



Building Attendance at a Reunion – *the art of the invitation*

Publicizing a reunion is essential, but not enough to draw strong attendance. Just like a party or wedding, people want to get the formal invitation and the personal invite. They want to know that they are welcome, that they will know the other guests, and that they will enjoy themselves enough to justify the time and expense of participating.

Issue the formal invitation. Use snail mail for a “Save-the-Date” postcard, then later the formal invitation. (It has higher impact than email or other electronic media.) Back them up with email notices. When appropriate, snail mail missives should request email addresses for future emails. It’s a good way to gather and update contact information.

Personalize it. The more personal the invitation, the more persuasive. The most compelling is made face-to-face by a friend. Next is a phone call – from someone you know. Then a written invitation personalized just for you. Blast emails and public notices are much less effective. That’s why attendance committees that personally contact as many potential reunion attendees as possible are so important. Effective efforts to boost attendance take a lot of work.

How do you maximize opportunities for face-to-face invitations? Create a series of pre-reunion events throughout the key regions where most invitees live. Ask local enthusiasts to help organize and host events in the many regions where potential attendees are concentrated or scattered. Hosts need to help guests enjoy the event AND invite each guest to the reunion – and everyone must enjoy the event enough to want to do it again by coming to reunion. A by-product is that each event creates multiple points of communications (see below): announcing each event and then reporting on the fun everyone had at it.

How do you maximize opportunities for one-to-one verbal invitations? Appoint an Attendance Committee, whose job includes contacting as many invitees – one-to-one – as possible.

Attendance Committees need to be large. Remember the phone tree rule of thumb: each person should only have to telephone 5 to 8 other people. See <http://www.aauw.org/resource/how-to-build-a-phone-tree/>.

Attendance Committees need to be diverse. If you include just your friends, you will only phone each other. Instead, include someone (or two or three) from every sports team to phone members of that team. Include representatives from every singing group, orchestra, marching band, drama society, improvisation group, debating club, student political association, dance troop, religious society, fraternity, sorority, student newspaper, literary magazine, humor publication, ethnic cultural center, student government, honor society, social service organization, residential dormitory ... the list goes on. The value of a university supporting many student groups is not only that they enrich the students’ life while at university, but also that they provide a way to connect with them once they have left. Remember that alumni might not give contact information to the university, but their friends and teammates still know how to reach them.

Student phone banks. Phone calls from people outside the reunion guest list are much less effective. However, alumni will often politely take calls from students – especially if they are not being asked for money. In addition, the cost of student phone banks may be much less than a commercial operation.

Recorded phone-trees. Everyone hates incessant robo-calls. However, a few short, select and well-thought-out recorded messages may be useful. A short recorded call from a famous classmate may produce good results. So may one from the class treasurer saying he’s not asking for dues, just asking you to join the fun. For additional information see <https://www.callfire.com/help/glossary/communications/phone-tree>.

Repeat it. Reinforce the invitation – and the message of community – through repetition. Tell people to “save the date” long before the actual invitation – then later send out reminders. Plan the basic timeline for contacting people long before the event – have a timeline in place at least a year ahead. Include the date of each specific communication, the type of media (e.g. phone, email, alumni magazine), the deadline for creating it and who is responsible for the creation and delivery. Using multiple media channels strengthens and deepens the message.

Remember, building attendance is work, but it should be fun too. It’s a good opportunity to talk with old friends.