

Working The Recruitment Process

By: [Mark DeVries](#)

If you're expecting a secret, new-and-improved way of recruiting volunteers, you might be disappointed with what you're about to read.

Churches who buy into the latest-and-greatest, cutting-edge approaches to recruiting typically find themselves with limited results. Here's the very straightforward process that, when worked, actually works:

1. **Start early.** We like to suggest that churches open their recruiting season for the coming year at least six months before the potential leaders are to begin serving. This principle means that most youth ministries need to begin their major recruiting push in February. When we make these recommendations, people smile, as if to say, "*That will never work around here. People don't commit that far in advance.*" But we've discovered that the very people we want to serve as leaders actually do think this way. These are the kind of people who take their commitments seriously enough that they know today whether they'll be the chairperson for the PTA or on the board of the United Way or Rotary six months from now. The earlier you ask, the more weight you give to the role you're asking the potential volunteer to play.

2. **Identify your needs.** Strangely enough, most youth ministers never sit down to discover how many volunteers they actually need to sustain their ministry for the coming year. Most imagine that they're somehow beyond having to write down a list of needs; they simply assume they can keep it in their head (reason number one for why recruiting seldom makes it to the top of their to-do lists).

Figuring out the number of volunteers needed begins by taking out a pen and paper (or sitting down at a computer) and listing all the volunteers who will be required for the coming year, such as:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sunday school teachers | <input type="checkbox"/> Sunday school helpers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> youth group leaders | <input type="checkbox"/> small group leaders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> prayer partners/shepherds | <input type="checkbox"/> retreat leaders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> major-event coordinators | <input type="checkbox"/> youth committee members |

We typically recommend a ratio of one adult for every five youth that the church hopes to see active in the ministry. In other words, a church with a dream of having fifty active students weekly should have ten volunteers engaged in hands-on leadership on a weekly basis. This number typically doesn't include the dozens of other volunteers who will work behind the scenes, like committee members and event coordinators.

A quick word of explanation about major-event coordinators: If you have ever lived in a midsize to large city, you've probably heard of an organization called Junior League, made up of women who work together to pull off grand events that raise money for their favorite charities. I watched from a distance as Junior League in Nashville put on events, and I compared it to the way I was working. Here's what I discovered:

- They raise tens (sometimes hundreds) of thousands of dollars with their events.
- These events are run almost entirely by volunteers, and they're much more intricate and involved than any event our youth ministry has ever tried to pull off.

- I was spending inordinate amounts of time organizing events (every- thing from arranging for food to reserving transportation to finding photographers). And I'm not particularly good at organizing events.
- I had well over a hundred women in my church who had experience serving in organizations like the Junior League.
- Many of these women's kids had forbidden them from being youth leaders or Sunday school teachers.
- Instead of asking these mothers to do load-bearing work in the ministry, I was asking them to bring half a dozen cookies once a year to an event, when they would have been doing a much better job organizing than I was or ever could.

It's always fun to discover a new way to spell stupid using the letters of my own name.

A fascinating thing happened when I started allowing highly organized people to organize our events: they got organized. The capacity of our ministry expanded dramatically, because I was freed to do the things only I could do, like recruiting and equipping volunteers.

3. Develop your pool. The next step is to develop a pool of potential recruits. Most youth ministries recruit "off the cuff." They discover a need (usually an urgent one), and they do what comes naturally—they go after the best person they can find for that position. Sounds logical, doesn't it?

The danger of this approach is that you may be asking an A player to do a job that a C player could do just as well—or better. For example, when you've got to have someone make the arrangements for the cook- out, your mind immediately turns to Jan. Jan is an uber-volunteer; she can do just about anything. She's clearly the best pick for this job (and just about any other job you might need her to do). You call Jan, and she's happy to say yes.

Two weeks later, you need someone to handle all the logistics for the silent auction, the extraordinarily complicated fundraiser that should bring in 90 percent of the money needed for the upcoming mission trip. You immediately think of Jan, but her youth ministry volunteer plate is now filled with the less-strategic job of managing the cookout.

Strategic recruitment means waiting to make the first recruiting call until you've developed a master list of potential volunteers. We suggest going through your entire church directory and writing down every name of every person who might be a potential volunteer, and putting those names in one of three categories:

1. working directly with students
2. working behind the scenes (like a major-event coordinator)
3. working either with students or behind the scenes

The general rule is to develop a list three times longer than the number of volunteers you actually need.

Once that list is developed, label each name on the list. You can use any system you like, but I like the baseball approach:

- ___ Babe Ruths (the As)—those players you believe would "knock it out of the park" if they took on a position in the youth ministry
- ___ utility infielders (the Bs)—those players who would do a fine job
- ___ pinch hitters (the Cs)—the potential volunteers who would "do in a pinch"

This is not the time for us to make a decision for our potential volunteers. In other words, this is not the time to say, “She would never do it.” At this point, we’re simply developing the list of people we believe have the gifts for this kind of ministry, even if we don’t believe they have the time right now.

4. **Select a draft pick for every position.** Once you have the two lists in front of you (the list of needs for your ministry and the list of potential leaders), place a name next to every position. Add phone numbers, and use this document as the master recruiting list. I always like to start with the “reach recruits,” those superstars (like the senior pastor) who I think have little chance of saying yes. If they say no, I’ve lost nothing. But I’m surprised how often someone I’m sure won’t be available says yes.

5. **Start smiling and dialing.** The traditional way of recruiting requires waiting until you think someone will be at home before making calls. This approach is problematic for a number of reasons:

___ It assumes people will be more likely to say yes because of your powers of persuasion. The opposite is usually true: if people feel forced into an answer, they will tend to say no.

___ It provides an excuse for not making calls immediately. “Just the right time to call” seldom comes, leaving the procrastinating recruiter a month further down the road with nothing to show for it.

___ It avoids the most polite ways of communicating the opportunity to serve as a potential leader. Leaving a message by email or voicemail allows your prospect to consider and pray through the opportunity without feeling pressure to respond immediately.

When you call, ask for what you really want. Avoid making the position too easy. Our senior consultant Jeff Dunn-Rankin has helped me imagine how Jesus might recruit if he used the same methods that many of us use in youth ministry.

Jeff imagines that the revised biblical text might go something like this:

And verily Jesus saw Peter, busy with his day job, and said reluctantly unto him, “Listen, man, I need you to do me a favor. Nobody’s responded to my note in the bulletin, and I can’t get anybody to help us out on this thing I’m putting together. I don’t know what happened to commitment, but hey, whatever. I just need you to spend some time with me once a month. You and Nathanael and Judas could do it on a rotating basis. Look, I know you’re busy, but if you do this I’ll definitely owe you one. If not, we’re canceling the Last Supper.”

6. When two-thirds of your potential leaders turn you down, **return to step four and repeat the process.** The secret is not in the creativity of the process; it is in persistently working the process. Committing the time and fighting the inertia of call resistance are key aspects of a recruiting program that short-term, camp-counselor youth workers avoid. Starting the recruiting process six months in advance provides enough margin for repeating the process over and over until you have a full team to field, before the insanity of summer schedules arrives.