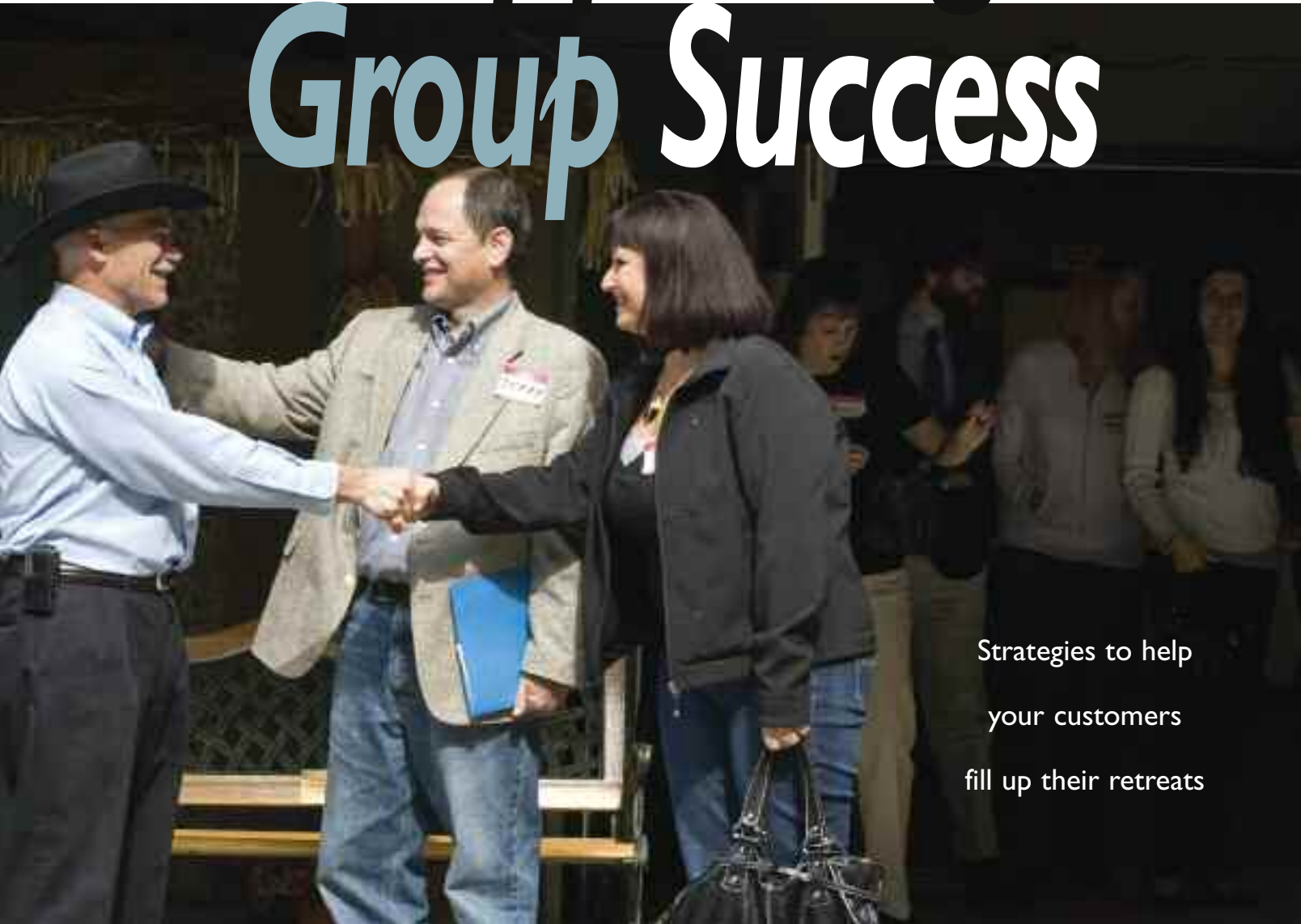


# Supporting Group Success



Strategies to help  
your customers  
fill up their retreats

**T**he phone rings. It's Suzy, the guest group leader of the First Real Church—the largest group you have on the books every year. The church, which is coming to your site in just a few weeks, is the only group booked that weekend because these guests always fill up the place and want exclu-

sive use of the facilities.

