

If You Build It, Will They Come?

Neil McNerney, LPC

Licensed Professional Counselor
Parent Consultant and Faculty Trainer

Strategies For Increasing Attendance At Parent Programs

Faculty - Virginia Tech Graduate School
Marriage and Family Therapy

The Problem

There are plenty of effective parenting programs available, and plenty of good speakers willing to come to your school. But how do you get the parents to actually show up? Traditional techniques have limited success. Emails, newsletters and signs have limited effectiveness.

The Solution

Develop a system that looks at recruitment based on updated approaches to attracting participants.

The Tipping Point

Malcom Gladwell's book, The Tipping Point, has explored the phenomena of how certain ideas gain momentum. Gladwell found three different, unique individuals that are essential to create momentum.

The Salesperson

These are people that have the natural skill of persuasion. They are comfortable to be around and know how to close the sale. Getting a salesperson excited about your program and asking them to help get people committed to coming can be very helpful.

The Maven

The Maven is someone that knows a tremendous amount about something and loves to share information. A parenting Maven has taken many parenting classes and knows the nuances of every approach. A Maven will become excited about your program and will love to help get the word out.

The Connector

Connectors know lots of people. They don't tend to be name droppers, but you will hear many names in

conversation. They receive pleasure in connecting people. Consider them "matchmakers." As you talk about something, they will be thinking: "Who do I know that can help this person?" or "Who do I know that might be interested in this?"

Identify and Deploy

1. Identify at least three parents in your school or staff that fall into the salesperson, connector, or maven category.
2. Ask them for help. Tell them about the program and let them know that you really want it to be a success: "I think this will be great for parents, but I really need some help in convincing them to come out. I know they will listen to you, a neighborhood parent, much more than they will listen to me."
3. Give them a specific task that requires a yes/no answer: "Can you email or call ten parents you know and see if you can convince them to come?"
4. Be creative. If you are not providing child care, see if your leaders can organize a babysitter for two or three families. Ask a leader to organize 5 or 6 of her friends to meet for dinner at a local restaurant before the event.

Community Leaders

Other community leaders can be a tremendous help in getting the word out and influencing people to attend. Who are your influential Parenting Partners?

- Clergy from local places of worship
- Social Service Agencies
- Child Care Centers
- Martial Arts Schools
- Tutoring Centers

Tips for Recruiting Leaders

Do: "Hi, it's Neil from the school. I'm planning a parent night. When I was thinking about parents that could help me get the word out, I thought of you. You seem to know a ton of parents and you are really respected."

If You Build It, Will They Come?

Neil McNerney, LPC

Licensed Professional Counselor
Parent Consultant and Faculty Trainer

Strategies For Increasing Attendance At Parent Programs

Faculty - Virginia Tech Graduate School
Marriage and Family Therapy

Don't: "Well, I sent out an email and asked for people to help. I even asked them to invite 2 or 3 other people to come, but it didn't work."

This is a "no ask" approach. A "no ask" approach is one that doesn't require a yes/no answer. Any email that goes out to a mass of people tends to produce low results.

Touch Base

Your Salespeople, Mavens, and Connectors are volunteers. There is a huge likelihood that they will get distracted and begin to focus on other things. It is essential to stay connected by occasionally touching base with them to keep your project in the front of their minds and activities.

Emails – The Good and The Bad

Emails can be very powerful in getting parents to attend a program. They can also be a waste of time. It all depends on how the email is crafted.

- **Do:** Make the email personal. Effective emails should read like they are one person writing to one other person.
- **Do:** Have the email written by the leader in the school. This is usually the principal, but it is sometimes the parent liaison, or PTA president.
- **Do:** Discuss the benefits of the program. Most emails are very focused on the details of the program instead of telling the parent why this program will benefit them.
- **Do:** Add emotion. "We are thrilled to tell you..." "I am very excited about..." "We were lucky enough to get _____ as our speaker this month."
- **Do:** Add "I" message. "This topic comes at a great time for me. I know I can really learn how to..."
- **Don't** write it like a press release.
- **Don't** sign it impersonally "Your School's PTA"

- **Don't** address it to a whole group of people. For example, don't write "Dear Parents" It is much better to leave out the salutation, unless you can personally address the each email.

Example of a good email:

Subject Line: Parenting event on February 23rd!

Body: I am very excited to tell you about our upcoming parenting event on February 23rd in the school library. We were lucky enough to get Neil McNerney to come talk with us about his upcoming book: "Homework – A Parent's Guide to Helping Out Without Freaking Out!" Neil's presentation will help us:

- Figure out why our kids have trouble with motivation and what we can do about it.
- Decrease the amount of frustration and anger during homework time.
- Increase our kid's focus through a program he calls "The Pomodoro Technique." I'm not sure what a pomodoro is, but I hope it helps!

I hope you will be able to come. I'm excited to go and learn more about this, especially with the week of homework we just went through in my family!

Please let me know if you can make it. Just reply to this email and let me know how many are coming.

Other Ideas That Work

- Direct phone calls two weeks before and then the day before
- Child Care ALWAYS helps
- Newspaper "Community Calendar" section
- Facebook
- School Website – front page
- Robocall from the principal – Especially when using "I/You" messages: "I'm very excited about tomorrow night's speaker, and I hope you will be able to come."