

KEYS to RECRUITMENT and RETENTION



What if there was a more comprehensive way of knowing how effective you are at connecting with your kids, your family, your friends? For the NWTF, that measure of effectiveness was revealed in a recent study on outreach programs across the country.

by Kris Wetherbee

Now more than ever, people in this country are living in an increasingly urbanized, technologically-infused and indoor-focused environment. As such, it may not come as a surprise to know the findings from a recent study suggest many recruitment and retention programs are more effective at retaining those already initiated into hunting, shooting and fishing than they are at recruiting true newcomers to these activities.

Conducted under a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Multistate Conservation Grant, Responsive Management (one of the top research firms in the wildlife and sports industries) and the NWTF, a 2011 study examined the effectiveness of nearly 40 national and state hunting, shooting and fishing recruitment and retention programs, including Women in the Outdoors, Wheelin' Sportsmen and JAKES. The goal? To develop a more targeted understanding of existing programs and essential elements needed to refine or develop new ones, and to standardize measurement criteria to be used in the future. The outcome proved insightful.

WHAT DID THEY FIND?

According to the study, the majority of program participants (73 percent of adults; 89

percent of youth) come from hunting, shooting and/or fishing families. Likewise, most program participants surveyed had hunted, shot or fished prior to the programs.

Post-program surveys also indicate that for many of the programs there was a large majority of participants who were more interested in hunting and shooting after the program than before, and many had improved their skills and increased their confidence. In addition, most recruitment and retention programs are increasing overall knowledge among participants in the areas of hunting, sport shooting and fishing, as well as awareness of the fish and wildlife agency's role.

Identifying the markets and audiences within these programs is crucial to developing effective strategies for getting newcomers more involved. One way to ensure continued involvement and dedication to these activities is by taking a cradle-to-grave approach that evolves with the skill set and age of the participant.

"There is a segment of the youth population whose



KID, DUCK HUNTER: MATT LINDLER; DUCK HUNTER: GIRL AND TURKEY HUNTER: SHANNON RIKARD



members are simply unlikely to try hunting, fishing, shooting or other natural resource-based or consumptive activities," said Mark Duda, executive director of Responsive Management. "However, that does not mean that new hunters and anglers cannot be created."

HOW NWTF PROGRAMS STACK UP

Several adult programs came out on top in increasing interest and participation in hunting, shooting and fishing.

Women in the Outdoors proved to be one of the best, with 82 percent of program participants rating the program as excellent, and 18 percent rating the program as good. What's more, 70 percent of participants said the program had improved their hunting, shooting or fishing skills.

Another top-ranking adult program was Wheelin' Sportsmen, whose participants appeared far likelier than other program participants to join a sportsmen's group or conservation organization after the program.

Youth programs that came out on top in several categories include the Alabama Youth Dove Hunt program, Boone & Crockett Club's Outdoor Adventure Camps, Vermont Green Mountain Conservation Camp, SC Reel Kids and the NWTF's JAKES/Xtreme JAKES.

Youth camps are especially popular as they

focus on crossover appeal, with opportunities to learn about a variety of outdoor topics and skills. These camps go beyond hunting, fishing and sport shooting opportunities with such activities as camping, biology and ecology, archery and survival techniques. They tend to appeal strongly to younger audiences interested in trying a number of new things.

JAKES and Xtreme JAKES provide youth opportunities to explore the outdoor world at more than 1,000 events each year. A post-program survey revealed 82 percent of participants are very likely to take or sign up for similar programs in the future. According to Mandy Harling, JAKES/Xtreme JAKES coordinator, past attendees are routinely targeted with invitations for follow-up events, which is one of several winning strategies to a successful program.

ROLE MODELS

The study demonstrated the NWTF is on track in offering a variety of outreach programs that work. One model of success for JAKES is its round robin-style event, where each youth, accompanied by an adult, rotates through stations throughout the day. The program structure encourages a family connection, repeat participation and positive socialization among the participants.

The Turkey Hunting 101 event for the Women in the Outdoors program has been one of the best at recruitment. It's a basic turkey hunting course that takes participants from classroom to shooting range, then back into the woods where hunting opportunities help reinforce their newfound skills. The course has proved so successful the NWTF expanded the program across the country.

Another standard for success in the Women in the Outdoors program is the annual event in Bakersfield, Calif. The event features a diverse offering of 40 or more classes, including basic hunting, shooting, fishing and archery along with classes such as basket weaving, feather crafts and candle making. Newcomers who may attend the event for the crafts inevitably become curious in more traditional hunting, which is also a successful way to recruit.

It connects familiar activities for the newcomer with more traditional hunting and fishing activities, a concept, according to Duda, that underscores the connection between each of the activities and promotes the idea of progressing from one to another, or trying different things as interest develops.

BREAKING BARRIERS

Unlocking the secrets to recruitment and retention is about finding the right keys. In this case the key is to identify individual markets and audiences, then develop programs and opportu-

nities that fit each group's interests and needs.

Research suggests family programs may be particularly effective in capitalizing on the enthusiasm of youth. One relatively new program doing just that is the NWTF's Family Outdoor Challenge. This annual event connects families in a fun, competitive setting via outdoor opportunities that include archery, canoeing, outdoor survival skills and shooting air rifles.

Sometimes the key is to bring the outdoors experience closer to home. The JAKES Take Aim Program may be right on target. It's a portable shooting experience with an inflatable BB-gun range that can be taken to areas that would normally not allow guns, such as state expos, schools and county fairs.

ON THE HUNT

While many elements make for a successful program, the 2011 study suggests these six are especially essential:

1. Create an event or program that provides a continuum of learning.
2. Take a true cradle-to-grave approach that evolves with the skill set and age of the participant.
3. Create crossover appeal by surrounding hunting, shooting and fishing activities/events with opportunities to learn about a variety of other outdoors topics and skills.
4. Tailor activities according to age, audience and overall experience level.
5. Encourage the "natural path" of recruitment and retention by initiating newcomers into hunting, shooting and fishing via experiences that are familiar and comfortable to them.
6. Foster family involvement and the importance of the social support aspect in recruitment and retention.

As successful as these programs have been and continue to be, the 2011 report indicates that there are still areas where the NWTF can improve. One of the greatest challenges is in the area of recruitment and how to reach and involve those who are unfamiliar yet interested in outdoor traditions.

"Our recruitment efforts need to appeal to folks outside the normal fields, while following a natural flow with programs that are already succeeding at recruitment," said Tom Hughes, the NWTF's assistant vice president for education and outreach. One way to do that is to bring in nonhunting families by offering activities such as outdoor survival, canoeing and fishing. Hughes says the best way to do this is in stages and by degrees.

"We still have room to grow and are now where near the final plateau of where we want to be," he said. "We have to refine the tendency to preach to the choir." 

