

A conversation with Jack Norris of Vegan Outreach on May 20, 2014

Participants

- Jack Norris – Executive Director, Vegan Outreach
- Eliza Scheffler – Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Mr. Norris.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Norris about Vegan Outreach's main activity of distributing pro-vegan leaflets, and about the effectiveness of leafleting.

Overview of Vegan Outreach (VO)

Vegan Outreach (VO) has four permanent full-time staff in addition to Mr. Norris. One staff member manages VO's finances, accounting, and human relations; another serves as a graphic designer for its website, t-shirts, logo, and newsletters. VO's office manager manages booklet orders and tracks donations, and its outreach director coordinates leafleters.

VO also typically has about 10 full-time and part-time seasonal staff.

VO's annual budget is about \$900,000.

Goals of VO's leafleting

Almost all of VO's funding is used to produce and distribute leaflets promoting veganism, in order to reduce animal suffering by decreasing the number of animals raised for food. There are also environmental benefits to reducing livestock farming. Livestock farming is responsible for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions and requires large amounts of water and land, which could be used to grow more crops for human consumption.

Research has found that people who become vegan more gradually remain vegan for a longer period of time, so it does not solely promote radical changes in diet but aims to encourage people to make gradual changes over time.

In addition to influencing the diets of individuals, VO wants to change the ways that people view farm animals and teach people that farm animals are capable of suffering. VO aims to influence public opinion to affect long-term public policy. The large number of Americans who eat meat currently makes it difficult for legislators to challenge the killing of animals in other industries.

VO's leafleting programs

Before the existence of VO, other vegetarian organizations distributed booklets that focused mainly on the benefits of vegetarianism for human health and the environment. VO

was one of the first to produce booklets focusing on cruelty to animals on factory farms. Undercover investigations of farms by other organizations provide the photos and other documentation of animal cruelty used in the booklets.

VO's leaflets are important because many people are unlikely to independently seek information about farming practices, because they do not want to know about animal cruelty. Though there are online videos of cruelty on farms and VO's website has information on farming practices, people may not come across these on their own.

VO mainly does leafleting on college campuses. This semester, VO has leafleted at 902 schools, including 50 high schools. It also leaflets at the Warped Tour, a travelling music festival with approximately 40 dates per year that attracts many young attendees. Public schools are easier to reach than private schools, because public schools are required to allow leafleting. Some private schools also allow leafleting, and others can be reached from city streets. VO specifically targets Ivy League schools, because graduates of these schools are more likely to have careers that give them the ability to influence public policy. VO generally tries to leaflet at larger schools to reach a large number of students. However, leafleting at smaller schools has the benefit of reaching a greater percentage of students, so there may be more discussion of the leaflets on campus.

VO tried to use volunteer leafleters at schools for years but found that it was magnitudes more effective to hire staff to do this. VO still uses primarily volunteers for leafleting in the evenings, on weekends, and at concerts. VO hires some of the most effective volunteers as full-time staff members.

VO has outreach coordinators who tour the U.S. and Canada. They have also done two tours in Mexico. In addition, VO has a presence in Australia and is trying to expand into other parts of the world. VO publishes a booklet in Spanish and is considering creating one in French, which would be particularly useful for French Canadians. It is also considering other communities that may need special booklets.

Every year, hundreds of groups in the U.S. and Canada request booklets from VO. VO follows up with these groups to confirm that the orders were received. A few weeks after delivering an order, VO asks the group where it leafleted and how many booklets were distributed. It records this information in its database. VO is able to confirm that about 80% of the booklets it sent have been distributed.

Many of the groups requesting booklets from VO cannot afford to pay for them. If VO had more funding, it would likely go towards expanding its leafleting work to other countries and ensuring that its booklets are as effective as possible.

Effectiveness of leafleting

There are many factors that can cause people to change their diets, so it is unclear to what extent VO's leaflets are responsible for causing dietary changes. It is difficult to measure how effective VO's leafleting is.

Mr. Norris pointed to research conducted by Farm Sanctuary's *Compassionate Communities* and The Humane League, which claimed that for every two booklets handed out, one fewer animal will be raised on a factory farm (<http://ccc.farmsanctuary.org/the-powerful-impact-of-college-leafleting-part-1/>).

VO has a large amount of anecdotal evidence for the effectiveness of its leafleting. Many people have said that they became vegetarian or vegan as a result of VO's booklets. Leafleters report that when asked, many people who receive booklets say they are saddened by the content and some say that the information makes them want to not eat meat. Vegan Outreach publishes on its website photos of people who have changed their diet or say they will change their diet after receiving a booklet and accounts from leafleters after they meet such people.

One way that VO tracks its impact is by printing a hotline in the booklet, which people can call or text to receive a Guide to Cruelty-Free Eating. VO tracks the impact of its booklets based on the number of calls and texts the hotline receives. VO used one booklet for about two years before determining that it was relatively ineffective.

Nick Cooney, founder and former director of THL, designed one of VO's booklets based on research on how to influence people's habits. Requests for the Guide to Cruelty-Free Eating seem to have increased since VO began using this booklet.

The Vegetarian Research Group (VRG) does the best research on trends in vegetarianism. It has not found a statistically significant increase in the percentage of the population that is vegetarian in recent years. The blog Counting Animals has found that the demand for meat has decreased beyond what can be explained by cost mechanisms.

VO's other activities

VO does a small amount of advertising on Facebook to share videos of abusive farming practices. It spends less than \$2000 per year on this. This program was created by a donor who earmarked funding for it. VO found it to be somewhat effective, so it has continued doing this to some degree.

VO's leafleters offer to sign people up for the VO e-newsletter, which provides updates on where VO has leafleted, updates on VO's Adopt A College program, information on personnel changes, and essays. A major purpose of the newsletter is to raise funding to continue VO's programs.

VO is also open to implementing new programs at the request of donors, if it is well suited to do so. If not, VO may refer the donor to another organization.

Mr. Norris is a registered dietician. He runs the site veganhealth.org, which provides information on vegan diets and scientific research on these issues.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>