

IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?

A Game Plan For
Recruitment and
Retention of
Members

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

If you build it, they will come. Right? But what if you threw a party and no one came? What if you set up a Math Teachers' Circle meeting complete with a great topic and session leader, and no one turned up?

It's a scenario that Circle leaders dread. And although it's highly unlikely any group will ever garner a completely null set of attendees, a variety of recent factors, including low morale, teacher layoffs, other professional development requirements and the shortage of spare time faced by overworked teachers, have contributed to flagging attendance in many Circles across the nation.

A recent discussion on Teachers' Net, the online community for members of the MTC Network, garnered a few great suggestions to respond to low attendance. For instance, Diana White of the Rocky Mountain Math Teachers' Circle in Denver pointed out that the Common Core State Standards are currently the priority in teacher professional development and Circles should make this a well-advertised priority as well. Michelle Manes of MaTCH (Math Teachers' Circle of Hawai'i) mentioned that her teachers are given the choice between professional development credits or a stipend, thanks to grants. Steve Pelikan of the Cincy Math Circle in Ohio brought up the importance of taking time at the end of a session to reflect on what was accomplished and what was learned, to talk about classroom connections, and to think about how the next session could be even more productive.

But what else can be done? Here are some more tips and tricks from some of the most successful groups in the Network in terms of recruiting new attendees and hanging on to prior attendees. Their advice follows three main themes: build the Circle well from the ground up, remain in constant contact with the group, and be sure give the teachers what they need from the Circle.

BUILD A COMMUNITY.

"Your best asset for the survival of your group are its existing members: teachers who have attended, enjoyed themselves, and hopefully, returned for more," Michael Nakamaye said. He is the leader of the Albuquerque MTC, a group that regularly hosts around 25 teachers per meeting. Nakamaye said that about two-thirds of the teachers are recurring participants, regulars he calls the "core group."

Nakamaye said he always encourages members of the core group to bring colleagues with them to meetings.

"People are more likely to come regularly if they're coming with a fellow teacher from their school, someone who can talk them into coming after a long work day," Nakamaye said.

However, he also stressed the importance of building relationships between participants from different schools, particularly between the involved teachers and the faculty mathematicians involved.

"There should be time to mingle, to circulate and meet new people," Nakamaye said, explaining that his group's meetings, as in many Circles, often begin with a meal and time to socialize and unwind before getting down to the math. "Then your group becomes more like a community and less like a lecture hall."

WORK TOGETHER TOWARD A COMMON GOAL.

Judith Covington, leader of the North Louisiana Math Teachers' Circle, also stresses the fact that community is important within the Circle. The most important step, she said, is to ensure that your Circle is something you are doing "with" your participants, rather than "to" them or "for" them.

"On a recent evaluation, one teacher wrote that as something we were doing right," Covington said. "We never quite thought about it in those terms before, but it really is the best approach. It should be the group setting out to learn together, rather than a presenter setting out to talk at them for an hour."

SOLICIT FEEDBACK AND TRY NEW THINGS.

Keeping with the theme of working together with the members, many group leaders recommend surveying members for input on how to run the Circle, particularly which day and time would be most convenient for them to attend. When Nakamaye's group responded that they were interested in trying a Saturday morning meeting, he couldn't believe it, but decided to try it anyway. Just in case no one were to show, he scheduled himself as that particular session's leader, and to his surprise, the session was as much of a success as the group's regular Thursday evening meetings, both in terms of attendance and teacher involvement.

Covington's group, meanwhile, has overwhelmingly and repeatedly voted against any weekend commitments, and their group meetings remain firmly rooted

in Monday evenings, as something to look forward to at the start of the week. Meanwhile, the Math Teachers' Circle of Austin, led by Altha Rodin, meets on either Thursdays or Wednesdays, changing at the request of surveyed group members.

SPEND SOME QUALITY TIME TOGETHER.

What if you are just beginning your group and don't have access to an existing group to survey or invite to meetings?

Rodin said that the best way to launch a Circle is the way the MTC Network recommends: with a residential overnight workshop for teachers, for several days in the summer. "This will give you a tight-knit community, a group of regulars, and a firm footing to start," Rodin said. Over half of the participants of the MTC of Austin's first workshop in 2010 are still among the group's regular participants.

BEGIN WITH A BANG.

Covington's group did not begin with a workshop, but rather a large party-like event in which she and her group's other organizers pulled out all the stops.

"We had door prizes, gift cards, great food, and a minor celebrity of our state's mathematical community as our first session leader," Covington said, adding that this approach could also work for the first meeting of the year or semester to inject life into a languishing group.

"Advertise like mad, show the teachers what your group is all about, and collect the email addresses of all the attendees," Covington said. "Then you have a great starter list to begin to invite to regular meetings." With this approach, the North Louisiana MTC attracted 45 attendees at their first meeting in 2010, and they have since leveled off to around 25 attendees per meeting.

