



Recruitment and Retention - Key Points

Think of recruitment and retention, just as you would “good health,” it is not easy and requires mindfulness, intentionality, good habits, and a change in lifestyle. Recruiting and retaining members go together and really cannot be separated.

YEAR-ROUND GROWTH PLAN

- Intentional Recruitment & Retention - Members and potential members are informed “consumers”. Does your program have a variety of delivery methods/activities and use varied strategies to attract and retain youth with different interests and needs? Are you matching youth needs and program design (the context in which it is delivered)? A quality, well-balanced program design will double as a motivator and influence the decision to return. Youth who experience successes, fulfillment, competence, and fun are repeat consumers.

Youth should be an active part of the recruitment/retention process - what the campaign looks like and what it says.

- Welcoming and Engaging Environment. Does everyone feel valued?
- Planned Success – Does your program provide an orientation for new families and members? Are these people provided a buddy/mentor/host family for the first 12-18 months?
- Flexibility – “One size-fits All,” no longer works. Consumers are used to mixing-and-matching.

Thinking outside the box?

Involving youth in the decision-making process can function like a compass guiding the group - new opportunities; different ways of accomplishing the 4-H mission; delivering programs; timing/length/duration of program(s), and more.

- Quality Programming – Programs are grounded in best practices, goals and mission of the organization yet delivered to meet the consumers needs.

Are programs fun in unique or unconventional ways? Is there a range of activities for every member to enjoy? Is the club assessing needs and tailoring programs that deliver unforgettable experiences youth will rave about with family and friends? Are volunteers being intentionally recruited to serve as project group leaders?

Are you letting recognized youth leaders, active families, certain project areas, etc. dominate the group and programming? Are different perspectives encouraged providing opportunity for growth and retention?

ENGAGED YOUTH & FAMILIES

- Relationships equal “Connection before Content.”

Relationships with Caring Adults – Do youth trust the Adults? Are there enough volunteers to nurture and provide growth which meet individual needs?

Relationships with Fellow Members – Are programs providing a safe social-emotional environment? Is diversity, inclusion, and equity part of the club culture?

- Welcoming and Engaging Environment - Do all feel valued for who they are?

- Youth are Empowered – Are youth truly engaged in developing “their” program – Fun, Fellowship, Spark (self-interest), and actively involved in their own learning and development? Are you focusing more on content, rather than the context in which the content is delivered?

- Quality Program – Youth are consumers comparing our program to others. What are you selling? Are you delivering? Are opportunities interesting and relevant? Are youth excited to experience something new?

Customer Service – *Word-of-mouth* is still tried-and-true and can help or hinder a program.

Partner with youth, they know “their” world/culture/community. They know what will and won’t sell. Listen and adapt. Know what can be adapted and what must be conformed to or worked with.

Programming should strike a balance between structured activities in which youth can experience feelings of competence in skills; understanding of others; free choice; and unstructured activities where they can simply relax and hang-out.

CRITICAL “EVALUATION” OF THE PROGRAM

- Are you evaluating your program -annually, more often or not at all? Are you asking the hard questions of youth and families who leave and never returned? Are you truly listening, studying, adapting, and/or changing?
- Youth are Empowered – Are youth truly engaged in looking at the data? Do you have a diverse committee that represent a variety of consumers – projects, gender, race, ethnicity, demographics, etc.? Is the committee informed

of their role and given the resources and tools to be successful?

- Quality Program – Is the program truly prepared to be mindful, intentional, prepared to establish healthy habits, and change programming to meet the needs of the consumer?

Are you downplaying the importance of outcomes such as winning; instead providing positive reinforcement for improvement, progress, and mastery?

Literature Review:

- Anderson-Butcher, D. Recruitment and Retention in Youth Development Programming. The Prevention Research, April 2005
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- DeAngelis, T. What Makes a Good Afterschool Program? American Psychological Association. March 2001
- ExtendedED Notes: Extending Learning Beyond the Classroom. 10 Recruitment strategies that will Boost Program Participation. July 2018
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- Gillard, A and Witt, P. Recruitment and Retention in Youth Programs. Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, Summer 2008
- Lauver, S. Attracting and Sustaining Youth Participation in After School Programs. Harvard Family Research Project. Spring 2004.
- Witkowski, L. Building Your Program, One Youth at a Time. Youth Engagement Alliance for Tobacco Control, May 2016.

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RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN YOUTH PROGRAMS

The following text is taken from *Recruitment and Retention in Youth Programs*. Ann Gillard and Peter Will. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, Summer 2008. The article is very applicable to the 4-H Youth Development effort. This is not the full article and liberties were taken to relate content and context to 4-H.

The twelve methods described are only a starting point for beginning a plan for recruiting and retaining members. Gillard and Will conclude we are actively competing for the time and attention of youth and *retention is ongoing active recruitment*. They describe it as two sides of the same coin. "Youth need to be continually recruited to keep attending, or to be retained in the program."

