How to Get More People Involved in Your Neighborhood Project or Effort

Effective outreach is one of the most important tools to help your group reach its goals. Getting people to participate in your activities is an ongoing process that your group can build into all its plans and activities.

A How-to Guide for neighborhood leaders working to make life better for people in Battle Creek
Neighborhood groups can use a variety of techniques to reach out. Whether you want to spread the word about the work of your group, increase the number of people involved in your project or provide neighborhood folks a chance to hear about a problem your group wants to work on, how you reach out is critical to your success. The process of reaching out can be a slow one—you need to build relationships and trust before some folks will even come to a meeting. So, where do you start?

Why do people participate in groups and activities?

There is not one right way to get folks involved with your group, but research and work with neighborhood organizations around the country has shown there are six reasons why people get involved with organizations like a neighborhood group. Sometimes called the Six Rs of Participation, these Rs represent the benefits people look for when joining a group that will outweigh the cost of participation. The more we build these into the way our group works, the better our chances of getting folks involved and keeping them involved.

**Recognition:** People want to be recognized for their contribution to their block, neighborhood and community. We all want to be recognized, at first just by members of our own group, and eventually by members of other groups. Recognition can be given in many ways, such as awards and dinners, highlighting and praising in the media or public events and through simple thank yous.

**Respect:** People often find that their values, culture or traditions are not respected in the workplace or their community. Everyone wants respect. By joining neighborhood activities we seek the respect of our peers for ourselves and our values. One way to show respect to your group members is to ask regularly about their values. Questions like “What do we care most about in relation to this issue?” and “What do we hope will happen if we work on this project?” are good questions to help find out what people value.

**Role:** We all need to be needed. It is a cliché but it is true. We want to belong to a group where our unique role and contribution can be appreciated. Groups must have a role for everyone if they want to maintain or grow their membership. This means we must share roles with real power and substance across the entire group.

**Relationships:** Groups are organized networks of relationships. Often, all it takes is a personal invitation to convince us to join. People join groups for lots of reasons, including making new friends, broadening your base of support or influence or accomplishing something we could not do alone.

**Rewards:** Not everyone wants the same rewards but the rewards of membership in a group must outweigh the costs of participating in terms of the sacrifice of time and energy that people make. Rewards can be determined by finding out about people’s self interest—what things do they care most about—and the ways in which membership in your group can help them achieve those things. The rewards people receive from participating in your group or project are always the answer to the question, “What's in it for me?”

**Results:** Nothing works like results to get people to participate in your group or activity. Making visible and easy activities a part of your group’s action planning and day-to-day work can go a long way to attracting and keeping people. Always remember to celebrate the small wins your group makes on the way to bigger goals.
Tools in the outreach tool box that build on the six Rs of participation:

Essential to effective outreach is having a toolbox of ongoing activities that your group can use to reach out to the various people or other groups that you need to be successful. Of course, not every tool is right for every job. Different outreach tools will be more appropriate and effective for different situations. The key is figuring out what to use when.

Public and block meetings: Town or neighborhood meetings are an excellent way to reach out to people who are already somewhat involved in the area. At these events, current members can be recognized and praised, information about your project or effort can be collected and shared and new strategies and ideas can be discussed. You can also get media publicity about these meetings both before and after they happen. Block meetings are smaller meetings of just a few neighbors in someone's living room or a place close to the neighborhood like a school or church. These are much less formal than large public meetings and are a great way to build relationships and get the word out to people who are uncomfortable speaking publicly or attending large meetings.

Door knocking: Going door-to-door, informing people about your group or the projects you are working on and inviting them to participate is a time honored and proven way to get people involved. It takes time and bodies, which your group may not have, but it can have a big payoff. The advantages of going door-to-door to publicize a meeting or recruit new group members include breaking down barriers and suspicions about your group or project. A drawback to this method, besides the time it takes, is the negative reaction to being “bothered” at home as some people are suspicious about opening their doors to strangers.

Tips for successful door knocking include always going with a partner, always leaving people with a flyer or something to remember you by and wearing a badge or t-shirt to help identify your group.

