

VENTURING MAGAZINE

Why is Venturing So Different? by Joe Garrett

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The last two years have been tumultuous for Venturing. Many changes have been made to the program, and many more will happen before the end of 2014. Most of these changes seem to be part of an effort to align Venturing more closely with Boy Scouting. We will soon be using the Boy Scout Oath and Law instead of the more age appropriate Venturing Code. We are losing our unique Venturing salute and sign. Our recognition awards, Venturing Bronze, Gold, and Silver will be completely replaced by a new scheme by the end of this year. The reason given for the new advancement scheme is that less than 1% of Venturers ever earn one of the Bronze, Gold, or Silver Awards. Apparently no one has considered that youth of this age group may not be interested in earning awards.



Over the past 6 years, many more changes have occurred to Venturing. Most were more subtle, but also had the effect of making Venturing more like Scouting. Our unique leadership skills training programs were opened up to all Scouts and administration of them was removed from the purview of the Venturing Program. Most important of all, our professional staff at the National Headquarters, a cadre of senior leaders who promoted, shepherded, and protected Venturing was disbanded and nothing was put in its place.

The results were predictable. Since 2008, when our staff advocates went away, Venturing's membership has dropped from 261,122 to 192,080. Today, there are only 4,000 more Venturers than the day we started in 1998. A special Task Force was formed two years ago to address this precipitous slide in membership. Instead of reviewing what had changed and caused this precipitous slide in popularity of the program, they elected to replace the Venturing Bronze, Gold, and Silver programs and debate the necessity of "requiring" uniforms and religious training. Where they conducted research, it was mostly of the youth who have already joined Venturing. What has resulted is a kind of echo chamber where the same comments are repeated often enough that they become conventional wisdom.

To its credit, the Task Force instituted a new National Venturing Committee along with new youth leadership positions at the National, Regional, and Area levels. They have attempted to push responsibility for the health of the program down to the Local Councils. As has been said often enough, "All Scouting is Local". A failure to truly support Venturing at the local level has been the elephant in the room since 1998. The idea of coed, teen Scouting has simply gotten no traction in many, if not most, Local Councils. In Councils within the Western Region, where Venturing appears to be healthy, The Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) sponsors the overwhelming majority of Venturing Crews. Without this one Chartered Organization, the Western Region would be by far the weakest supporter of Venturing. Roughly one-third of all Venturers today are from LDS Crews, and the vast majority of these are located in the Western Region.



Why is Venturing so different? Almost all Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts join Scouting at age 6 or 7 when they are recruited into Cub Scout Packs. The decision-makers in this "transaction" are the parents, and the "selling" and marketing" that goes on is directed at adults. Some boys drop out of Cubs before they complete their Webelos year in the fifth grade, but most stay until graduation (or crossover). At that time, during their fifth grade year, about half of all Webelos join Boy Scouts, crossing over to a Troop in a ceremony called bridging. The other half quit Scouting altogether. At this point, the boys are allowed to make the decision to stay in Scouting, but their parents are still key influencers. These boys are already familiar with earning badges, wearing uniforms, memorizing codes of ethics, and camping. They are informed consumers of our programs, and the ones who quit have decided they do not want to be our customers anymore.

At about age 14, when they enter high school, boys start dropping out of Scouting in large numbers. By age 16, only a small minority of the original Tiger Cubs are still in Scouting. In the meantime, at age 14, young people of both genders are eligible to join Venturing, which has traditionally been a different program altogether, based on social experience, adventure, association with adults, and service. Venturing is relatively unstructured compared to Boy Scouting, and no two Venturing Crews are ever truly alike. Young people are allowed and encouraged to explore various hobbies, sports and interests with their individual Crews.

What is so different about this, and why is there friction between Venturing and the rest of Scouting? The short answer is that Venturing has to market itself directly to its youth members. In most cases, parents have little influence on the decision to join a Crew and often are not even aware that their teens are contemplating joining Scouting. Even where parents are involved, their participation is typically much lower than in Cubs or Scouting where parents often serve as the adult leadership.

Because Venturing is marketing itself directly to teens, it needs to be attractive, modern, and engaging in a way that is not necessary for Cubs, Boy Scouts, Varsity, or LDS Venturing. This age group has already rejected the programs offered in Cubs and Boy Scouts. They have voted with their feet, either quitting one of those programs (or Girl Scouts) or having avoided joining in the first place. In short, the merit badge/uniform/oath and law approach has already been rejected by these consumers and we are making a huge mistake by believing that drawing Venturing closer to Boy Scouting's traditions will draw in more teens. This is an act of self-deception on a very large scale. In marketing, this is called the self-reference criteria error and involves believing that your market shares your tastes and likes.

