Help with Popcorn Fund Raising

Tips From a Top-selling Unit

Our Cub Scout pack has in recent years been very successful at selling popcorn to raise funds for our program. Two years ago we were #1 in our district and #2 in the council overall. And last year we were #1 overall. We’ve been able to do a lot of fun and worthwhile things with the money we've raised, including finally replacing our worn out old Pinewood Derby track with a shiny, new state-of-the-art one. But just five years ago we were flat broke with not even two nickels to rub together. How did we go from worst to first? Here are some essential elements for popcorn Kernels that have helped our pack succeed in a big way.

**Reach.** As much (or as little!) popcorn as you may have sold in prior years the chances are excellent that you could sell a whole lot more this very next year. Even in a flagging economy you can almost certainly sell more than you think is possible. Three years ago our pack grossed $12,000 in sales. The next year our Kernel set us a target of $18,000 hoping to get just $15,000. We sold just under $30,000 worth that year. Last year, with that Kernel lost to another role in scouting, I assumed Kernel-ship. I lowered expectations but implemented some fresh motivational ideas to help minimize the damage. End result: we topped $30,000. Henry Ford put it best: 'Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right!' Believe you can sell more. Reach for a big number and then go make it happen.

**Organize, Mobilize, Motivate.** I’m not a salesman but the best ones I know all tell me 'You've got to ask for the order.' When the Trails End rep tells you that one in three people asked will buy popcorn you've got to trust him. It's a simple numbers game: the more people you ask the more will buy. And people will buy – more than you think they will. They may not know much about scouting but they believe in it and want to support it. The key is to get your scouts in front of as many prospective buyers as possible and have them ask. The popcorn Kernel's chief responsibility is to enable and encourage the scouts in his unit to ask as many people as they can for an order or a sale. That means arranging 6- and 8-hour days, both Saturday and Sunday, each weekend of the drive period covering both doors at the local Wal-Mart or Lowes or Giant with tables topped with attractive displays of popcorn and fronted by
well-groomed, appropriately uniformed scouts who are helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, cheerful, brave and clean. It means motivating boys to go out one or two afternoons a week to canvass the neighborhood ringing doorbells. It means enlisting parents and pack leaders to share the load of storing and transporting cases of popcorn and of setting up, managing and tearing down show-and-sell operations. It means focusing everyone in the unit, youth and adult alike on some goal, final or intermediate: a number, a prize, a reward.

Here are some strategies and tactics that have worked for us:

- **Do show-and-sells at big box stores** and do them every weekend of the drive, starting with the first available weekend. Get on the store manager's calendar early in the summer (June is not too early) and then follow up with a letter (on unit stationery if you have it) thanking the manager for supporting your boys in their fund raising effort. Mention the dates and times they’ve agreed to. Continue to follow up with monthly phone calls during which you mention the dates and times they’ve agreed to. A week or two before the start of the drive make one more call to the store manager to confirm that you're on the calendar as agreed. Ask if you can have a letter specifying that you have exclusive permission to conduct your show-and-sell activities on those dates and during those times. You will write the letter yourself and bring it by the store. All the manager has to do is sign. You want the store manager's signature; not the head cashier’s, the person-at-the-customer-service-desk-that-day's or that of Eddie the butcher. All kinds of people answer the phone at these stores and agree to whatever you ask for, then hang up and forget you. And five minutes later they do it again with someone else. When you're one of three contingents showing up on a Saturday morning with otherwise equal claims to the storefront you want to be the one holding the trump card.

- **Attach value to participation.** Show-and-sells try attention spans, particularly of young boys. We try to limit shifts to two hour lengths, though we let some of the older boys do double shifts. In any case, you need scouts in front of those tables so its necessary to recruit a large number to fill the times. Last year, our biggest selling to date, we awarded chances in a grand prize lottery for show-and-sell work. For each two-hour
shift worked a boy earned a chance in the drawing. At our kick-off, held the weekend before the start of the drive we came away with the show-and-sell sign-up sheets half filled. Boys continued to sign up during the next few weeks until all the slots were taken. Contrary to prior years we never had to go begging for boys to come fill thinly covered show-and-sell periods. And let it be known that parent supervision is required. Mom is not to drop junior off in front of the Lowes and go shopping for four hours. Someone needs to be there to supervise junior – and the cash box.

- **Augment the Trails End prize program with unit-sponsored prizes.** For the last couple of years we’ve offered and given attractive prizes to our top three take-order sellers and to our top three combined (take-order and show-and-sell) sellers. We’ve given a pizza party to the top-selling den (based on a per scout average) and a pizza party to the entire pack for meeting the pack goal which, of course, we make eminently achievable. Last year we added a new dimension: a grand prize for meeting goal to be given away in a lottery. Boys earned chances in the drawing by working show-and-sell shifts and for $100 increments in their take-order sales. We then further incentivized by adding grand prize drawings for increments beyond the primary goal. The more the boys worked or sold the more chances they earned in the grand prize drawing. The more they sold the more grand prizes we gave away, multiplying their chances. And everyone with even one chance in the drawing has a crack at a big prize which makes it interesting for all. There is a lot of leverage in offering a big prize lottery-style. Rather than work for a guaranteed small prize, boys (and their families) work for the potential of winning a much bigger prize. And potential is inexpensive. Hence each big prize winds up paying for itself.

