

Pipe Band Recruiting

- Some Experiences and Ideas

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In the early '80's when I was P/M'ing the local Grade 4 band, we had some good luck with a recruiting and training program. We are in a low-Scottish population but largeish general (nearly 1,000,000) population area. This made it hard to attract members from routine public appearances, but fairly easy to attract them through a deliberate public effort.

This description is limited to the piping side. We lacked a current upper-grade lead drummer and I, a piper, am not in position to discuss this subject much.

There is also nothing here relating to the very important subject of external band support organizations. We had periodic assistance from pre-existing Scots and Irish societies locally, but no formal or informal group specifically dedicated to supporting our band.

Our scheme had several stages:

- Public Recruitment Event
- Introductory Group Lessons & Cultural Education
- Private Lessons
- Purchase Full Instrument
- Apprentice Membership
- Full Membership

Public Recruitment Event

Planning the Event

Through trial-and-error we learned that the easiest way to get publicity was to conduct a discrete single public performance with an educational theme. We could mention recruitment so long as it was tied to an easily-defined event. The media couldn't or wouldn't give much publicity to dry announcements of recruiting periods or membership opportunities.

The event needs to be timed for your target recruits. I was striving for a fairly good band, which meant reaching children and women in addition to men, children being especially important. We chose early September, after school had started so that families were getting organized, but early enough that people had not yet filled their yearly calendars with other activities. The show itself would run from 7-8:30 PM or so for maximum accessibility to our prime age group (12-18 yrs).

For maximum public appeal we learned to add entertainment and cultural education material to the recruitment aspects of the program. This would attract people of all ages and backgrounds, especially older people looking for interesting, inexpensive and safe activities.

Publicity Campaign

Many local media have press kits or advice about arranging such events and constructing successful public service announcements. We obtained these and followed the advice of the professionals. Much of that is reflected in the following notes.

For print, a clear photo with 1-3 people prominently featured (big faces are most attractive to readers) is best. A short new release can be included, up to a page, not too wordy (usually 1-1/2 to double-spaced to permit editing). It should be written like a newspaper story, with the most important paragraphs first, decreasing in importance down the page, for ease of editing.

An especially clever print idea is to furnish local newspapers with photos of local residents who are already members or students in the band. These have the highest likelihood of being published--often a reporter would contact the local "star" and turn the PR material into a story.

Radio stations would accept written announcements. We were advised to write 5-, 10-, 15-, 20- and 30-second announcements from which they would choose. I believe they would accept cassette-recorded announcements also, but we didn't pursue this option.

TV and Cable TV (in my era) would accept a slide photo and short written announcements (the radio announcements sufficed). We made a photo of an especially attractive Scottish record album, with contact phone number clearly and prominently lettered, which translated well to the TV screen. Presumably they would accept home videotaped announcements of suitable quality at this time.

Simple announcements, perhaps posters featuring a photo, were sent to churches and libraries. One year we purchased dozens of copies of a particularly interesting and listenable pipe band album, affixed band contact information labels to the jackets, and donated them to libraries in our region. Every one accepted the gifts happily, leaving the contact information in place.

In addition to free print and broadcast announcements, whose exposure depended on the serious news activity of the rest of the world at the time of our campaign, we also purchased classified ads in regional & community publications announcing the event. We felt this contributed to the odds of getting free PR exposure.

The Event Itself

We had a dramatic pipe-band opening, performing 3-4 sets formally, and shifted into a lecture-demonstration mode for the main show. A final number, typically "Auld Lang Syne," required the band to play after having sat idle for some time. This being an educational event, we allowed the audience to see retuning and setup activities (briefly) normally hidden from them.

Afterwards, refreshments and the opportunity to see costumes (we had a variety on display) & instruments up close were well received. The wide audience attracted by this

approach only increased the enthusiasm of the recruits, excited by the obvious public interest in their newfound activity.

Information on related cultural activities & clubs in the region was made available. This was useful to older attendees and families of kids (who, in this modern era, like to feel assured that they're not dealing with some sort of cult!)