Method 1: YOUTH VOICE. When youth are authentically represented and feel ownership of programs, they are more likely to be attracted to stay in programs.

Recommendations:

- Committees with youth and adults working cooperatively and respectfully.
- Carefully, yet honestly support youth in understanding their roles and responsibilities within the organization, committee, etc.
- Design and use a leadership program from one level of leadership responsibility to the next. Something that must be worked at and attained.

Method 2: INTENTIONAL PROGRAMMING. Programs should be designed and implemented with youth input and reflect the needs and aspiration of the participants.

Recommendation:

- Ensure youth have input about program content, scheduling, and program operations. Gather input from non-participants also.
- Regularly update program offerings based on trends, youth input, and noticeable/important community issues. Balance change with the need for predictable consistency.
- Diversify activities for youth with different interests and backgrounds.
- Opportunities to develop and engage in a variety of relationships with peers and adults.

Method 3: SAFETY. In order to recruit and retain youth, they need to feel emotionally and physically safe. A safe place is one that does not tolerate, accept, or support violence or aggression due to sexual orientation, ability, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomics, etc.

Method 4: COMMUNITY SERVICE. Meaningful service opportunities can improve youth's connections to their communities, job skills, self-esteem, and commitment to the organization.

Recommendations:

- Support youth in understanding they do have something to offer others.
- Develop a plan that youth are actively engaged in from start to finish (service-learning). This is more than just showing up for a planned community service activity.

Method 5: ATTENDANCE INCENTIVES. While participation in programs may be intrinsically rewarding for some youth, others youth (especially those new to the program) may need encouragement. Youth should gradually be worked from extrinsic rewards to internal motivations.

Recommendations:

- Create a systematic program of contacting dropouts to determine their reason for leaving. Use this information for program adjustment and enhancement.
- Create a culture of high attendance consistent with the background and culture of the individuals being served.
- Use field trips and special events as incentives consistent with the background and culture of the individuals being served.

Method 6: PROGRAM PROMOTION. Youth hear about programs both formally and informally and engage in activities that they feel are aligned with their identities. Youth listen to the buzz created by others concerning the quality of program activities, volunteers, and staff. The buzz may create positive and negative impressions of the program.

Recommendations:

- Involve youth in every aspect of advertising (recruitment) campaign from beginning to end.
- Use youth culture language, colors, themes, and activities culturally sensitive to local youth. Use available and timely digital marketing tools trending with youth.
- Use first contact techniques, such as assigning a member/family to “buddy” a new member or family.
- Truly listen to and address new youth’s concerns about their potential participation and specific constraints.
- Attempt to counter negative program buzz with factual information and attention-grabbing programs and events.

Method 7: FAMILY INVOLVEMENT. If family members believe in and support youth participation in a program, youth are more likely to attend. Family members can serve as resources and volunteers for the program.

Recommendations:

- Advertising to adult family members
- Conduct culturally appropriate “family nights” with joint activities for youth and family members.

Method 8: APPROPRIATE STAFFING. The program needs to hire (recruit and certify) and support caring, respectful adults who are committed to engaging youth voice, choice, and participation, and who can relate to youth. Youth will stay in a program because caring adults (and friends) are there.

Recommendations:

- Recruit volunteers who reflect the diversity of participants (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, etc).
- Support youth in cultivating self-efficacy—if young people can do the task, let them.
- Meeting/program time and location are favorable for the schedules of working parents.

Method 9: YOUTH-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT. A comfortable setting helps youth feel at ease.

Recommendations:

- Separate older from younger youth (via facility entry points, different activities) through time scheduling or spatial configurations so that they feel comfortable being with others their own age. Ages and Stages is important in positive youth development.

Method 10: COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS.

Collaborating with other youth-serving organizations is a cost-effective way to fill the programming gaps and to recruit new participants.

Recommendations:

- Provide field trips to introduce participants to opportunities in other programs
- Have adults and youth conduct workshops and trainings for other organizations and vice-versa.

Method 11: ACCESS AND TRANSPORTATION. Easy and safe travel to and from programs can result in increased attendance.

Recommendations:

- Engage local transportation or school bus companies in transporting youth to and from programs.
- Locate programs in the target community/neighborhood so that participants can safely walk to programs (consider using adult chaperones), or collaborate with existing facilities, such as churches or community arts centers, to implement programs.
- Ensure that the hours of operation are consistent with youth/families’ availability and preferred times for participation.

Method 12: EVALUATION. Evaluating program, participant characteristics, and outcomes can provide information for future program refinements and targeted recruitment and retention strategies. Including youth in the evaluation process can facilitate stronger youth buy-in and encourage the development of critical life skills.

Recommendations:

- Evaluate attendance patterns (frequency, total numbers, demographic data, and other information of importance to the organization).
- Identify key aspects of the program that influence positive youth development.
- Examine trends in the community as well as among the participants, such as shifting demographics, economic changes, youth culture preferences, etc.
- Conduct regular assessments to determine program satisfaction and suggestions for program improvement.