

Strategies for Public Education

Over the last several years our division has seen a significant decline in the number of participants in our public education courses. Since these courses are our primary source for new Auxiliary members we have also seen a decline in our new membership. Auxiliary member participation has also been on the decline, with fewer members carrying the load. We needed to examine every aspect of what we were doing and look for new solutions. We examined materials, populations, methodology, locations, marketing and program implementation. We needed a straight forward plan that could be easily articulated to our members. We viewed the problem as a division problem and started to search for solutions.

Recently, I was appointed, not elected, acting flotilla commander for a flotilla where there were leadership difficulties. At my first flotilla meeting I had three members. By the second meeting we were up to six members. All the remaining members were REYR or had become inactive. We had no instructors, crew, or coxswains. The first objective was to increase the membership and recruit new members through our Public Education Courses. We decided to focus on just one auxiliary instructional product. We chose America's Boating Course (ABC). We chose this course because it is relatively short, (nine instructional hours), well done, but most of all flexible. We transferred the data on the Instructors CD to PowerPoint folders on our computer's hard drives. This gives us the flexibility to include regional components that personalize the material to the specific locations and populations we have targeted.

As an example on the water mortality figures for 2004 in Tennessee were the worst in history (31), which is twice the expected amount. The major factor of this increase was not due to past problems such as failure to have a proper lookout or alcohol. The cause of most of these accidents was increased currents due to higher than normal water levels. We modified the ABC materials to reflect this and focused more on boating in moving water, aids to navigation, rules of the road, locks, dams and water hazards that we encounter on a daily basis on moving river water. These changes helped us to address a serious problem and regionalize the material.

Once we had the appropriate materials we turned to marketing. We asked three questions, who, where and when. In the past we did not make any distinction of the participants we were trying to attract and used boat shows and the general public.

We are now targeting four populations:

1. Young active adults
2. Teenagers
3. Families
4. Senior citizens

Once we identified who, the where became apparent. We started with active adults and choose a Health and Fitness Center for the location for this group. We marketed through their news letters and in the area news papers. This group is the smallest of the groups but seems to be working well.

The teenage population was easier. As a result of a recently enacted state legislation, everyone born after Jan. 1, 1989 would need a boating certificate from the state in order to operate a boat in Tennessee. We selected the University of Tennessee for this group. The University placed this course in their spring and summer catalogs, stating the program is designed for teenagers and will enable them to earn their boating certificate. We are in our second year of the teenage program at the University of Tennessee. This is the most challenging program. We spend a lot of time on PWC's and peer interactions. This group thinks they are indestructible and we have to significantly modify our approach. We ran ads for this program on television, radio and newspapers. Last year we had 60 participants all teenagers. This year we are also marketing on the TWRA web site and expect an even larger turnout.

For families, we chose one of the largest churches in the region. We publicized the course in the church's news letter and in regional news papers and local marinas. We are also going to local boat dealers and asking them to send their entire staff, so far two have agreed. This course started with 26 participants of which were teenagers. Eight adults of this group stated they wish to join the Auxiliary.

Finally, for the senior citizens population we chose a Yacht Club at a water front retirement community. We marketed through their weekly news letter, closed circuit television, and various clubs and associations. We chose to offer ABC over three week nights from six to nine. We usually teach on Tuesday, Thursday and Tuesday. We believe offering the course on a single day is less productive because the participants do not have time to study, come back with questions and it is just too much in one setting. The exception to this is the teenage program which we run on two consecutive Saturday afternoons.

The results of this effort have been remarkable. We just finished our third week of the senior program at the Yacht Club. We started with 50 participants and are finishing with 52. We included a makeup day. We also recently completed an orientation program for the new members. This program has been so successful we have been asked to repeat it as soon as possible for people who missed it. We are offering ABC at least every 30 days somewhere in the area over a period of six months. The primary force behind what we are doing is the division. We are very fortunate in one regard. We use at least seven qualified instructors for each course. I know it would not be possible to use so many instructors in all locations, but ABC is still viable with fewer instructors.

When the new BS&S comes out this year we will reevaluate how and when to incorporate into our programs. In the past we have been using it with police departments or other public service organizations. BS&S is very time intensive for both our instructors and the participants.

The key factors producing the positive results are targeted marketing, the flexibility of ABC and appropriate location and successful instructional programs. We have maintained from the beginning that the course must be interactive. The most difficult problem has been for the instructors to avoid using a lecture format. We have been successful by asking questions of the participants and bringing in physical examples. Last night one of our members used plastic pipe and small chains to show what happens when a trailer separates from the hitch and drops down on crossed chains or uncrossed.

We have spent no money on marketing or facilities that offer the programs. So far everything has been supplied free of charge.

When we started this project, I believed we would solve many of our problems. We do have much larger PE classes and we have increased Auxiliary potential membership. However we have created a new problem that is very daunting.

Crew and coxswain training has become a serious problem. We know from past experience that if we don't proceed with training in a timely manner, members lose interest. Since a facility boat with a coxswain and two crew members is required for on the water training, we don't have enough qualified crew or coxswains to accomplish the training in a timely manner with so many new members. At the present time the flotilla where I was acting FC is now up to 18 potential members and has an elected FC. Our new members include retired Coast Guard, Navy Submariner, Homeland Security Director and a pilot with his own plane.

Most of our on the water trainers are also teaching PE courses. Then there is IS-100, IS-200, IS-700, IS-800, it would be great if members would do this on line at home. But that doesn't happen. We have to schedule classes. IS-210 could be a back breaker. We also have classes for vessel examiners and instructors. There are also the dealer visitations and the vessel exams. If you include the flotilla meetings, division meetings and conferences, our active members are now over extended. I realize this may be a temporary situation. The support from division members has been outstanding from the beginning. As the fair weather approaches we do not have enough members in operations to carry out crew and coxswain training in a timely manner. We have the facility boats but lack the coxswains. The only solution I was able to come up with was to contact LCDR Tom Kaminski of the Marine Safety Detachment of the US Coast Guard Nashville. He has offered his assistance. At the present time I don't know how much time Commander Kaminski will be able to provide. Nor do I have any idea how Auxiliary regulations will play out.

In terms of the Chain of Leadership all of our division staff officers have been involved and the VCP and DCP have been involved from the beginning. I sent a memo regarding the program to the District Public Education Officer.

I am sending this information to the Education Department for both ideas and suggestions of how to proceed. I am also wondering if any of this information may be useful to others in the Auxiliary.

As a Branch Chief in the Education Department I am always looking for new approaches to PE. I don't know if these approaches will be helpful elsewhere, but for now they have made a significant difference for Division 12 in East Tennessee.

Respectfully,

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