

We must reach them to teach them!

**Joshua Long KD8BVB
Xenia, Ohio**

How many of us have recently sat in a meeting, participated or heard a discussion on what it takes to get Teens involved in Amateur Radio? A lot of talk, but very little success, right? Although great work has been made by many, especially school clubs and the Boy Scouts, we still tend to miss the larger audience of Middle and High School students. I have been working with teens for a few years now on various topics and Amateur Radio has been the hardest to peek their interest with. It seems the hobby or its reputation has lost the luster that attracted so many of us over the years. I thought I would share some comments and suggestions on what has worked and not worked, although I struggle still each year reaching teens in the name of Amateur Radio.

Age of Teens?

Keep in mind the term “Teen” stretches from 12-19 years of age, and wow, if that is not a huge span when it comes to development and interest. Although many groups want to reach the 16-18 year old group, the fact remains that there is way too much competition for their attention. Keep in mind that Teens of any age normally occupy much of their thoughts with one idea or hobby at a time. Looking at the ages of 16-18, Amateur Radio would be competing with interest like Drivers Licenses, Cars, Colleges, Parties, and lets not forget the opposite sex. This age group also is the hardest to convince that taking a test to get into a hobby is worth it. That brings me to a whole other subject matter that we will leave for another day.

The group that we should be reaching out to are the Middle Schools, the 12-15 year-old range were their life is consumed by learning new things. This is the age where playing with toys is not “cool” anymore but they are still not old enough to run the town on their own, were video games are the largest hobby to overcome for their attention, although a force to be reckoned with itself. This age group’s minds are so open to new things that many in this group can study mere hours for the Technicians Test and pass with flying colors. Knowing your demographics is the key to any marketing campaign, and this age group is ripe in interest to explore technology. As a side note, although we want and should find ways to get more girls involved, it’s an uphill battle and you may lose more hair then its worth it to get their attention towards an Electronics hobby. Try to keep ideas as much as possible gender unspecific, but know when to realize that teenage girls are a group all on their own.

Internet & Computers?

Lets face it, teens live on computers. So it’s no surprise when they find something new to read up on, the first place they go is to a search engine online. To attract teens we must create websites and online programs that attract them visually. Once a teen lands on a website you have about 5 secs to grab their attention or their off. The days of simple no

frills sites that attract many aging hams, are useless and pointless to attract young ones. If you do not have an interacted site with pictures, videos, and maybe even a Flash movie a teen is probably 80% likely to skip over the site and move on. It's also wise to go to them, clubs and groups should embrace their trends. Our advertisements should use the same language and shorthand as teens use and our visual aids should have teens pictured in them. Do not be afraid to branch out from traditional websites and create blogs and pages on social networking sites like Myspace® or Facebook®. Learning tools like these and using them to go to the teens will grab their attention more than trying to find ways to bring them to your site.

Besides websites the hobby needs to continue to find ways to adapt computers to our technology. I heard a recent survey that said computers are the number 1 requested item from teens during the holidays. Although programs like Echolink® and others have made huge strides in connecting our hobby to the internet, more attention must be made to make the programs more visually appealing and eye catching. A teen can sign on to a Webcam and Voice chat online and talk the world over, and not need to take a test. So our innovations have to be interesting enough to make them want to take the test.

Education?

I do not know how else to say this, but most Amateur Radio classes would scare a teen off after the first class. I have seen it first hand! Can you image sitting in a class room all week and in the evening or on the weekends we then ask them to sit in another class room and listen to an Adult present a topic that would put you to sleep in a heart beat.

We have to go interactive! We need to present many hands on demonstrations and get them on the air and hooked. Bring radios, computers, & antennas into the class rooms and into their hands. Find ways to visually explain components and technologies, these visual aids go a long way for them retaining the knowledge. We must also insure that we use presentations with videos & pictures to explain the terms and definitions they need to know. Above all else do not set them at a table and preach to them. I tell you their heads would bob. I recommend contacting local middle school teachers to work with them to come up with ideas that will attract teens. These teachers have all the experience. Your educators in the Amateur Radio class rooms need to be fun and energetic, and probably should not be 60, sorry guys, but a 20-30 year old teacher has more of a connection than most 60-70 years olds.

School Clubs?

I talked early on about other interest are competition for Amateur Radio. So we need to grab their attention when those are not present. School clubs are great ways to get kids involved. Work with your local school district in stressing the importance of Amateur Radio. Present to the schools the relevant of the hobby in connection to electronics, technology, world relations, ect and the ways our hobby can be used to educate teens.

In school these kids are starving for something new and interesting, they can not play video games or go to the mall, so they in fact are a captive audience, both eager to learn and to try new things. But still do not bore them; find Hams in your clubs that have a gift to interact with teens, many adults stay connected with teens through groups like the Scouts & Church Teen programs. These adults have a gift to relate and communicate with teens, get one of them interested and you come along way to grabbing teens attentions.

So in summary, we must know the age group and know that we must grab a teens attention when their attention is not on other more interesting topics. If you have teens already in your groups, poll them, ask them what it will take. Lets face it no matter how we like to think Amateur Radio is interesting, compared to driving, the opposite sex, and video games, we do not stand a chance. We must focus on the age group that we stand the largest chance of success with and insure that we keep efforts on visual aids and hands on demonstrations that first hook them on the hobby; we can teach them later we must reach them first.