With excitement, you greet her. But her words aren't so cheerful: "We might have to cancel our retreat. The economy is tough, and I don't think anyone will sign up for the retreat. I don't know what to do!"

A call like this one from Suzy will either leave you with that sinking feel-

ing or will set into motion what could prove to be the greatest opportunity of ministry and blessing for not only the group but also your organization.

Being prepared to come alongside group leaders so they can achieve maximum success and bring as many people to their events as planned can make all the difference. As guest group leaders

are increasingly successful in filling up the events, your camp or conference center will have more opportunities for ministry and your organization will be financially sustainable.

## Strengthen Relationships

Relationships are the key to success. During difficult economic times, customers are more alert to how they are being treated.

As leaders of Christian organizations, we should exceed the hospitality guests experience at secular resorts, hotels, or conference centers. We have a higher calling and a deeper awareness of and concern for the spiritual impact of our guest group events than other venues. We must be prepared to serve guests in a Christ-like manner.

Make every effort to deepen your relationship with the guest group leader to promote loyalty.

In addition, pray for the group leader and the group. Pray that God will provide a way for everyone to attend the retreat, and that He will work in the hearts of those participating in the event. Ask Him to remove all the distractions of life that might keep someone from attending.

## Assist with Booking

As you build relationships, lend the guest group leader your expertise in the planning and promotion process.

One of the keys to successful retreat planning is being realistic about how much space to reserve. If the group leader is experienced and has organized a particular retreat for years, he or she already knows how many typically attend the event. But in a down economy, things could be totally different. Help the leader plan accordingly.

If the individual is new to retreat

planning or this is a first-time retreat for the organization, he or she will need additional assistance. It is not helpful to either organization to overcommit and under-fulfill the original contract.

Be conservative. It is easier to increase numbers as the event grows than it is to decrease numbers or cancel it altogether, leaving everyone stressed and your camp or conference center at risk financially.

## Back Efforts

The typical group leader will need help planning the marketing of the event as well. Even if he or she doesn't think so, the person needs your help. You are the expert. You do this every day while the group leader does this once a year.

Time is of the essence. Substantial time between booking and the actual retreat gives the group leader more time to get the word out systematically.

Having prepared materials your staff can send out immediately upon booking the group will help the leader be efficient—and view you as a ministry partner. This will also help build the relationship between the customer and your organization.

## Provide the Tools

The tools you provide a guest group to assist in marketing depends on your organization, the guest group, the type of retreat the group has booked, and your marketing budget. Consider the following ideas as you prepare to assist your future guests.

- ➔ Provide a brief outline with lead times that explains what to do to promote an event. Helping the group leader be organized and timely will result in greater success for you and your customers.
- ➔ Include a sign-up sheet and a deposit form with the guest group name included. If you offer different types of housing options, include only the options available to this particular group.

## Powerful Promotion

A guest group leader who recently used Canby Grove Christian Camp and Conference Center in Oregon provided the following ideas for promoting retreats.

Consider recommending them to future guest groups at your ministry.

- ▶ Start promoting four to six months in advance with theme and speaker information.
- ▶ Assign a team to promote the retreat through e-mail blasts.
- ▶ Follow up those who say “maybe” with a

handwritten note of encouragement.

- ▶ Offer a monthly payment plan or savings plan so attendees can avoid handing over a large fee at the time of the event.
- ▶ Give a gift certificate for partial or full retreat fees on Mother's Day or Father's Day, at Christmastime, or during another special time of the year.
- ▶ Offer an early registration discount.
- ▶ Invite excited attendees to staff the

registration table.

- ▶ Ask people to pray for the event and the participants by name.
- ▶ Get individuals involved in the event.
- ▶ Encourage people to sign up for an entire lodging room or area and then invite others as guests.
- ▶ Send out reminder postcards one week prior to the registration deadline.
- ▶ Make follow-up calls to those who expressed interest but have not registered.

- Produce a bulletin insert that the group leader can easily copy. Include the name of the group, the retreat name and theme, the event date, speaker information, and any additional promotional copy. Make it as easy as possible for the group leader to get the word out to his or her group or community.

