

# Hey! Small Groups! Over here!

## All those looking for a Small Group, please raise your hands!

People want intimacy, and you've got small groups, but how do you connect the yearning of the public with the opportunity of your ministry? Let's imagine you have a mission to connect with seekers and mature disciples. You have appointed a great small group leadership trainer; and you have trained some terrific small group leaders. Some of the groups may be based on a curriculum, and some of the groups may be based on a common interest, but none of the groups have attracted much attention. How do you get the word out?

The very nature of small group ministry means that traditional church advertising won't work. The *last* things you want to do are:

- Put a sign-up sheet on the back wall of the sanctuary;
- Build an information booth in the center of the refreshment hall;
- Offer a phone number in the newsletter;
- Advertise in the newspaper;
- Attach flyers to car windows in the mall parking lot.

You can't communicate intimacy with mass media distribution, and you can't arouse interest with generic lists of intriguing topics.

Wise churches are getting the attention of marginal members and community seekers in three basic ways. These all require some serious research into the lifestyle segments that dominate your primary mission field (based on the average distance people drive to work and shop). This research will tell you media preferences, recreation venues, topics of special interest, and even the kind of retail shopping and restaurants various publics frequent. Now do the following three things:

### Personal Invitation

The most effective personal invitation happens *between people of similar lifestyles*. Don't expect an affluent, married, empty-nester with a passion for golf and a taste for Starbucks to get very far inviting a struggling, single, 20-something with a passion for X-treme sports and a taste for beer, to the small group. Even if the affinity is on target, the trust gap will rarely be bridged. Men invite men; women invite women; teens invite teens; and keep going with almost any imaginable demographic. Yes, your church may not reflect the demographic diversity of the zip code, and you are wondering how anyone in your church can make a personal invitation to people who are so different.

Personal invitation is like the game of dominoes. Every piece has two numbers, and every person has at least two sides to their identity. Match one side of your identity to that of a seeker, who has yet another side to their identity, and they match that to another seeker, and so on. If you have ever played the game of dominoes, you know that the chain of connections wiggles all over the table, configures in strange shapes, and follows unexpected directions.

That's what happens when small groups grow through personal invitation. Let the personal invitations direct the flow of small group multiplication; don't expect small groups to conform to prearranged plans.

### Micro-Targeted Location

Every lifestyle segment (and all the micro-cultures that explode like popcorn in your mission field) has particular places where they gather. These gathering places may be in cyberspace, and you can certainly take advantage of advertising your small groups in the web sites, chat rooms, forums, and facebook that they frequent. Or you can just twitter. However, most lifestyle segments still have physical places where they tend to gather: certain kinds of restaurants, entertainment centers, sports venues, continuing education opportunities, fitness and health care centers, and other places. That is where you post flyers, hand out brochures, and especially station real live people who can hang out and talk with peers.

Notice that smart advertisers for consumer products similarly identify these micro-targets for posters, billboards, video, and freebies in order to sell products that are considered “trendy” by that particular lifestyle group. They may even spend money to co-sponsor events, lifting the profile of their company (church?) and its relevance. When you deploy people to hang out, model the values and beliefs of your church, and engage people in conversation, but be sure they actually fit in and enjoy being there. It’s not a chore. It’s a blast. People are attracted to other people *when they are enjoying themselves*.

### Community Networks

There is already an underground communication network in every neighborhood, town, or city. These are people who regularly connect with each other because they share particular hobbies or interests; or because they are committed to common service projects; or because they share specific health care concerns or are supporting each other to overcome addictions and disabilities. If you have topical small groups that intersect with these networks, then you need to contact clubs, social services, hospitals and health care centers and ask them to pass along your small group opportunities. Be sure to demonstrate your trustworthiness by revealing your core values and positive beliefs.

We have said it many times in small group ministry, but since we so often miss the point it bears repeating. Small groups are about relationships first, and topics second. It is less important for many people to attend a curriculum or affinity group *for people in general*, and more important for them to attend a group *specifically for people like me*. Topics are one thing, but being with the right group to talk about them is even more important.

Once you know who, how, and where to communicate, perhaps the greatest challenge for churches seeking to spread the word about small group opportunities is what to say. Most churches overestimate the available time for communication. You don’t have time for an explanation. You only have time for a data burst. The attention span may only be a byte measured in a few seconds. What are the most important things to communicate?

- 1) **The Benefit:** People need to know instantly why this opportunity is a blessing not to be missed. What’s in it for them? What beneficial change will occur? How will it improve their lives tomorrow?
- 2) **The Environment:** People need to know if the ambience of the conversation suits their lifestyle. Where will it happen? What kind of atmosphere will there be? How will it engage all five senses?
- 3) **The Timeline:** People need to know when it will happen and how long it will take. Time is their most important possession, and you want some. Will it be at the right time and last just long enough?
- 4) **The Leader:** People need to know if the leader is credible. It’s not about name, title, office, or educational degrees. It’s about experience, spirituality, and trustworthiness. Who is the leader?

These four things need to be delivered within seconds, and delivered clearly, concisely, and honestly. Don’t waste a lot of time informing people about the sponsoring church, or the denominational affiliation, or the published curriculum, or extra perks. Just give them a hyperlink and they can look it up.

Your website backs up the data burst. If people are intrigued enough to learn more, the first thing they want to read are endorsements from former users. Borrow the strategy from Amazon.com. Whenever they list a book they sort out all the reader responses to provide the “Most Helpful *Favorable* Review” and “Most Helpful *Critical* Review”. Do the same for your small groups using exit interviews or follow-up evaluations. Whether they are favorable or critical, provide the *most helpful* comments on your website. More than anything else, that may be the clincher for anyone to commit to a small group.

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