Petition drives, flyering or surveys: This method is similar to door knocking but involves gathering information in a formal way or engaging people about issues with a concrete tool. You can also use this method at community events or places in the community where people gather—like a high school sports event, busy street corner, the mall or a neighborhood school or your church.

Tabling: This is a variation on the petition drive/flyer/survey method above but involves setting up an information booth or table at busy supermarkets, shops or places where people gather. Be sure to get permission from the organization or business before you set up your table.

One-on-ones: These are conversations with potential group members that allow you to understand what motivates them and what it might take to get them involved in your group (sometimes called “self-interest”).

Although they can be time-consuming, one-on-ones can help you build those important relationships with other people in your neighborhood. Here are some tips for successful one-on-ones:

- Try to relax and enjoy getting to know the other person.
- Use mutual friends or other contacts to help make the initial meeting with the person. After each one-on-one, ask, “Who else do you think I should talk to?” and use that person’s name when you make the next contact.
- Start the conversation by introducing yourself and explaining why you are there: “I am here to listen to what’s important to you and to learn what you think about (fill in name of neighborhood or issue or project your group is working on).”
- Ask open-ended questions that require more than a yes or no answer and listen for lead-ins to their stories. Explore different areas to see what most interests this person: “Can you tell me about what you’d like to see in this neighborhood for children?” “Do you participate in community organizations?” “What do you think would make the neighborhood/park/school better?”
Some possible areas for open-ended questions include:
- Neighborhood changes they’ve seen, problems they’ve experienced
- Their children: schools, recreation, hopes
- Family pressures: relationships, finances, jobs
- Wider society: their view of why society is changing

• Don’t give advice or try to help people personally—you are not there to be a social worker!
• Try to identify their self interest. What does this person get excited about? Are these things similar to the interests of your group? It’s OK if the person’s interests don’t fit that of your group right now. There may be other things they can work on in the future.
• Tell the person how they might get involved and invite their participation only if they seem ready to participate. Make sure you leave them with something concrete to remind them of your group or your project and make a commitment to follow up.
  “We’ll see you at the meeting on Monday, then. Can I call you Sunday night to remind you?”
• Always thank the person for their time.
• Make sure you follow up on any commitments you made.

Outreach Checklist

Here is a tool your group can use to help develop an outreach strategy for your next meeting or project or just to get more people involved:

1. Have you designed an outreach plan?
   - Identified places where residents will be that you want to reach?
   - Defined the boundaries of the area you want to target?
   - Assessed your human resources (how many volunteers you have, etc.)?
   - Thought about the goals of your outreach effort? (Are you getting the word out about a meeting? An issue? An event?)

2. Have you decided what tools and techniques to use?
   - Flyers
   - Door-to-door
   - Tabling
   - Block meetings or chats
   - Public meetings
   - Petitions or surveys
   - One-on-ones

3. Have you recruited enough volunteers and paired up buddies if needed?

4. Are there deadlines or timelines you need to meet?

Review the checklist and think about specific needs and resources you might have. You can use the results of this checklist to create an outreach plan for your group.

Getting More People Involved in Battle Creek

When the Battle Creek Health System’s facilities needed renovation and expansion, there was talk in the community that the hospital’s leadership was considering moving the facilities to the south side of town. Neighbors of several of Battle Creek’s northside neighborhoods did not want to see this happen and organized a meeting to show support for the hospital expanding in its current location. The group used many of the outreach ideas included in this guide such as door-to-door talks, petitions, flyersing, tabling and neighborhood meetings to ask people to come to the larger public meeting with city and hospital officials. Their efforts were extremely successful as over 500 people attended the meeting and the hospital chose to remain on the north side of town.

Local Resources

Feel free to share this guide with friends and neighbors. Call 269-969-2228 for additional copies and for other guides on a variety of how-to topics.

Source: From original material by Gillian Kaye, Community Development Consultants and Ira Resnick, Senior Program Officer, The Community Foundation of New Jersey