

# recruiting 4-H leaders: what tips the scale?

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Mary Lou Fuhry

"Hello . . . I just read in the paper that you need people to help with 4-H youth groups. I'd like some information about this. What is 4-H and what kind of person are you looking for?"

At the receiving end of this call, the 4-H agent, always alert to any expression of interest, points out the responsibilities—and rewards—associated with working with 4-H groups. The agent knows this phone call is direct evidence that the caller somehow has been made aware of 4-H and its need for adult leaders. How this awareness or interest came about should make the agent think about the various ways word of 4-H spreads.

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The newspaper article the caller referred to may have been the only stimulus the prospective 4-H leader needed to prompt a call. More likely, it was the culmination of a series of reminders—a radio announcement, a conversation with someone, a visit to the county fair, a meeting with an eager 4-H participant, or perhaps a flyer that somehow had found its way to the caller's home.

Which stimulus will tip the scale, moving adults to contact 4-H to volunteer as leaders? And, are both those familiar with 4-H and those new to it being reached? In Geauga County, Ohio, an area with a significant influx of former residents of

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the city of Cleveland and its suburbs, the need to introduce newcomers to 4-H is particularly important. By obtaining answers to these questions, a more efficient and effective leader recruitment program should take place. Efforts would be focused on those most likely to produce results.

I decided to keep a record of incoming calls dealing with 4-H leader inquiries. This record involved only those who asked about volunteer leadership in home economics and its related 4-H projects.

From September, 1980 to June, 1981, 50 people called to inquire about these interest areas. These were the questions we wanted answers to:

1. Were the contacts new to 4-H?
2. How did the contacts learn about 4-H and/or the need for adult leaders?
3. Did the contacts eventually take steps to become 4-H leaders?
4. If they became leaders, did they recruit new 4-H members?
5. If they decided not to become 4-H leaders, what reasons did they give?

### **Old Friends or New?**

Of the 50 adults who contacted the Extension office, only 20 indicated they were acquainted with 4-H and its activities. Their knowledge came from their children or friends, or the contacts were 4-H alumni themselves.

### **What Tipped the Scales**

How did those 50 who called find out about 4-H and the need for leaders? What prompted them to make that initial call? Various stimuli were responsible (see Table 1):

1. *Newspaper articles.* Nearly one-third of the callers (15) attributed their interest in 4-H to newspaper articles. Newspaper publicity is a long-range recruitment device used by the 4-H program in the county. Articles about 4-H activities and short announcements requesting volunteer leader help are published weekly in local papers.
2. *Contacts through 4-H members.* 4-H members and their leaders invite parents and friends to an annual 4-H Project Fair, which is held every winter. Their guests are invited to join as members or leaders. Parents, relatives, and neighbors often join as leaders to show their support for 4-H activities. Five of the 50 people who called had 4-H members in their families. Three

- more were former 4-H members. Two called after attending the winter fair.
3. *4-H leader referrals.* About one-fifth of the callers (9) said that a 4-H leader had referred them. To encourage these referrals, 4-H leaders and clubs were given award points for recruiting new leaders and helping to start new clubs.
  4. *Referrals from Extension agents and other agencies.* The Extension agricultural agent, home economics agent, and other county agencies are reminded regularly to encourage adults to become volunteer leaders. Extension agents made public announcements about the need for 4-H leaders and wrote about this need in their newsletters. Five people decided to call as a result of this interagency cooperation.
  5. *County fairs.* Thousands of adults who come to the county fair each summer walk past posters inviting them to participate as leaders. Sign-up sheets are provided, which can be filled out on the spot or taken home. At the 4-H booth, active leaders and 4-H agents are available to provide the personal touch. This program was responsible for four telephone calls after the fair.
  6. *School referrals.* Elementary schools scheduled assembly programs that gave the 4-H agent the opportunity to tell about 4-H programs and the need for more leaders. Two adults volunteered as a result.
  7. *Other reasons.* The following reasons were also mentioned:
    - a. *4-H camp.* The caller became aware of 4-H activities when she learned of 4-H camp and enlisted her own child to attend.
    - b. *Letters to community organizations.* An informational letter was sent to all community clubs, telling about the opportunities 4-H Clubs offer youth, and requesting volunteer help.
    - c. *Door-to-door recruitment.* Requests were made for leader help in various neighborhoods where there was an interest or need for 4-H activities.
    - d. *Posters and flyers.* Posters encouraging 4-H participation were distributed for display in stores, banks, and other popular locations throughout the county. Flyers carried the same message and included a tear sheet to be returned by those who were interested in becoming 4-H members or leaders.