We presented the band primarily as a musical organization, with emphasis on the training, practicing, and skill requirements. Everything was done with musical and artistic terminology and deportment in order to attract students with similar interests and to establish our band's priorities for recruits of different backgrounds or inclinations (for example, those who think of a pipe band as primarily a military sort of activity).

Introductory Group Lessons & Cultural Education

Equipment

The band bought in advance and issued chanters and College of Piping tutor books to all piping students. Students could buy this equipment at any time at full price or scheduled partial payments, but this was not required for the introductory phase. We charged no rental for these few lessons--we believed this was an important time to be generous with small costs.

We used cheap Pakistani practice chanters for the group lessons and welcomed their continued use for our routine street band chanter practice. As we were an entry level band, I heard no benefit from using expensive, better tuned or matched practice chanters. The competition sub-group, being more dedicated and having more refined musical problems to solve, used "proper" chanters.

The College of Piping audio and video tapes were not available at that time. We would surely have issued audio tapes. Probably the more expensive video tapes would have been suggested but not required or provided.

Students were encouraged to buy their own inexpensive portable cassette tape recorders and medium-to-high-quality cassette tapes for recording lessons & home practice. Inexpensive external microphones were recommended to avoid machine noise and better to catch the subtle sound of fine crossing noises and false fingering sounds.

Training Program

The 8 group lessons were based on the early portions of The College of Piping Tutor Book 1, with some changes allowing for the realities of group instruction.

At the end of the music portion of each lesson, some discussion or presentation was made relating to bagpipe music (solo or band) or to Scottish or Irish culture generally. Possible material can include recorded song or folk band presentations, live piping or folk music performances, Highland and Scottish country dancing, notices of upcoming community activities (concerts, ceilidhs, cultural events such as St. Andrew's Supper, etc.).

Our broader inclusions were well received. They gave context for those destined to become players, and pointed our "probably-nots" towards activities they could enjoy for years to come.

Assistants

Several of the better players who showed promise of teaching ability were chosen to assist in the group instruction. We occasionally had problems with clashes of methodology. Undoubtedly it's a good idea to iron these things out before the program starts, or perhaps spend a few minutes before each class discussing the plan of action.

End of the Class

Diploma certificates were made up and issued with the pipe band members present. The class would perform "Amazing Grace" on practice chanter for the band. Cookies, etc., and the band would play a number or two in a rudimentary state of tuning as time permitted.

Almost invariably those who most obviously weren't inclined or able to continue were satisfied with the conclusion of the program. The others were individually invited to continue in private lessons with our several instructors. In my few years' involvement we never had to formally deal with an obviously unsuitable student who wished to continue past the introductory series.

Private Lessons

We had confidence in turning over students to our various instructors. As you might expect, the details of instruction past this point were at the discretion of those instructors.

Some specific goals however were furnished by the band. Obviously we wanted the students to learn our very small minimum parade repertoire. Also the band had a formal timing style (most embellishments begun rather than ended on the beat) which had to be learned. Finally it was band policy to make an official recommendation when the P/M felt the student was ready to purchase full bagpipes.

Purchase Full Instrument

This was our certification that the student had the ability to play in a street band, and that we would accept him/her as a member once the minimum repertoire was learned on the pipes. A brief but formal audition for the P/M, and the appropriate congratulations etc., were part of the process.

Apprentice Membership

A sort of apprentice membership began when the student had our minimum parade repertoire memorized and ready to practice on the pipe chanter with the band. Our weekly practice routine was to do group exercises first, proceed to parade music, and finish with the more demanding show repertoire. The apprentices could leave once their part was finished but they were welcomed to stay and listen of course.

Early in the apprenticeship the learners would play pipe chanter only in the circle. For marching practice we reversed the pipes, in a manner of speaking, corking shut the chanter and opening up the drones. The learners could then make some sound and become accustomed to handling partially-working instruments while learning to march.

Apprentices were invited to perform in parades or very short, simple shows as soon as they were dependable marchers. They only played drones until the P/M certified their readiness to begin playing the pipe chanter. For this they needed to have the music under control, have the strength to play medium-easy reeds of suitable stability, and have the

stamina to warm up, play and survive a parade or performance with the pipe chanter and one drone sounding.

From this point onwards the student's role in the band was one of regular member.

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