

A Little Salesmanship “Grows” a Long Way



By Leah Montas

Our membership shrank the first year I was PTA president. I tried not to obsess about this and instead focused on all the dedicated volunteers and wonderful programs, events, and support we were providing to our teachers and students. We were meeting the mission of PTA and having a very successful year!

However, in the back of my mind, I was bothered by the fact that our membership numbers had dropped. So, after I attended a regional session with my vice president on growing membership, I got the courage to propose something different. We discussed with our board the idea of growing our membership from a different perspective—sales. We took common sales techniques—promotion, teasers, and goal sharing—and tweaked them to meet our nonprofit goals.

Promotion

I personally get excited at the idea of winning something, and it is clear from our first promotion results that the rest of the parents at my school feel the same way. We announced that everyone who joined our PTA by September 30 would be entered into a drawing for a free school t-shirt. We publicized this promotion heavily in the PTA newsletter, on message boards, and at our Back to School Picnic, Open House, Back to School Night, and other events. By the end of the promotion, we were already at 81 percent of our membership goal. We plan to have another promotion for the spring membership drive; we will give away a free yearbook to anyone who joins before a certain date.

Often, parents think they have joined PTA, but they have not, or they plan to join, but they forget. So, we simultaneously ran another promotion that focused on the teachers' involvement in recruitment. Some of our dedicated teachers have a competitive streak, so we ran another contest that offered a donut party to the classrooms with the most PTA members by September 30. When teachers remind their students to remind their parents, the students listen. Having the students remind their parents incessantly was a great way to get parents to join right away.

Teasers

Our PTA student directory is distributed to PTA members exclusively. It is a highly anticipated and valued resource for parents making birthday party invitations or booking play dates. To encourage parents who managed to miss our countless reminders to join, we sent teaser reminders that said, “If you want a guaranteed PTA directory, you must join by Monday!” It was blunt, but it got the point across—and it worked!

Still, I had some parents ask me why they did not receive their directory. I told them it was because they forgot to join and handed them a membership form. After that, another plea went out: “If you didn't get a PTA directory, it is because you forgot to join the PTA! There is still time!” Well after the directory was published, a kindergarten parent asked me how she could get in contact with the parents in her child's class to arrange a play date. Once she realized she could get her hands on the valuable asset that is the student directory she joined PTA!

Goal sharing

We set our goal, shared it with all of our parents and teachers, and monitored and reported our progress. We had a goal thermometer on every monthly newsletter to let all the parents and teachers know how close we were to achieving our goal.

By keeping everyone connected and informed, we subtly reminded everyone that if they had not yet joined, we were waiting patiently. It also encouraged bus stop talk. Friends might be more likely to join if their peers were asking them if they have.





Results

In 2009–2010, we had 215 members; in 2010–2011, we had 204. This year, we set a fairly aggressive goal of 250 members. We reached 85 percent of this goal by the end of our first promotion in September, and by December, we were at 92 percent of our goal. So far, we have had an 18 percent growth in our membership. The most amazing thing about these results is that we actually increased our dues this year by \$5, and we still grew our membership. This is evidence that these sales tactics work!

Lessons learned

In my first year as PTA president, I was timid and afraid of being too pushy. But, when I looked at membership from a different perspective, I realized that people were not refusing to join—most simply forgot! It is easy for parents to forget with so many school materials coming home in the first few weeks of school. So, I realized that we are actually doing parents a favor by reminding them.

I have also learned that one of the most important jobs of a leader is to recruit volunteers and assign them duties that utilize their strengths and talents. For example, I am personally not very outgoing, but some of our members are. Putting naturally bubbly and outgoing people who are not afraid to ask people to join PTA at our membership tables worked! Simply asking is not the same thing as being pushy.

Another valuable lesson learned was to aim higher. I was initially afraid that our goal was unreachable, but I think we may have sold ourselves too short. Now it seems very likely we will surpass it. 

Leah Montas is the president of Goshen Elementary PTA in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

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