**Table 1. Tally of phone calls.**

Duration: 9 months (September through May)

What prompted the call	Number	Percentage
Newspaper articles	15	30%
4-H member contact	10	20
Leader referral	9	18
Agency referral	5	10
County fair	4	8
School referral	2	4
Other reasons	5	10
Total	50	100%

Number new to 4-H: 30

Number who volunteered as leaders: 25

Number who needed agent help to recruit members: 13

Number who cited lack of time as reason for noninvolvement: 21

Of the 50 contacts made, 25 became 4-H volunteer leaders or assistant leaders. Thus, one out of every two contacts was successful.

Of the new leaders, 13 needed agent help and support in organizing their clubs and in recruiting club members. Agent help included advertising in schools, newspapers, radio, preparing flyers, and involving 4-H committee members.

### Reasons for Refusal

Most of those who decided not to make the 4-H commitment indicated that they lacked the time for volunteering at present. Some said that home responsibilities interfered. Since such circumstances may change with time, these people will be contacted again about volunteer leadership.

### Conclusions

Here are some of the conclusions reached:

- An average of one out of two tells us that our recruitment is on the right track and is reaching people most likely to volunteer.
- Prospective volunteers read the newspapers and, therefore, *it's advisable to continue to write news stories and announcements as recruitment devices. In addition, it would be good to explore the effectiveness of other media resources, such as radio and TV.*
- The large number of callers who claimed no previous knowledge of 4-H indicates that we have a job of public information ahead of us.
- The comparatively small percentage of former 4-H members who responded to the call for adult leadership

is significant. Perhaps interest in becoming a 4-H leader needs to be generated while the individual is still a 4-H member. This interest might be accomplished through some effective leadership training.

- A large proportion of agent time is spent on school promotions, including preparation and presentation of programs, yet only two people attributed their call to school promotion. Perhaps the school programs are more effective as 4-H member recruitment devices.
- Even though one prime reason was named as the motivation for the call, you can't discount other factors that led the volunteer to phone. As one caller put it, "I've been thinking about this for a long time."
- Keeping records of calls doesn't need to be long and tedious to achieve meaningful results.

### **Implications for Extension**

Although no single method can be used to effectively recruit leaders, certain patterns emerged that deserve recognition.

First, if the results of the survey are an indication of effectiveness in recruitment, more agent time should be devoted to mass media communications, including newspaper articles, announcements, and advertising. It may also include radio and television promotions. County fair promotion can be included with mass media communications because a large group of individuals is exposed to 4-H and its advertisements. This type of recruitment obviously reaches both those familiar to 4-H and those new to it. An effective use of mass media recruitment would seem to require some organization and legwork by the agent. However, the results justify the effort.

Secondly, 38% of new leaders was obtained through those already involved in the 4-H program (leader referrals and 4-H members). These two areas are perhaps the agent's best sources of new recruits from the perspective of time invested . . . existing volunteers and clubs do the work for the agent. Incentives given to present leaders, such as honors or club points for those exposing others to opportunities with 4-H, may bring worthwhile results.

Another method of reaching potential leaders was through efforts of other Extension agents and county agencies. Results from this method require the 4-H agent to continually point out the need for adult volunteers at both Extension meetings and other meetings with directors and members of various groups throughout the county. Time involvement for the 4-H

agent includes updating and reminding key personnel while they meet with new audiences unavailable to the 4-H agent.

The results of the study also indicated that leaders weren't obtained through school promotions. In Geauga County, Ohio, this promotion takes a great amount of agent time. Assemblies are planned to tell students of opportunities in 4-H and the need for adult volunteers. Perhaps results from contact with youth increase club membership growth only. Another study on member recruitment could indicate if agent time in schools is well spent.

No one method can do the job. However, some approaches proved more fruitful than others. In my own area, mass media advertisements and recruitment through existing leaders produced the best results. What tips the scales in other counties and states may depend on factors unique to those individual areas. But, these two main areas should definitely be explored.