

VENTURING MAGAZINE

The Open House and the First Crew Meetings by Joe Garrett

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Building membership in a Venturing Crew is no different than recruiting for an adult service club, an "animal club" (Eagles, Moose, and Elks Clubs), or a religious club. Personal invitations are the foundation of almost all recruiting. All the publicity, promotion, and public appearances will lead to nothing if a personal invitation is never offered. Having said that, without some kind of public visibility and promotion you are unlikely to identify many prospects for membership. I have had good luck promoting our Venturing Crew in our local high schools. If the schools will not let you in, as is increasingly common, then you need to find other ways to get in front of teens and their parents. I have toyed with the idea of using yard signs, similar to political signs and real estate signs to promote Venturing. This has become the method of choice for our local youth sports leagues. It is an expensive and untested approach, so should probably be executed at the Council level first. Other ways to promote involve finding concentrations of teens where you can promote your program such as YMCA's, churches, Boy's and Girl's Clubs, and for specialty interests, places like horse boarding facilities.

Once you have identified a method of advertising your Crew, you will need to plan an open house, or first-nighter. This is your first opportunity to introduce yourself and your Crew, so it needs to be done well. They say that first impressions are formed within seconds of the introduction, so make it a home run! On a couple of occasions, my Crew has hosted an overnighter karaoke, Rock Band (XBox), and movie night for recruiting. At these events, everyone stays up all night playing video games, computer games, karaoke, and movies on a large screen with a projector and a good sound system. These events are highly effective at retaining the invitees, but I can't say for certain whether the kids who joined had already made a decision before the party. We have had open houses at the local high school with mixed success. If we had good attendance, we usually had many teens join our Crew. On the other hand, though, we have had a couple of open houses with only one or two attendees. These are a double disappointment, since the one or two kids who show up are likely to get a bad impression and decide not to join.

Many Crews have phenomenal success by simply inviting prospective members along on regularly scheduled Crew activities. If your Crew maintains a printed calendar of events that can be handed out, this can be part of the simplest and most effective way of building membership. An ideal crew calendar schedules an interesting activity every month. The calendar itself should be either an annual plan developed by the Crew officers each summer before school starts, or a rolling six month calendar. In either case, the ability to hand out copies of the calendar will build better habits among your members and give them the opportunity to invite prospects on events ahead of time. A published calendar can also be shared with Crew members' and prospects' families. This helps avoid scheduling conflicts, shows organizational skills, and teaches your youth the importance of looking ahead beyond tonight's Facebook session and homework.

Again, personal invitations are by far the most effective and successful way to build Crew membership. One pitfall of this approach, however, that forces a re-examination of the other methods, is the tendency of crews and teens to invite prospects of their own age. A natural progression in most Crews is to develop "clumps" of members all of the same age. The problem with this doesn't become apparent until they all graduate from high school at the same time and the Crew is left with a gaping hole in membership and youth leadership. A dirty little secret about this is that often, the "clump" of kids

includes the son or daughter of the Crew Advisor. In this situation, the bulk of the Crew members, the youth leaders, and the adult leadership can all lose interest at the same time. In my experience, this is one of the big reasons you rarely see a 25 or 50 year tenured Venturing Crew like the long term Boy Scout Troops and Cub Scout Packs that are often featured in local newspapers, Boys Life, and Scouting Magazine.

So, to recap, personal invitations are the most proficient method for gaining members to a Venturing Crew. Open houses, or firstnighters are effective at bringing in a group of new members, too. A published calendar will support the efficiency of both of these efforts. Great meetings and pre-planned activities are equally important. The crew leadership should be mindful and wary of "clumps" of members of the same age. This makes annual recruiting extremely important. The very, very best time to recruit teens to Venturing is in the early fall of their ninth grade year. Spring of their eighth grade year can be a great time, too, especially if the Crew has a good summer activity lined up that will be attractive to new younger members. Some Crews plan summer activities especially for new member recruiting. My Crew schedules a "snowboarding for beginners" day trip with lessons every December in anticipation of our several weekend ski trips held in February and March. This allows us to recruit new members during September and October when school restarts. Since the new members have already begun the process of learning to snowboard, it frees up the rest of the Crew to take them up on the mountain during our regularly scheduled ski trips, rather than staying on the bunny slopes with rank beginners. It also supports recruiting new ninth graders. Recruiting needs to be a year round activity, and should be a component of the planning for every event your Crew does. The larger your Crew gets, the more diverse the age distribution, and the more new members you are constantly adding, the healthier your program is likely to be. A diverse age group with lots of new members presents an added benefit for your youth leaders as they are constantly given the opportunity to teach new skills, policies, and practices to the younger Venturers. This is one of the keys to the success of Boy Scout Troops, as the teacher of a skill often benefits more from the experience than the student does. This teaching opportunity is a subtle benefit but can be a huge asset for the youth of any Venturing Crew.