In fact, giveaways, freebies and treats are a great way to garner ongoing attention, Covington said. For example, for an upcoming session involving Polydron geometric construction sets, the group plans to buy a set for every teacher in attendance to use during the session and then take back to their classrooms. Her group's organizers hope that the promise of these in-demand classroom supplies will garner unusually high attendance for that session.

Similarly, Rodin said, creating lesson plans based on each session for teachers to take directly back to their own classrooms is a really great way to add value to the meetings and give teachers something they can really use, on top of the fun and personal math knowledge they already get from the sessions.

REMAIN IN CONSTANT CONTACT.

Rodin also said that a good rule of thumb is to have a potential group list about ten times bigger than the number of teachers you actually want at your session, particularly when working within an urban setting. She regularly reaches out to a list of 200 people in order to glean 20 to 30 participants for each meeting.

"The trick is to try for a steady stream of teachers, rather than the same exact group of teachers, at every meeting," Rodin said. "Our aim is to always have around twenty teachers, but many of the teachers can only attend one or two sessions per year. Teachers are tired; they have a lot on their plates. It's best to just get used to the reality that they can't all attend every single meeting, and you can't expect them to."

Covington also stresses the importance of maintaining your own email list to keep in constant contact with prior participants. "People who have come before are more likely to come again, even if infrequently," Covington said. "I never delete an email address, but I do include an opt-out message at the bottom, just in case. Teachers rarely opt out, but it's just common courtesy and, in some cases, required by law. So keep that in mind."

Covington also recommends selecting your meeting dates a year or semester in advance, and at the first meeting, giving each attendee a flyer with all the dates for whole year. "Then send the schedule to your whole list and post it online," Covington said. "That way, the teachers can plan ahead well in advance." Covington also mentions it's valuable to keep reminding teachers, especially those who have already registered, of the upcoming meeting. "I usually send a reminder email a day or two before so they don't forget," Covington said.

THINK OUTSIDE THE INBOX.

Nakamaye agrees that maintaining a good email list of prior and prospective participants is important to the success of a Circle. "That contact is important

to remind them of your group, even when they can't make it," Nakamaye said.

However, Nakamaye points out that you can sometimes get a lot farther with people with something tangible.

"Computer communication has lost some of its value in modern society," Nakamaye said. "People are so bombarded with messages, email in particular, that email contact is getting to a point of diminishing returns. It isn't always the most effective way to reach people." His group initially reached out with a good quality printed brochure in teachers' school mailboxes and received a great response to it. This approach is particularly useful when, as in Nakamaye's region, mass emails to teachers are not permitted unless it's with your own list.

Rodin, meanwhile, also realizes the limited potential of relying on her own email list and relies on the additional help of a point person with a wider sphere of influence. Her particular point person is Susan Hemphill at Region 13, a local branch of the Texas Education Agency. Hemphill is able to cover a wider base of interested teachers, forwarding messages and personally inviting teachers she knows who might be interested. Rodin attributes much of her group's success to Hemphill's involvement.

Covington, similarly, said she intentionally chose teachers from each of the three neighboring parishes (the Louisiana equivalent of a county) to be members of her Circle's leadership team, specifically so the Circle would have a person on the ground in each parish. One team member, Tanya Sullivan-McGee, is a middle school coordinator for her parish, and has particular success convincing the teachers of her parish to attend.

MAKE IT EASY TO ATTEND.

The location of Nakamaye's group meetings is ever-changing, alternately held at various schools throughout the district. He said that teachers from the particular school where the meeting is being hosted are often well represented at each meeting. In his opinion, this is due to the ease of attending for them.

Similarly, Rodin said that her group's consistent location in a university building immediately adjacent to a well-lit parking garage that is free in the evenings at the time of the meetings is an invaluable factor in her group's attendance.

Meanwhile, Covington adds that making it easy to attend is not only about location, mentioning that she also brings notepaper and pencils for the teachers to take notes, so they don't have to remember to bring anything.

MAKE IT WORTHWHILE.

However, the most important factor for a Circle's success is to make the meetings a valuable asset to the teachers in attendance.

"Teachers will only come if it is worth their while to come," Nakamaye said. "There are a variety of things you can try, but it all comes down to that."

Rodin's group, for example, offers Continuing Education Credits and Gifted and Talented Credits to their participants. "Teachers in Texas often pay up to \$100 for events that award these credits," Rodin said. "It didn't cost anything but time to get our MTC certified. It's just

paperwork, but it makes attending a great value for our teachers."

Rodin's group also consistently orders high-quality catered food from the best local restaurants, rather than having pizza at every meeting like many teachers' groups often have. "It costs a little more, but the teachers really deserve it and they really enjoy it," Rodin said. "And we always make sure to have really superb desserts for them as well."

Covington echoes the importance of treating the teachers with the highest respect and the best of everything your Circle can afford. "It's really important to treat your teachers well, like the professionals they are," Covington said. "They're already so overworked and underpaid. The best thing to do to boost attendance is to make the meeting something exciting, enticing, something that people actually want to attend."

In essence, build it well, and, indeed, they will come. 

