bill Radke was upstairs in the booth and freaked out. He was afraid it was a bunch of stalkers who rummage through his trash looking for discarded socks or something. Once convinced that they weren't a bunch of crazy people, he came down and even answered the phones for a while. But he didn't do a very good job: It was as if he'd never seen a pledge form before. He'd be baffled by the instructions and fill it out wrong. Ultimately, his technique settled into "answer the phone, chat with the caller for five minutes, then hand the phone to a volunteer to collect the pledge information." This year, the show that happened to be on the air at the time was *The Swing Years and Beyond*, so we chose the name *The Swing Beers*. When the name was announced, the on-air banter went like this: Amanda: "And in our pledge room answering phones we have a group called *The Swing Beers*. I don't know what that means." Ken: "I do."

Ken Vincent obviously drinks beer.

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