- **Involve everyone – including your customers.** Speaking of potential, here’s an idea that I will admit we haven’t tried but is worth considering: give-aways to customers. For example, a free lottery scratcher ticket for each $15 worth of popcorn delivered. How about a chance in a drawing for a large gift tin of popcorn to be awarded at the end of each show-and-show day or weekend. Or a large assortment of popcorn to go to the lucky winner at the end of the drive. Many of your popcorn customers value scouting and are buying a stake in the mission when they buy popcorn. Why not
reward them with a material stake as well?

- *Emphasize take-orders.* Show-and-sells are great. They generate a large number of opportunities for scouts to 'ask for the order'. And they provide a comfortable setting for some less assertive boys to help build their confidence. In short, you want to do them. But for productivity, they pale in comparison to take-order selling. A boy in uniform ringing doorbells in his neighborhood when people are at home can generate twice the sales in one hour than he can in two hours at a fully staffed show-and-sell.

My son committed himself to being top seller in the pack last year. Three quarters of the way through the drive he became aware that he had fallen behind a few other boys in the number and value of the show-and-sells he had done. I told him not to worry about it but to focus on take-orders, which he did. He wound up as top individual seller and top combined seller both.

Find and offer incentives for boys to book more take-orders -- better prizes, more chances in the big drawing, whatever. Bottom-line: the more boys you have ringing doorbells the more they will sell and the better will be the results for them and for your unit.

- *Do a BIG unit kick-off.* Get everybody together. Explain the drive. Identify the goals and incentives. Recall the past glory (if any). Predict future glory (which you are all going to make happen). Hand out the take-order kits. Communicate the start and end dates. Detail the procedures and set expectations. Take sign-ups for show-and-sells. And have fun! Give away prizes (little ones). Give away food (we did a pancake breakfast last year). Generate excitement that boys will take away and carry with them as they go forward into the drive.

**Reward, recognize, appreciate.**

Constantly, constantly, constantly recognize and appreciate effort and commitment, even the smallest examples. When kids and parents sign up for show-and-sells, thank them. When
they show up for show-and-sells, thank them. At the end of their shift, thank them again. Let them know that you appreciate their participation in pursuing the unit's goal. Whenever you get a chance, make example of peoples' contribution. Single some out if they've done something noteworthy, but always begin and end each opportunity to address the pack in general with thanks to everyone for everything they're doing or have done to advance the cause.

Recognize and reward top sellers by making a big presentation when you give them the prize(s) they've earned. Also recognize any and all scouts who've 'done their best' regardless of how much they've sold. Many of your boys will be selling popcorn again next year and, in the future, various goods and services. In between they'll be selling themselves to colleges and universities and eventually to prospective employers and perhaps even to voters.

Cultivate.

**Communicate, encourage, inspire.**

Communicate continuously before, during and after the drive to keep everyone mindful of the goal and of where the unit stands in relation. Talk about what's been achieved, what's immediately achievable and what still might be achieved. E-mail progress reports weekly on dollar amounts sold and sales credits to show-and-sell participants. Relate stories you've heard about boys who've had success with take-order selling. You'll likely run into other units who are selling too. Find out how they're doing and pass the information along. Foster a spirit of friendly competition. Competition is a cornerstone of entrepreneurship. Let your boys and families know how well others are doing as an inspiration to reach for more.

Inform as soon as possible of any adjustments that need to be made to schedules, procedures, practices and expectations. Keep everyone updated on what's going on so they will all sing from the same song sheet and no one will feel left out.

**Watch the money.**

The good news is it piles up. The bad news is it's easy to lose control of it. We do our best to
secure cash physically at show-and-sells. Large bills stay out of sight and are periodically removed from the table-top cash boxes. A responsible adult is in control of all cash at all times. We register every sale on a tally sheet that tracks the types of product sold and the amounts collected and we keep a running total of money on hand including any no-sale donations we may receive. This helps immensely when we reconcile nightly, matching the money with the register. As soon as possible after the accounting is done we deliver the cash directly to our treasurer, that night or the next day. Every time money changes hands something of equivalent value (e.g., a receipt) should go in the opposite direction, even between trusting and trustworthy adults.

**Finally, start and stay committed to the purpose.**

Keep in mind and in the minds of those you serve at all times the reasons for selling popcorn. Your objectives are to:

- Fund and grow your program;
- Grow, strengthen and enrich your unit; and in the process,
- Advance the scouting mission.

Good luck with your next drive and let this one be the first of many banner years to come.

Yours in Scouting,

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