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Effective Ways to Promote 4-H Camps

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Background

As the choices of extracurricular activities increase and compete for youth's time and family income, it has become more essential for 4-H programs to market camping programs as a meaningful investment for children. Youth participation in leadership activities and special interest clubs has been positively related to student academic achievement, school engagement, and educational aspirations (Lamborn et al., 1992). Bartko and Eccles (2003) found adolescents that participated in a number of constructive, organized activities, combined with relatively little participation in passive, unstructured activities showed healthy behavior and development as well as good academic performance. Research has shown the impact of participation in 4-H camping programs has promoted the social growth and development of life skills such as personal responsibility and positive decision-making (Arnold et al., 2005; Garst & Bruce, 2003).

According to National 4-H Enrollment Statistics (USDA, 2005), 299,297 youth participated in overnight 4-H camps. Of these youth, 58 percent were female and 42 percent were male. In Ohio, 4-H resident camps retain large youth participation enrolling 47,939 youth (59 percent female and 41 percent male) in 808 camp sessions annually (Ohio State University Extension, 2005). Every year 4-H professionals and volunteers actively recruit 4-H members to enroll in 4-H camping opportunities. There are a variety of promotional tools available to market camps to 4-H youth. In today's world, we can utilize mass media, technology, mailings, and simple word-of-mouth promotion. Each method ranges in cost and effectiveness.

Which is most effective? This is a question many camp professionals need to ask when allocating funds to camp promotion.

Who influences the decision to enroll a 4-H camper?

The decision to enroll in 4-H camp is most influenced by the campers themselves regardless of gender, followed by parental input, friends, then finally siblings (Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2006). Camp promoters, whether they are club volunteers or youth development professionals, should concentrate their efforts primarily at youth. However, keep in mind that parents tend to first screen and limit choices for their children. Brochures, informational meetings, school visits, and general advertisements should have the child in mind, but they should also address the preliminary concerns that parents identify, including safety and supervision.

Parents who are alumni of the 4-H program report a higher influence on the decision process than those parents who are not personally familiar with 4-H (Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2006). Many parents encourage their children to participate in similar activities that they benefited from when they were children. Because they may appreciate the value of the experience, they may take a more active role in the final decision to enroll in camp. Parents who are not 4-H alumni may be quick to dismiss camp promotional materials because it may be "foreign" to them. An increased effort needs to be made to reach both the children and parents of nongenerational 4-H families in camp promotion if you want them to enroll.

How should 4-H camp be promoted?

Although various marketing methods are used to promote the availability of 4-H camping programs to potential youth and their families, personal methods are the most effective (Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2006). Program planners should pay special attention to the potential of expanding camp enrollment and reaching additional families through direct channels. Volunteers and club advisors have the most influence promoting camp through these channels. Local clubs should emphasize camp promotion in their club meetings by utilizing camp counselors or members who have previously attended camp. Ask them to speak directly to club members about what 4-H camp is all about. Additional personal methods of camp promotion include club and school visits by 4-H professionals. Promoting 4-H camp in monthly 4-H newsletters is also very effective. Announce the camp program opportunity early and often throughout the 4-H year. Mass camp mailings are also an effective way to increase camp enrollment, although they are not as effective as the previous two suggestions. Newspaper, radio, television, and web promotion are found to be drastically less effective when promoting 4-H camping programs.

Conclusion

Fortunately for local 4-H professionals and volunteers who often work with limited budgets, research suggests that the most effective ways to promote local 4-H camping is through venues that cost very little or nothing at all. It is important to recognize that no 4-H residential camp is the same. Each is unique in programming as it is in promotion. Specific promotional efforts that work in one area may do very little in another. Camps should evaluate promotional efforts on an ongoing basis and consideration should be given to what has generally been found to be effective. A positive testimonial by past campers and counselors given to club members goes a long way in building camp numbers. It is equally reassuring that camps do not need to spend a lot of money for mass media promotion as it has been found to be significantly less effective than personal

promotion. As youth professionals and volunteers look to allocate camp resources and decide how much to spend where, the money can be reserved for building solid camp programs that deliver positive impact. The promotional piece can be done utilizing youth to spread the positive word about 4-H camping experiences.

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