Make a full-color bulletin insert available online (or send it electronically). If the group leader has the funds and ability to print the inserts in color, they will produce a more appealing presentation.

- Prepare a PowerPoint presentation, featuring similar information that you included in the bulletin insert, which you can customize to each group. This will give the group leader a professional presentation that they're likely to use. Visual aids go a long way in promoting any event.

If you prepare the framework of the presentation, you will also protect your brand and image as it is presented to the group.

- Prepare formatted e-mail blast copy that can be easily customized and sent to a group or community.
- A short (two- to three-minute) promotional DVD that a group leader can play during a meeting or church service will add excitement to the retreat announcement and make promoting the event easier for the group leader. It will also give your camp or conference center good exposure to the whole group.

A generic DVD is an OK first step, but specific retreat DVDs for men, women, youth, and other groups you regularly serve are more effective. Keep in mind that you aren't promoting beds and activities, but the experience. Although your property specs are important, they are not what make someone want to attend an event.

- Send the guest group leader links to your organization's website or YouTube page. This will allow those who are unfamiliar with your camp or conference center to see what your facilities and accommodations are really like.

Don't let the fear of the unknown keep someone from signing up. *Camp* means varied things to different people. You may have comfortable, hotel-style rooms available. But if the person making the announcement just happens to say, "We are going to Camp Pine Tree this year for our women's retreat," a first-time attendee may think she will have to sleep on the ground in a tent—in the snow.

- When you have your color promotional postcards printed, leave the backs of some of them blank. The guest group leader can print appropriate information on the back for a professional-looking and effective marketing tool.

- Prepare a poster-size announcement consistent with the look of the postcards; leave space for the group to insert its information. You might even personalize the poster as a token of appreciation for the group booking its event at your site.

- Some group leaders have the ability to produce their own promotional materials. All they want or need is access to your photos, logo, site map, directions, and the like. Make these easily available via e-mail or post them on your organization's website to help groups produce their own customized tools.

- Provide an online registration feature that allows individuals to sign up for the retreat, make a deposit directly to your camp or conference center, and choose an available housing option and roommate(s). The group leader can simply log onto your ministry website to see the registered guests,

and never have to worry about collecting deposits or payments.

- Pop-up tabletop and floor stand displays are excellent tools at sign-up tables. Send general and retreat-specific displays to the group leader to use and return. These tools draw attention and identify where to sign up for the event.

For a particularly large event, consider having a vinyl banner made and give it to the group to use in promoting the retreat and during the event. Include the group name, your camp or conference name, and the theme, for example. When the group arrives on site, you may wish to place the banner over the entrance to your facility or over a doorway outside the main meeting room.

## Maintain Communication

In addition to helping each group leader communicate with his or her people, it's critical to keep the lines of communication open as you actively seek to serve the leader.

After the initial contact, set up a schedule so you get in touch with the individual 90 days, 60 days, 30 days, 14 days, seven days, and three days prior to the event. Consistent, regular communication with the group leader allows time to respond to low registrations and minimizes any surprises when the group arrives.

The key to marketing is building relationships. Focus on your relationship with the guest group leader and provide the tools he or she needs to market the event. The more you help him or her market, the more you will help your organization strengthen its mission and financial standing. ■



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## Related Resources

### In CCCA's Store

▶ *The Complete Leader's Guide to Christian Retreats* by Rachel Gilmore

▶ *Managing Quality Customer Service* by William B. Martin

▶ *The Retreat Leader's Manual* by Nancy Ferguson and Kevin Witt

▶ *Seven Steps for Effective Retreats* (Focus Series)

▶ *A Survival Guide for Retreat Counselors* (Focus Series)

▶ *Time out for Renewal* (Focus Series)

▶ *Women's Retreats: A Creative Planning Guide* by Sue Edwards, Kelley Mathews, and Linda Robinson

### On the Internet

▶ Sound Word's CCCA audio recordings, "Connecting with Your Customers," "Creating Spaces: Seeing Your Facility through Guests' Eyes," and "The Forgotten Theology of Retreat" [www.soundword.com](http://www.soundword.com)