Of the roughly 192,000 Venturers who remain in the program at the end of 2013, about a third are members of Crews chartered to the LDS Church. The Mormons do a fine job raising their young people and the way they use Scouting to train their young men is admirable. These 60,000 or so Venturers are all young men



between the ages of 16 and 18 (14 to 16 year olds are members of Varsity Teams) and these Crews have a single purpose; to prepare these young churchmen for adult membership in their church. These young men are members of Scouting because it is part of their track to adulthood. Because of the specialized nature of these Venturing Crews, they are not representative of and cannot be used to generalize about coed Venturing or about teens who might join the program.

We are left with about 132,000 young people who are actually participating in general purpose Venturing. This is less than 10% of the number of Cub Scouts (1,417,034) and only about 15% of the number of Boy Scouts (888,947). In the years 2002-2004 we had an average of about 285,000 Ventures in the program and the slide in membership since then has taken us back to where we started in 1998. In 1997, the combined Career Exploring and Special Interest Exploring (which became Venturing) had a membership of nearly a half million and climbing.

Why are we losing membership and what can we do about it? I think we can all agree that Scouting itself does not understand teens and is not enthusiastic about coed Scouting. For whatever reason, since 2004 we have not put our resources behind building this program, and the results are clear to all. The momentous slide is certainly not the result of the Bronze, Silver, Gold recognition program which was also there during the successful years of 1998 to 2002. What changed? The National Venturing Staff went away, and our most unique program attributes (Kodiak, Powderhorn) were taken away and made generic to all of Scouting. Our youth leadership training track was made to include NYLT, a multiday class in how to run a Boy Scout Troop and how to implement the Patrol Method, both of which are irrelevant to Venturing. Our adult leadership recognition (the Venturing Leadership Award) was taken away and our Venturing Advisor Training Award, Venturing Advisor's key, and Venturing Advisors Award of Merit were made generic and lumped in with generic Scoutmaster and Cub Leader recognitions. The message has been very clear for several years now. "You Venturers (coed teens) are not a special (read older, unique) class of members and you will no longer be allowed to maintain your unique program features."

How do we fix this? What follows is all opinion. First, quit quibbling about awards, uniforms, and the like. They have no appeal to teens and in most cases are a buzz kill, especially when recruiting. If we need an award based Scout-like program, let's take Varsity and make it coed. It serves exactly the right age group, 14-18, and already uses most of the traditional Boy Scout assets. We need to focus on unique programming. Return Venturing to its unique status and make it, once again, an older, age appropriate program with its own privileges and special activities. Venturing needs to be an adventurous program for young adults from age 14 through 20 years old. This means age appropriate activities, youth leadership events, high adventure opportunities, and most of all, it means **MARKETING**. It means pooling our limited resources across Councils and geographies in order to stage significant, exciting events.

We cannot go to the market of high school and college students with a program that is associated with khaki shirts and merit badges. Why? Because **EVERYONE** in the country thinks they know what that is. If your potential market thinks they know what your product is, they will never listen to your pitch. If you go to a high school auditorium and ask the teens there to listen to a sales pitch on Boy Scouts, you will have lost your audience before you start. They all know what Scouting is, and they have already either rejected it altogether, quit after a short tenure, or a very small minority are already members. None of these are fertile grounds for recruiting. If for no other reason than recruiting, Venturing needs to be unique from Boy Scouting. Its predecessor, Exploring, had this figured out. Exploring was organized at arms-length from Boy Scouts and, although it was well known to be part of Scouting, its brand identity was career exploration and high adventure. This is where we need to get back to. In the

year before Venturing and Exploring split, there were 455,000 Explorers and growing to a half million. Today, the two programs have a combined membership of only 306,974, down almost 150,000 youth.

I am not suggesting that we abandon our Scouting values in order to chase membership. On the contrary, I am proposing to talk about the benefits of our program that our potential market is interested in. I am proposing that we deliver our core values AFTER we have made the sale. **We are the only program in Scouting that is selling to the youth rather than their parents.** We need to completely rethink how we go to market with this program for coed teens. We have been unsuccessful at selling it as senior Scouting. We have consistently lost membership since we started making it look more like Boy Scouting. In contrast, when it was a free-standing program focused on teens (Exploring, and for the first 7 years of Venturing) it was showing healthy growth. We don't need a task force made up of traditional Scouters. We need a professional staff dedicated to studying the market and creating a program that is attractive to young adults.

The Vision Statement of Scouting: "The Boy Scouts of America will prepare every eligible youth in America to become a responsible, participating citizen and leader who is guided by the Scout Oath and Law." What do you suppose is meant by "every eligible youth?"

